

## Seek Peace and pursue it!

Text: Never yield to evil, practice good, seek peace and pursue it.”  
(Psalm 34)

Jesus said: “My peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives give I unto you. Therefore don’t let your hearts be discouraged. Don’t permit them to be afraid.”

In Canada every police officer is also a peace officer- by definition: someone who keeps the peace. And a sense of humour definitely helps to keep the peace, as this true story illustrates.

One day an officer flagged down a teenager for speeding. He said to the boy “I’ve been waiting for you all day!”

And the boy said; “I know, and I got here as fast as I could.”

The officer laughed so hard that he just couldn’t fine the boy. He let him off with a warning and wished him a Merry Christmas! They both left the scene smiling.

Today is the Second Sunday in Advent when the theme is Peace. Ever ask yourself why World Peace is so elusive?

Arun Gandhi The grandson of Gandhi of India, has taken up Gandhi’s torch and writes: “*For generations human beings around the world worked hard to attain peace but their efforts ended mostly in heart-breaking futility leading to pessimism and worse. There is a wide-spread belief now that peace is unattainable and that civilization is doomed to perish by violence... Generations have now come to believe that violence is human nature and one just has to live with it.*”

We have been going through a rough period in human history at present. We have a war going on in Ukraine and Israel and the world has

experienced a deadly pandemic and the unleashing of climate change woes.

The war in Ukraine is the first in Europe since the Second World war.

After the Second World War the United Nations was formed. It is in many ways a wonderful organization committed to world peace but it has a huge non democratic flaw. The Security Council members each have a veto so that any substantive resolution adopted by the majority in the Security Council can be vetoed. Russia uses this veto anytime it feels hindered in any way and has used the power of veto 121 times, far more than the other members. The Us has just used its veto to block a ceasefire in Gaza.

This veto in my view leads to an abuse of power. It explains how, although the United Nations charter is designed for peace and cooperation between nations, that Russia and Isarel can wage wars where thousands die unnecessarily, and the United Nation can do very little about it.

Zelensky, the Ukrainian President says:

“A crime has been committed against Ukraine...Russia’s invasion of a fellow member state had upturned the world order.”

“So long as the aggressor is party to decision making in the international organization, you must be insulated from them, at least until aggression stops,” he added.

“Reject the right to vote. Deprive delegation rights. Remove the right of veto – if it is a member of the UN Security Council.”

We Presbyterians are members of the Reform church. Under Martin Luther, Calvin and John Knox, protests against the abuses found in the Roman Catholic church in the 1500’s eventually formed the Reformed Church. In 1968, once again, we reinforced the commitment to reform adding the words “The Church Reformed and

Reforminging”. In other words, we are committed to making the church into a more perfect organization, which is an ongoing, necessary task to meet the demands of the days we live in.

Why is this necessary?

I believe that no institution can stand the ravages of time and changing contexts without reformation. Our human nature, which is sadly flawed, and the prevailing Zeitgeist, demand continued reformation in order to build better. The United Nations is in deep need of a way to reform itself, if it is to serve well and survive. It needs action based on what we know about human nature revealed every time there is a war. It could begin by forfeiting the veto powers any time a member involves itself in Aggression against a sovereign state.

NATO, which was formed in 1949 was a brilliant answer to European wars. NATO has stood the test of time. Article 5 states that if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked.

The reforming way forward could then be this: Extend this article 5 to The United Nations, making it a necessary condition for membership in the United Nations, period!

Consider if any nation anywhere in the world was attacked by another nation in an aggressive war all the other nations would come together to stop the war. This is a dream, but as Shakespeare said of human beings: “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on.”

Mahatma Gandhi believed that we would never get to “peace on earth goodwill towards human beings” until we reformed human nature. In other words, we need to get to inner peace **first**, something that the Bible teaches from cover to cover. That inner peace would be the very

opposite of our selfishness, violence, greed and lack of love for the neighbour.

When Jesus is out in a storm on Galilee, we find him peacefully asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat. At first, the disciples who were mainly fishermen, think they can handle it but the storm gets worse until they panic and shake Jesus awake. Suddenly, he stands up in the boat and says: “Peace be still!” and there is a great calm.

In 1968 I was in New York in Norman Vincent Peale’s Marble collegiate Church and he was preaching on this story of the storm. He built the case of all the stressors of life that we all face- until people were leaning forward in their pews with anxious looks on their faces, me included. The place was full of business people and he talked about how tough it can be in business, how tough it can be when your spouse wants to divorce you, when your children go astray. He was talking about the loss of inner peace.

At the time, I was on a training mission for IBM, but I was anxious about working for IBM. Would I be able to do sales, week after week, based on commission? What if I didn’t make my draw? What then? I was full of anxious thoughts.

Suddenly Peale launched into the story of the storm and he said “The disciples went up to Jesus and shook him awake saying “Don’t you care? We are perishing!”

And Peale said: “The Lord of all Creation stood up in the boat and said: **“Peace be still!” And there was a Great Calm.**

Peale made a long pause.... And then he said: “And he can do the same for you today!” and sat down, and the mighty organ rumbled into life for the last hymn.

At the time in 1968 that sermon hit home to me.

Many years later I was reading along in Joel Osteen’s book Become a Better You and he was dealing with Jesus and the storm and he said this:

“The reason Jesus was able to bring peace to that situation was because he had peace in himself.” Joel said: **You can be in the storm, but don’t let the storm get into you.**

I thought a lot about that. What a profound insight! We won’t get to world peace or any other kind of peace, until we have inner peace as individuals. Because somehow, amazingly, when we are peaceful, we are so much more effective and loving in our actions.

Rudyard Kipling said it well in a poem to his son John:

“If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating...

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
And stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;  
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,  
And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!

So, how do we get to inner peace?

### 1) We need to Guard our minds!

I was at a church coffee hour once and a woman decided to unload on the group about her house which had been sold. Apparently, she had spent years lovingly restoring the place with all the original woodwork, Hardwood floors, sash windows rebuilt, until it looked like the day it had been created.

The place was sold because she needed the money. Her grief? The new owners destroyed all her careful work making it modern, white painting the things she had so carefully stripped. She was very sad. She had taken the storm inside herself and it was making her miserable. The group listening all agreed that she needed to let it go. She needed to turn the situation over to God. “Let go Let God,” they said.

St Paul teaches us how to get to inner peace by the thoughts we choose to think:

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Having trouble with the news? Why wouldn't you? Wars in Ukraine and Gaza, a pandemic and floods, drought, tornadoes and heat waves and a lack of urgency on the world stage even when we know that inaction will be fatal to us all. There is a hit song which goes like this: “I believe that if you just go by the nightly news, your faith in all mankind, would be the first things you lose.” Yes...

So, sure, listen to the world news **but don't let it get inside you!** If its getting in and depressing you, let's learn to turn it off and follow Paul's advice and concentrate on whatsoever things are of **good report. Let's know our limits!**

We need to defend our minds. We are only human. Even Jesus had a problem with inner peace. Sometimes it can be more than hard.

Jesus did lose his inner peace in the Garden of Gethsemane and that loss of peace extended right into the crucifixion when he cried out “My God My God why have you forsaken me? His defenses were down. The storm had come inside.

But as he was dying, the inner peace slowly returned. How? He let the storm go. He let God. He said “Into Thy hands I commit my spirit.” and breathed his last.

Have you ever been in love romantically, when all the odds were against you and you were behaving in such a way that people thought you were crazy? “Oh, he’s in love,” they said as if that explained everything! Romantic love does seem to have a way of bypassing all common sense. It is very beautiful and sometimes is described as an affair of the heart and not the mind.

In the same way there is a kind of peace that St. Paul says passes our understanding. It is a heart gift from God, which we can ask for. We don’t have to understand it, **we just have to take it inside us**. Rather than taking the storm inside, we can choose peace on the inside- a kind of peace so wonderful that it transcends our understanding and all the problems that are on the outside. It is a gift we can give to others.

**It is a gift that follows prayer.** St Paul says: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

When we give the gift of peace it changes things at the heart level.

There is a lesson we can learn from Covid. It started in one person and spread across the world. I think that peace can begin one person at a time

because I think peace is contagious. I do think that peace can come to this world. I think that is the hopeful message of the Christmas Angels **Peace on earth good will towards human beings**. We hear that message every Christmas, one person at a time... We must never give up on the power of one person changed by peace.

Kevin Rones, is a San Diego based acoustic guitar performer whose mission is to inspire.

One night he had the feeling at 3 am, that he should go to the beach and play his guitar. He obeyed the intuition and got up.

When he arrived, there was a slight rainy drizzle in the air. The boardwalk usually crammed with people, was at this hour home to only two people. On one side of the beach was a woman who appeared to be troubled and was using a broom on the boardwalk. The other was a lone figure sitting on the retaining wall and staring out to sea. Kevin chose a spot equidistant between them and began to play.

As he played the woman swept her way right next to him smiling at him. She appeared homeless and dirty, her clothes tattered and mismatched. After Kevin greeted her, she said: "I'm cleaning this place up. Somebody has to do it. Just look at all that sand it gets tracked everywhere."

She went on, "You sure play beautiful music. I think my friend Annie would like your music. I want to hire you to play for her." She pointed to the lone woman seated on the sea wall.

Kevin told her that he would be happy to play for Annie, for free.

The broom lady said that her friend never talked and not to be offended, if she didn't seem to hear him. They approached and the broom lady introduced Kevin, saying that she got Annie a present to cheer her up. "It's a guitar man who is going to play a special song for you!"



Annie did not move on the sea wall. She had dark sunglasses on and was wearing a tattered coat. The broom lady left them and swept her way in the direction of the pier.

Kevin sat next to the woman and began to play. As he played Kevin **focussed on inner peace and put every thought into having good things happen for this woman.** He played for quite a while.

Suddenly Annie turned and said , “How do you do that? You play and you make it so beautiful. I can feel it inside my heart.”

She took off her sunglasses. She had tears in her eyes and a smile on her face. She held out her hand to Kevin. There were a few coins in her hand. She offered them saying she wanted to pay him. She said that was all she had, because she was having a run of bad luck.

But Kevin refused saying his music was the gift from her friend.

Annie said: “She’s nuts you know, but she is a friend. I guess its not bad luck!”

Kevin told her: “When I play, good things happen!”

“Go ahead and play then” she said in a sad voice, “Cause I like to believe that!”

So, Kevin sat on the retaining wall beside her and played for Annie. He lost himself in the music. He no longer knew what he was playing or for how long. He says that he was totally connected to the instrument and an overwhelming peace ran through his entire body and seemed to radiate out from him.

When he stopped, he was startled to see that a small crowd had gathered.

A man stepped forward and said: I have been listening for awhile. It was amazing. I have to give you money.”

Kevin said “I can’t take your money but if you were to give it to this woman beside me, I would be grateful.” The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. As he gave the wad to Annie, the man said “This is from that guitar man. It’s your lucky day!”

As Kevin was packing up his guitar, the broom lady was sweeping towards him again. Annie in a quiet voice reminded Kevin that he had said ‘When I play good things happen.’ “I believe you now.” She said.

The broom lady stopped beside them. She had overheard the remark. With a startled look on her face she said: “She talked. She never talks- I can’t believe it! She never talks.”

Kevin had given a gift of peace from his heart, a gift of the peace that passed his understanding, and it changed one lone woman on a beach... and also a small group that had gathered.

As Paul Shane Spear once said: **“As one person I cannot change the world, but I can change the world of one person.”**

Or as Margaret Mead once said: **"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has."**

**Let’s not be discouraged about peace.**

**Instead, let’s seek peace and pursue it.**

**Amen.**