

Disturbing the peace

Matthew 5:9

October 28, 2007

I have disturbed the peace. By agreeing to participate in the *Spotlight on Torture* campaign sponsored by the National Religious Coalition Against Torture, by agreeing to be one of the intended 950 churches to show the film, *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*, during the last week of October, I have disturbed the peace.

I have upset some of you by that decision. You think the film will be too political, too graphic, too much focused on the negative. There are those of you who think the film should not be shown here, and there are those of you who think the film should be shown here. We will disagree about whether it is or is not appropriate to show the film here, and we may well disagree about some of the issues raised by the film, but we can all agree on one thing. By saying "Yes" to the invitation to screen the film, I have disturbed the peace!

Lech Walesa disturbed the peace, throwing the nation of Poland into turmoil through his relentless efforts to organize workers in the Solidarity movement, challenging Poland's autocratic government and its neglect of human rights.

Desmond Tutu disturbed the peace, speaking out with courage and spiritual power against South Africa's apartheid-sponsoring minority government, exposing its moral bankruptcy and undermining its authority and offering encouragement to its opponents.

The Dalai Lama has disturbed the peace, advocating independence and self-rule for Tibet in the face of Chinese domination. To the Chinese, he is a hated enemy and an obstacle to peace, and they expressed their anger and indignation when he was recently awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Martin Luther King disturbed the peace, helping polarize a nation over issues of desegregation and equal opportunity and equal dignity for black Americans and opposition to the war in Viet Nam.

Even Al Gore has disturbed the peace, challenging us to make fundamental changes in the ways we think about energy use and carbon output, alarming us with the grim prospects for a planet that fails to make those changes.

What do all these folks have in common? They are all winners of the Nobel Peace Prize and all of them are guilty of disturbing the peace!

Jesus disturbed the peace. Jesus deliberately provoked the Jewish religious hierarchy. He violated cultural taboos spending too much time with the wrong people. He called people away from their homes and their jobs and their families. He told people to seek the Kingdom of God at the expense of all other seemingly noble aims. He turned his world upside down, sometimes literally. Remember the money-changing tables in the Temple?

Jesus upset the Jewish and Roman leadership enough that they resorted to putting him to death to silence him. The Prince of Peace was most certainly guilty of disturbing the peace!

What are we to make of this paradox, that those we recognize as men and women of peace, those we honor as exemplary peacemakers, are in fact so often guilty of disturbing the peace? And how will we understand what Jesus means when he says: *Blessed are the peacemakers?*

Let's start by looking at that phrase, "disturbing the peace." "Disturbing the peace" implies upsetting some kind of equilibrium, unsettling some kind of status quo. It conceives peace as something static, something passive. Peace is imagined as the "regular" state of affairs that may be disturbed and put into uproar.

This is indeed our common notion of peace. We see peace in negative terms, as the absence of conflict, the absence of turmoil, the absence of commotion and noise and busyness. Peace is defined by what is not there, by what is not happening. We talk about peace of mind, when our minds are free of conflicting thoughts; about peace of heart, when our hearts are free of conflicted feelings; about peace among friends, when friends are not fighting; about peace among nations, when nations are not at war.

But the biblical notion of peace is different. The meaning of *eirene*, the Greek word used in Jesus' blessing, and *shalom*, the word the Hebrews used, is different. This peace is not negative, but positive; not passive, but active; not static, but animated. This peace is not about what is not there, but about what is there, not about the absence of conflict, but about the presence of wholeness and health and well-being and justice and all the other good things that God intends for God's creation.

Jesus says: *Blessed are the peace-makers*. It's a creative, active thing -- making peace, advocating for, bringing into being, the good that God intends. Jesus didn't say, *Blessed are the peace-keepers*. He said, *Blessed are the peace-makers*.

It's not about keeping the peace, it's about making peace. So peace is not just about keeping people happy, about keeping things quiet and settled, about settling differences and mediating disputes. Peace is about advocating and healing, about helping and supporting, about challenging injustice and doing what is just. And sometimes that will cause a commotion.

I am guilty of disturbing the peace. But whatever you think about torture and whatever you think about talking about torture -- and it is okay for us to disagree! -- please understand that my aim is to make peace. My aim is to seek wholeness for those who have been broken by what has been done to them, and to seek wholeness for those who have been broken by what they have done. My aim is to make peace.

And I am bold enough to pray that your aim will be the same! That the aim of each one of you, that the aim of this church, will be to make peace. That we will seek together not just to keep the peace, but to make peace. That we will make it our aim to be peace-makers, on the model of Jesus himself.

Jesus said such people are blessed. Jesus said such people will be called children of God!