

“The Gift of Peace”

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 24, 2017

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One of my many gifts to Kris on our first Christmas together, shortly before we got engaged, was a beautiful pottery bowl that I had created myself. I filled it with dirt and placed a few pea pods on top of it. It was a symbol of...? “Peas on earth.” (Her family wasn’t much impressed either.) But that’s what she had replied, when I asked her what she wanted for Christmas, “Peace on earth.”

Today we lit the candle of peace. Don’t we long for peace?

I did share in the sermon on hope three weeks ago, the first Sunday of Advent, that, in fact, today the world has significantly fewer deaths by war than at any time in world history, only 10 per million people, only 4% the rate as in the 1950s. (Smithsonian Magazine).

That’s terrific. But that’s still tens of thousands of people each year dying in war, not to mention other violent acts.

Peace. Isaiah gives us the picture of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which the wolf will lie down with the lamb. The story is told of a zookeeper, wishing to portray the Peaceable Kingdom, put together an exhibit with a wolf and a lamb in it. “How do you do it?” people asked.

“Every morning I put in a new lamb.”

We long for peace, but we are so far from it. The late General Omar Bradley famously said, “Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount.”

The Bible, particularly the prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah—the Bible is clear and wise about what makes for peace. It can, in fact, be summed up in a bumper sticker, the quote from Pope Paul VI: *If you want peace, work for justice.*

For the first three centuries of the church’s history, Christians followed Jesus in the path of nonviolence. It was only after Constantine co-opted the church in the fourth century and declared Christianity to be the official religion of Rome that the Church went to hell—and I use the term theologically, not profanely—the Church started amassing wealth and embracing violence, and it has never recovered.

Leo Tolstoy told the story of a Russian youth, a conscientious objector to war, who stood trial. In the courthouse the young man expressed his position, declaring that his philosophy

of life came from the demands of Jesus. The judge replied, “Yes, I understand, but you must be *realistic*. These laws you are talking about are the laws of the Kingdom of God and it has not come yet!”

The courageous young man answered, “Sir, I recognize that (the Kingdom of God) has not come for you, nor yet for Russia, nor for the world. But it has come for me.”

Jesus, in Luke 17, said, “The kingdom of God is among you.” Jesus calls us to live “as if,” as if the Kingdom has come. People who travel a great deal internationally set their watches to their destination time as soon as they board the airplane. They start living in the time zone to which they are traveling. This is the call to us who follow Jesus, to live by Kingdom love, even though it has not yet come in its fullness on earth.

Two true stories of peace.

All was quiet on the Western Front, Christmas Eve, 1914. The war was only five months old, and already 800,000 men had been wounded or killed.

Pope Benedict XV had called for a Christmas truce, an idea that the Germans agreed to, but the Allies rejected. Yet the troops themselves initiated a truce. To this day no one knows where it began or how it spread, or if, by some curious festive magic, it broke out simultaneously across the trenches.

Most accounts suggest the truce began with carol singing from the trenches on Christmas Eve, “a beautiful moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere,” wrote a British infantryman. (Pvt. Albert Moren of the Second Queens Regiment). “First the Germans would sing one of their carols and then we would sing one of ours, until when we started up ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ the Germans immediately joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words *Adeste Fideles*. And I thought, well, this is really a most extraordinary thing – two (enemy) nations both singing the same carol in the middle of a war.”

The phenomenon took different forms across the Western front. The next morning, in some places, German soldiers emerged from their trenches, calling out “Merry Christmas” in English. Allied soldiers came out warily to greet them. In others, Germans held up signs reading “You no shoot, we no shoot.” Over the course of the day, troops exchanged gifts of cigarettes, food, buttons and hats. One account mentions a British soldier having his hair cut by his pre-war German barber; another talks of a pig-roast. Several mention impromptu kick-about with makeshift soccer balls. All told, some two-thirds of the troops along the Front— about 100,000 soldiers— are believed to have participated in the legendary truce.

Hostilities returned, in some places later that day, but in others not until after New Year’s Day.

Indeed, the military superiors on both sides were alarmed at what they viewed as subversion. They feared for the soldiers' willingness to keep fighting after the fraternization. In fact, one British soldier (Murdoch M. Wood) later said, "I ... came to the conclusion that I have held very firmly ever since, that if we had been left to ourselves there would never have been another shot fired." (By [Naina Bajekal](#), Time Magazine December 24, 2014).

Second true story. This comes from Robert Fulghum, the author of *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, though this comes from a later book, entitled *Uh-oh*. Robert Fulghum was a pastor and he tells of a time he invited a juggler to come to his church on Christmas Eve for the midnight service. "I wanted to read an old story from long ago about a wandering juggler who happened into a monastery in deep winter and asked for refuge. You may know this story. If memory serves me..., I think it's a French tale called "Our Lady's Juggler."

The story says that the monks were busy making gifts to lay before the high altar of the monastery chapel in honor of the Virgin Mary. Because if she (were) pleased, her statue would shed a tear of compassion for humanity. But when the gifts were presented at the Feast of the Nativity, the statue did not respond. In the middle of the night, the juggler, who thought he had no gift to give, went in alone and juggled before the statue—and juggled to the very limit of his capacity. To make a long story short, the statue of the Virgin Mary shed a tear—and the baby Jesus in her arms smiled—because the juggler had given everything he had, holding back nothing in his generosity. So goes the story.

To bring the story to life, I wanted to have a real juggler perform for the congregation first, and then I'd tell the story and turn it into my Christmas sermon. A little show-business pizzazz for the midnight service.

When time for the service came, the juggler had not arrived. Not until the middle of the second carol did I see him working his way up the crowded side aisle. But no costume. I had specifically asked him to wear his jester outfit. And no juggling equipment. What a disappointment. So much for magic at midnight.

While the congregation headed into the last verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," the juggler and I held a whispered conference. His car had been stolen, with all his possessions and equipment...A friend had brought him and would take him home afterward. In the meantime, he had an idea. All I had to do was tell the fairy story, and he, the juggler, would take it from there.

No time to argue. The carol was done, and the service had to go on. I assumed that when it came time for his performance, the juggler would explain his circumstances and use some things he had found in the church kitchen for a short act. Reasonable enough. However, Christmas Eve is not a time for reasonableness. I ought to know that by now. So I read the story.

And the juggler stepped into the light from out of the congregation. Slim young man, the wiry, athletic kind. Black tennis shoes, jeans, green turtleneck shirt. Solemn expression and freckles on his face in place of the expected makeup. Longish brown hair. Nothing special to look at. And no tools of his trade.

He smiled. And began his routine. In fact, he went through his entire routine just as if he had brought balls and clubs and knives and scarves with him. We had all seen enough juggling to know what was going on. And in each part of the routine, he went one step further than he had ever juggled and we had ever seen...The limit for the very best professional juggler...is seven balls. Our guy did eight, and we knew it when he did it and applauded the moment of triumph. On through twelve silk scarves in the air at once and seven knives, and we even knew when he set his torches on fire and got eight torches in the air all at once and caught them without burning himself. We laughed and shouted encouragement and applauded this remarkable performance. We couldn't see it, but we believed it. We gave him a standing ovation. On Christmas Eve in church—a standing ovation. He held up his hand for silence. And the congregation sat down. The juggler wasn't through. He was going to do an encore.

He started juggling things we couldn't quite recognize. What's this? Chickens? Birds? Some kind of tree. Rings. One off of each finger. Five? five gold rings. Got it! "The Twelve Days of Christmas." He was going to juggle one of everything in the Twelve Days. The partridge, the pear tree, and all the rest. Impossible. But he was doing it. A swan. A goose and an egg. I was thinking, he will never get the maid and the cow off the ground, but with a great heaving effort, he did it. After that, the leaping lady and the dancing lord and the drum with drummer were a piece of cake. Every gift was in the air—way, way up in the air, because this was a lot of stuff. And as each piece came around, we knew what it was and shouted out its name as he caught it and threw it back into the air again. Fantastic! Nobody had ever done this before. The juggler was laughing. The congregation cheered like a crowd at a championship game when a last-minute score won it for the home team. The juggler suddenly clapped his hands loudly and stood still. One finger in front of his lips called for silence. And silence came.

We stood looking at him and he at us. In the most powerful and meaningful moment of quiet I've witnessed at Christmas Eve. The sermon was supposed to follow the juggler. And it did. But it was not I who spoke. We were all addressed by a sermon of eloquent instructive silence. The silence in which we absorbed the power of the vision we had of the impossible event we had wished into being. The silence in which we thought about our capacity to realize things we can sometimes only imagine. Some of the most wonderful things have to be believed to be seen. Like flying reindeer and angels. Like peace on earth, goodwill, hope and joy. Real because they can be imagined into being...