

“Anything But Peace?”

What are we talking about when we speak of peace? The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. Let’s explore for a moment what that can mean.

One day, as I was coming out of the Panera store in Macedonia, a young woman, a complete stranger, said to me: “You look really sharp this morning.”— this is shalom.

Forty-some years ago, during my vicarage in Kettering (suburb of Dayton) I was a visitor in the home of the Lee family. Mrs. Lee offered me tea; I respectfully declined. You need to know that the Lee’s were first-generation immigrants from China. The offer of tea to them is not a mere formality; it is a gesture of deep hospitality, the refusal of which is an insult. I was unaware of this. That is not shalom.

I learned of this cultural faux pas within hours, and immediately went back to the Lee home to offer my apologies. Mrs. Lee graciously accepted my apology (which was clearly the result of my ignorance). This is shalom.

So Will I now go up to every woman that I deem attractive and tell her how sharp she looks? No. Will I accept hospitality from every source, even when I don’t wish to receive it? Probably not. So what is Shalom . . . peace?

Jesus wept over Jerusalem: ***“If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”*** Do we recognize ***“the things that make for peace?”*** We hear the prophet Isaiah: ***“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.”***

This is regarded by many as the quintessential depiction of peace (take a look at Henry Hicks' The Peaceable Kingdom or Henri Rousseau's The Dream). About that vision . . . can it be realized in a secular realm? Can calves and lions and fatlings (what is a fatling? It's a young animal that is being fattened up for slaughter ... prime targets for hungry lions) can they live together? Not in any world we know. Which is why it is such an attractive dream; everything at peace, nothing is competition; no threats; no dealing with harsh realities.

St. Paul clearly has shalom in mind when he writes: ***“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

Steadfastness (ὕπομονης) . . . encouragement (παρακλήσεως) . . . (literally “give to you the same to think among one another”) . . . κατα Jesus Christ . . . so that (ἵνα) with one accord (ὁμοθυμαδόν) in one mouth you may glorify (δοξαζήτε) . . . that's shalom. Shalom is not pursuing your own thing . . . thinking that you can by yourself glorify God (yes, you can pray and praise privately . . . but it is not shalom).

Then we get to this evening's Gospel and it sounds like anything but peace: ***“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”***

Come on, John! Lighten up! 'Tis the season of good will . . . not the time for axes and fire, wrath and name-calling. Yet, strangely, this may in fact be the most peace-filled message we hear today.

Shalom takes on many meanings: good neighbors, good weather, no warfare, no violent storms, many children, a loving wife — all of these are designated as shalom in the Bible. Shalom has as its root meaning:

wholeness. But equally as powerful in the imagery of shalom is the notion of harmony. That's why Paul's words are so obviously shalom. John likewise is urging people who have veered from God's path — pushing them, prodding them, goading them back to where God wants them to be, back to harmony with God.

That is so hard when those people do not see themselves as being apart from God. "Obvious" sinners are much easier to bring to shalom — they know they need it. "Righteous people" refuse to see themselves as needing what shalom offers. Hence Jesus' lament: ***"If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!"***

John is not being nasty. John is being passionate. If he can get the Pharisees and Sadducees to resonate with him, he will be seen as compassionate. Much has been made over the past several years (and is dawning anew in the current political scene) about "compassionate conservatism." [Non-conservatives label it a misnomer, perhaps even an oxymoron; some conservatives aren't sure where to place the accent.]

Compassion means to "suffer *with*" — it is a noble sentiment, and something that few of us achieve. Oh, we feel bad about some people caught in poverty, or oppression, or dysfunction — but that is not yet "suffering with" them. I don't think that "compassionate conservatism" holds any water; but then, by this standard, nor is there anything that even approaches "liberal compassion."

You have heard me use the notion of "core longings" — those God-given, deep-rooted yearnings that we never seem to meet because we so easily settle for something less. I fear the same is true about shalom. We don't know ***"the things that make for peace,"*** because we are diffused in our passion for the things of God.

Until there is harmony — oneness, wholeness with God — there will never be peace. Once again, hearken to the words of St. Augustine: *"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."* There can be no shalom unless there is first passion to be what

God wants us to be.

That's what John is urging. Not fear of God, but fellowship with God. Not God fuming, but God enfolding us into His loving embrace. That's where peace, shalom, begins . . .with our realizing that God wants to be with us (which is why he sent his Son) and want us to be with him (which is why the Holy Spirit is at work in the church).

When we want to be with God, then for us that is shalom.

Amen.