

Peace is ... defending

Isaiah 11:1-10

December 4, 2016

What does peace on earth look like?

*Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,
and leopards will lie down with young goats.
Calves and lion cubs will feed together,
and little children will take care of them.*

That is peace! But where, on earth, can you find a scene like this one?

You can't. It doesn't exist. Where, on earth, can you find wolves and sheep peacefully co-existing? Where, on earth, can you put a leopard and a young goat together and not end up with a dead goat? Where, on earth, do little children tend dangerous animals and babies play unharmed next to a den of poisonous snakes? This is an idealized picture of a world that does not exist.

Yet.

The astonishing claim of the prophet is that this is the world as it will be, this world -- not some fairy tale world -- this world as it will be, when intransigent enemies are enemies no more, and when dangerous threats pose no danger. No, such a world does not exist, but could it? Is it possible? Is such a peace possible, here, on this earth as we know it, but transformed? This is the prophet's vision. This is God's promise. This is the world as it will be.

When? When he comes. When he rules. A new king will arise from among the descendants of David, the root of Jesse, and he will make peace.

There will be peace on earth because he will rule by wisdom and skill, instead of by power and intimidation.

There will be peace on earth because he will do the will of the Lord, instead of pursuing his own whims or ambitions, instead of seeking merely to please the people and appease their enemies.

There will be peace on earth because he will not judge by appearance or hearsay. He will see people as they are. He will take the time to look and to listen, to judge people -- friend and foe alike -- as they are, not as they seem to be or as others make them out to be.

There will be peace on earth because he will judge the poor fairly -- fairly, equitably, not on the basis of what they have, but on the basis of who they are. Isn't that fair?

And there will be peace on earth because he will defend the rights of the humble -- ones without power, ones without say, ones who are overlooked, ones who are taken advantage of, ones who are scorned, ones who are left out.

He will defend them, stand up for them, give them their rights, lift them up, give them honor.

What does peace on earth look like? Peace is defending: defending not our own assets, our own well-being, our own honor, but defending the assets and well-being and honor of our neighbors, specifically, explicitly, our humble neighbors, our neighbors in humble circumstances.

This means that peace is not passive, but active. Peace is not merely the cessation of hostilities, but the achievement of justice, not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of well-being, for all the people.

Are we there? Are we there yet?

No, we are not. But hasn't he come? Hasn't the descendant of David, the root of Jesse, Jesus the Messiah, already begun to rule? Yes, he has, but we are called to rule with him. We who follow him, who give ourselves to him and commit ourselves to his way, we rule with him. There will be peace on earth when we refuse to judge people by appearance or hearsay, when we judge the poor fairly, when we defend the rights of the humble.

Let me once more suggest several practical ways we may make peace on earth, in this case, by defending the rights of the humble and helpless.

1) Boycott Wendy's (<http://p2a.co/4YG1tEq>)

Some of you will remember that several years ago, we highlighted the work of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an organization of farm workers in Florida. The Coalition defends the rights of humble tomato pickers who suffer intolerable working conditions, lack of voice, and exploitative wages. At that time, the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ urged a boycott of Taco Bell, a company employing many of these workers that refused to negotiate any pay increase. Now the spotlight is on Wendy's.

From the UCC's Take Action webpage:

Farm workers are among the most abused and exploited workers in the United States. They labor long hours under difficult conditions for very low pay, and too often suffer sexual harassment, racial discrimination, and even slavery.

For 23 years the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a group of farm workers based in Florida who primarily harvest tomatoes, have marched, picketed, and fasted to bring greater justice to the Florida fields. Their efforts have convinced many corporations to join the Fair Food Program, a partnership that has eliminated modern-day slavery and sexual violence in the Florida tomato fields, improved farmworker wages for the first time in decades, and guaranteed basic protections for workers. Most of the major fast-food chains now participate in the FFP including McDonalds, Burger King, Subway, and Taco Bell. But Wendy's refuses to join. In March, 2016, the CIW called a consumer boycott of Wendy's until they join the FFP.

2) Support the abolition of the death penalty (<http://www.firstcongucc.org/weblog/2005/10/28/why-the-death-penalty-is-wrong/>)

There are few human beings more helpless and in more humble circumstances than a prisoner awaiting execution. And is there a right more worth defending than the right to life itself? We make peace when we defend the rights of the helpless, when we show mercy, when we will not cede to ourselves the right to take life, but leave room for God's grace. Abolishing the death penalty is not about making excuses for violent acts, but about choosing for ourselves a different path, the path of peace, the path of making peace.

From a blog post I wrote when the state of Iowa was considering reinstatement of the death penalty:

The death penalty does not do justice, if justice is understood as upholding and encouraging lawfulness and as improving the moral and civic character of a society as a whole. The death penalty debases a society, encourages the belief in violence as an appropriate tool for solving social problems, and appeals to the perhaps understandable, but abhorrent and indefensible, desire for revenge.

3) Urge passage of the Appalachian Community Health Emergency Act (<http://p2a.co/IgMuAyX>)

Last June while Laura and I and the other eight members of our confirmation mission team were at the Appalachian South Folklife Center in West Virginia, we listened to a passionate presentation one evening from a friend of the Center about the devastating consequences of mountaintop removal. She spoke to us about the ACHE (Appalachian Community Health Emergency Act) designed to enact a moratorium on new mountaintop removal permits until its effects can be properly assessed.

Commentary from the UCC's Take Action webpage:

More than 500 Appalachian mountains have been devastated and desecrated [by mountaintop removal]. Nearly 2,000 miles of streams have also been damaged or destroyed as a result. The health impacts for surrounding communities include increased rates of birth defects, cancer, heart disease, and early death. Few environmental sins have marred the soul of our nation to such an extent.

Mountains cannot speak for themselves. Both they and the communities that live on them and among them need advocates who will defend their rights and bring them peace.

What does peace on earth look like? It looks like people like you and me standing up for the rights of neighbors who need it. Peace is defending.