

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

December 4, 2022
The Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1-12
Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13

How many of you have seen the movie Miss Congeniality with Sandra Bullock? A quick plot summary...she is an undercover FBI agent sent to catch a terrorist at the Miss United States pageant. It's important to know, she had to be groomed to be a contestant. Naturally she was rather rough around the edges, a hard-hitting agent who didn't avoid the difficult work. She had a difficult time to say the least trying to fit into polite pageant protocol.

In the scene from the pageant interview finals she is asked, "What does society most need today?" You first hear the responses of the other contestants who all answer one after the other...world peace. When it gets to Sandra Bullock's character she answers, "That would be harsher punishment for parole violators." Her answer is met with a stunned audience. After a long pause, she continues with a smile...and, world peace. And, everyone cheers.

The point of the scene is that the truth to any kind of change in our world isn't the popular answer. It's so much easier just to say "world peace" and move one to other more pleasant things. I mean...could we even come up with a real, viable answer to peace if we had to?

Isaiah describes peace this way:

⁶The 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.
⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD....

If you take a look in your bulletins this morning, I have included two images for you. The first is what is known as the Peaceable Kingdom by Edward Hicks. Painted in 1834, this was his attempt to imagine the reality of love. The reality of Jesus' teachings in real time between real people. Hicks was interested in the kind of society that love could create. A peaceable society. He was interested in the kind of active love that Jesus taught that could bring about a kind of radical peace.

Hicks was a Quaker minister and in his exploration of Christ's embodied love he painted at least 62 of these paintings to reflect the imagery from Isaiah 11. When you look at the first image, you sense his hope in our ability to rise above our divisions, to establish peace with one another by taking seriously the love that Jesus taught.

Look at the image more closely. Notice the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion, the cow and bear grazing, the lion and the ox eating straw. Each of the pairs living out love and putting aside their natural inclination to harm another. Living into the tension that marks their reality with humility and grace.

Hicks believed that our natural inclination toward violence and division could be overcome with love that would lead to peace if we let go of our darker instincts. If we put aside selfishness, greed, pride, and hatred. He believed that this was what faith could accomplish for our world.

But if you look at the second image, you see something slightly different. What do you notice?

In this detail of another of Hicks' painting, his frustration with humanity is growing. Here, it is Christ (in the image of the child) who is gripping the mane of the lion with a sense of fierce control. Many of his later paintings show this greater tension with animals baring their teeth, tired from their effort. Peace, for Hicks, wasn't as straightforward as he had hoped. And in the second image he seems to say, our way to peace is going to take a little more effort, a little more assertiveness, a little more courage than he first imagined.

What does peace feel like for you today? Does it feel like the first image or the second?

Yesterday, we consecrated Mark Stevenson as our new bishop for the Diocese of Virginia. It was a grand celebration led by our presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry. And, if you have ever heard him preach, you know he preaches out loud...bold, unapologetic preaching that calls us to task.

His favorite line is "If it's not about love, it's not about God." And, indeed, Bishop Curry talked a lot about love yesterday. Love as the pathway to peace...in our hearts and in our communities. And Bishop Curry is nothing if not inspiring. After you hear him, you want to go out and hug a few strangers whether they want you to or not.

However, one of my colleagues wasn't as giddy over Bishop Curry's comments as I was. He said to me...so, what difference does it make? I mean Bishop Curry can talk about love and peace all day long but we all know the reality on the ground isn't that cut and dry.

My friend seemed cynical, a bit of a pessimist when it comes to love and peace. But the more I thought about it, he was right. If we aren't careful, love can become just a warm and fuzzy surface distraction, a world peace response that never pushes us to truly create the peaceable kingdom Jesus calls forth within us.

Let me ask you this...have you ever struggled to love someone? Have you ever had to grit your teeth and force a smile when you really felt hatred and anger boiling up within you? Have you ever wanted to turn and walk the other way when faced with someone you disagree with and can't ever seem to find common ground? Maybe that other person has crossed lines or made decisions that you simply can't come to terms with.

Most of us are fumbling trying to figure love out. And if we are truly honest, most of us would rather avoid love at least some of time. Because talking about love and living love are two very, very different things especially when we refer to the kind of love that transforms us and moves us to those hard and challenging places that are calling out for our attention. And so, my friends' frustration was naming a much deeper reality that we don't like to face.

Love is uncomfortable. Peace is hard. And, it requires that we be willing to unpack some dark places within ourselves...our need to be right, our desire to have control, our inclination to shut out the things that make us uncomfortable.

On Friday, the Clergy of the Diocese had a small gathering with Bishop Curry to talk about our lived experiences within our congregations. He reassured us...living into love, the kind of love that brings about peace and unity takes time. It takes trust. It takes courage. But that there is no act of love that is too small to begin transforming our communities.

And then he said this...life without living as Jesus taught us isn't life at all. In fact, he said, it's dangerous. We can't afford to fail at a peaceable kingdom. We have glimpses of the alternative every single day driven by greed, hatred, oppression, and discrimination. And if we aren't careful those dark parts of ourselves and society will only grow deeper and take root and won't let go.

And so we grip the lion's mane with determination for what can be. We don't give up. We seek out the hard kind of love that calls us to task.

This is what John is teaching in our Gospel. That just as the chaff is the barrier to the good fruit of the wheat, we also have barriers that are preventing our good fruit from yielding the love and peace that God desires for us. And so, God is going to help us remove those barriers. To remove things like our anger, our fear, our apathy, and selfishness, our suspicion of difference, our disdain for the things we don't understand, our resistance to building bridges, of saying I'm sorry, of doing the work of reconciliation and healing.

And I have hope that we can get there because God is no God of easy love. God is a God of bold love. God is a God of transforming peace. And God sent his beloved son to show us the way...the way to a true peaceable kingdom. Amen.



Edward Hicks (American, 1780–1849), Peaceable Kingdom, 1834. Oil on canvas, 29.6 × 35.5 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Detail from the 1829–30 Peaceable Kingdom in the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum Collection.