

Come, Lord Jesus – make these words your Word, that our hearts may become your heart. Amen.

Peacemaking is a risky business,
whether it's between estranged spouses or nations at war.
There is never a certain outcome, and one seeking to mediate between or
reconcile parties in conflict can easily become the target of both.
It is draining, exhausting, frustrating, anxiety-inducing – anything but peaceful!

Reconciliation with someone from whom we're estranged is also risky.
There is loss. We need to compromise on some of our demands.
We need to give up our need to be right, even when we are right.
We need to yield some of our control, so we can make space for a restored
relationship. Boy, isn't it just easier just to stay estranged or even enemies?
Human nature says yes, and once men figured out how much money there was
to be made from war and conflict, the incentives to peace really dropped.

So why have we been spending our time this Lent talking about
what it means to be peacemakers, what qualities we need to cultivate,
what spiritual practices we need to develop?
It's partly because of the depth of divisions we see around us right now –
The call to be peacemakers in Jesus is particularly urgent for Americans.
And there is an even deeper reason for us as Christ followers:
Jesus's whole mission, especially the part we celebrate in Holy Week and Easter,
can be seen as the mission of a peacemaker, striving to reconcile a
humanity estranged from its creator and sustainer, its Life Force.
On Good Friday, anyone looking would even think he had failed.

But the story wasn't over yet.
The Christian writer Frederick Buechner has said, "The worst thing is never
the last thing." God always gets the last word, and it is life.
But Jesus had to trust in that by faith. In the reading we heard today,
he lets us know just how hard that was to be, and he uses this amazing
image of a seed to describe the call of a peacemaker.
A seed cannot live out its destiny, its purpose, without dying.
In the natural world, in our gardens or in our bodies,
life does not happen without death.

New skin grows as old cells die and are sloughed off.

Chicks only hatch if the egg breaks.

Butterflies need to demolish their cocoons.

A baby is not born without trauma to the mother's body.

And yes – seeds can bear fruit only if they are buried in dark earth,
and broken open so that the new life within them can be brought to fullness.

Jesus uses the image of a seed – a grain of wheat – to speak of his sacrifice.

When he says, *unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*"

He is saying, there is no life without death.

Most seeds are planted in the ground. That seed goes into the dark earth,
which is where we put things that are dead. It's dark. It's cold. There are worms!

Maybe the seed doesn't want to open in such an environment...

Maybe it's better to stay safe, enclosed.

But inside the seed there is life, waiting to get out, pushing to get out.

Unless that seed breaks open the life inside it will wither and die.

Unless we break open the life inside us atrophies and dies.

When we take up the mantle of disciple of Jesus Christ, really choosing to love
and follow him wherever he leads, we are choosing to be planted as seeds,
allow ourselves to be broken open so God's life in us can get out.

We follow Jesus into the dark, allow ourselves to be broken and transformed
from a seed into a seedling, and then a plant that bears abundant fruit.

That's the trajectory of a disciple: planted, broken, transformed, fruitful.

That's the trajectory of a disciple fully engaged in God's mission to
reclaim, restore and renew all of creation to wholeness in Christ.

God does not rest until we are made whole – that's what Jesus was doing here.

That's what God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah – the time is coming when

*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

God will not rest until all of creation is made whole – that's what we're doing here.

To be peacemakers in Jesus' name goes beyond our own relationships –

It has a communal dimension, a societal dimension.

And rarely have the tears in our common fabric been so many or so evident.

To make peace requires us to make whole – and that means we need
to have a system of justice that has wholeness as its aim.

That is the system of justice God enacted in Jesus –
not retribution for our sins, but restoration of relationship.

The system of justice most of us are familiar with does not aim for wholeness. It aims for punishment and retribution, as though that brings healing to anyone. There is a different way of approaching justice, one based on inviting both victims and perpetrators to speak truth, to hear truth, to seek a restored relationship.

This week I read an editorial by David Brooks, who writes for the *New York Times* – and occasionally preaches at the National Cathedral.

Brooks became a Christian a few years ago, and interviews a lot of Christians doing work of healing society. This week he reflected on a conversation with Esau McCaulley, a New Testament professor at Wheaton College, on a Christian vision for social justice. He writes,

*This vision begins with respect for the equal dignity of each person. It is based on the idea that we are all made in the image of God. It abhors any attempt to dehumanize anybody on any front. We may be unjustly divided in a zillion ways, but a fundamental human solidarity in being part of the same creation.*¹

This is where justice must begin for Christ followers –
we forfeit the right to demonize others, to deny their fundamental humanity.
We forfeit the right to seek vengeance –

Old Testament and New teach us that is God's purview alone.
We don't have the option to pass judgment;
we don't have the option to take life in the name of justice, not if we are for life.
These are among the things we give up for the sake of the gospel.

As Brook writes, *That is the ethic of self-emptying love — neither revile the reviler nor allow him to stay in his sin. The Christian approach to power is to tell those with power to give it up for the sake of those who lack. There is a relentless effort to rebuild relationship because God is relentless in pursuit of us.*

“He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love,” King wrote. “We can never say, ‘I will forgive you, but I won’t have anything further to do with you.’ Forgiveness means reconciliation, a coming together again.”

Can we be willing to die to our own sense of what's owed us, let grievances die,
let pride die – even let our dreams die?
Can we make room for God's dreams in us?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/opinion/social-justice-christianity.html?searchResultPosition=1>

What dream of God is trying to bust out of you? Where are you discerning a call to be planted, broken, transformed and made fruitful?

Brooks ends that essay, "*On the other side of justice, we reach the beloved community and multiethnic family of humankind.*

This vision has a destination, and thus walks not in bitterness but in hope.

Perhaps the hardest call of a peacemaker is to be a person of hope, in the face of so much reason not to hope. Yet that is what God calls us to.

As people of faith in the God of resurrection we are called to trust the life in what looks like death – what is death, but is not the last word.

Hope reminds us that death is not the last word on anything, because God always gets the last word. And God's word is always life.

Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.
be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”