

Be A Blessing!¹

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 10, 2018, by Joy T. Barnitz, M.Div.

Scripture: [Matthew 5:1-12](#) and [Psalm 15](#)

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In the plaza where the rally at the conclusion of the Women's March in Oakland on January 21, 2017 was held, I saw a young child in a stroller and on the front of the stroller was a hand-written sign with the words: "Peacemaker in training." The "picture" of that child has stayed in my mind ever since since that memorable day as I have come to consider myself to be a "peacemaker-in-training."

Be a Blessing! That's how Everett Fox's translation of Genesis Chapter 12, verse 2 ends. Be a Blessing! Not a suggestion, a command. With an exclamation point! The more customary translation of this verse is aspirational: "And you shall be a blessing." Fox's version of this verse² is:

I will make a great nation of you and will give-you-blessing
and will make your name great. (PERIOD)

Be a blessing! (EXCLAMATION POINT!)

God is sending Abram out from his homeland at age 75. Abram takes his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all their possessions, including the animals and all the people of their households, on a pilgrimage of faith. This is the original immigrant pilgrimage story. What trust Abram, and his extended family, must have had to pack everything up and move to an unknown place! I marvel at Abram's trust and that of his family. Just as God entered into a covenant with these original pilgrims, God enters into a covenant with each of us and gives us free will to make choices. Our choices are what determine the consequences ... not just for us, also for the communities in which we live and for our country and for the world. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is calling us into living our daily lives according to the second great commandment: to love our neighbors as ourselves. To do this, we must make wise choices in our lives.

Let's put some context around our Gospel reading for today which is among the best-known passages in the Christian Bible; it comes from the Sermon on the Mount.³ Jesus addresses both the disciples AND the crowds in this sermon that includes numerous sayings related specifically to Jewish Christians, who are the intended audience. By setting the sermon on a mountain, Jesus becomes a Moses-like figure; by sitting down at the beginning of the sermon, Jesus assumes the position of a teacher.

¹ Revised and updated from a sermon preached on 29 January 2017 at Covenant Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, CA.

² Genesis 12:2 Fox's translation is found in: *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes by Everett Fox. (New York, NY: Schocken Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 1995)

³ Matthew 5: 1 - 12

The Beatitudes are beloved in part because they capture essential lessons Jesus taught us. They are embedded in our culture, as illustrated by Kurt Vonnegut:⁴

“Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!”

Since November of 2016, I've been pondering peacemaking; in particular, I've been thinking about engaged small group and one-to-one conversations as methods of peacemaking. My interest in this came from reading an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, “Why I Left White Nationalism” by R. Derek Black published shortly after the 2016 election. Black's article caught and has held my attention. Black is the son of the founder of Stormfront, which was the first major white nationalist website; he is also the godson of David Duke, former Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Black grew up in West Palm Beach near Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate and “was once considered the bright future of the movement.” After community college, Black studied medieval history at one of the most liberal colleges in the U.S.: New College in Sarasota, Florida. Black attributes his change in attitude toward white nationalism to the “many talks with devoted and diverse people ... who chose to invite (him) into their dorms and conversations rather than ostracize (him).” In particular, Black cites the impact of being invited to and attending a weekly Sabbath dinner given by a fellow student, the only Jewish student then on campus. Black noted in his *New York Times Magazine* article that, since his renouncing of white nationalism: ⁵

People have approached me looking for a way to change the minds of Trump voters, but I can't offer any magic technique. That kind of persuasion happens in person-to-person interactions and it requires a lot of honest listening on both sides. For me, the conversations that led me to change my views started because I couldn't understand why anyone would fear me. I thought I was only doing what was right and defending those I loved.

Let me emphasize that last part: “... I couldn't understand why anyone would fear me. I thought I was only doing what was right and defending those I loved.”

⁴ The full quote is: “For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. 'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!” Kurt Vonnegut, “A Man Without a Country,” *The Guardian* (20 January 2016)

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/21/kurtvonnegut> (accessed 28 January 2017)

⁵ Sources of this story were accessed on 28 January 2017:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/why-i-left-white-nationalism.html>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3846448/How-son-infamous-white-supremacist-groomed-leadership-turned-movement-thanks-Orthodox-Jewish-friend-college.html>

Those words caused me to stop and reflect; and I keep coming back to them. They made me see Black as a real person, someone like me, someone who wants to defend those he loves and doesn't see the harm it's doing to others. And what changed *his* mind? It was one-to-one personal conversations over time. This was an approach available to me, if I chose to engage in it. To do so, meant stepping beyond my comfort zone and for that I needed community.

One of the choices I made was to march in the 2017 Women's March in Oakland held on Saturday, January 21st, 2017. Before I decided to march, I had to decide what I was marching *for*. My action needed to be connected with my reason AND my heart, not just in moving my feet. Yes, I was marching to support my friend, Moina Shaiq, then President of the Tri-Cities Interfaith Council, who was speaking that day. Yes, I was marching because I wanted the validation that I was not alone in my fears for the future of our country. And yes, I was marching because I remembered the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s, the protests of the Vietnam War, Watergate. I remember those times and I was numb; I felt all that had been accomplished toward building a country where all could flourish was slipping away. And, most importantly, I was marching because I believe deeply that "all persons are created equal" and are here on earth living their lives "to form themselves for heaven through their life in this world"⁶ and, by doing so, serve God's great purpose.

And, yet ... marching was not enough.

It IS not enough.

In 2015, the UCC celebrated the thirtieth (30th) anniversary of its decision to become a Just Peace Church by re-invigorating the Just Peace movement in the denomination through affirming four distinct contexts in which to seek peace as outlined by the World Council of Churches in 2013:

- For Just Peace in the Community- so that all may live free from fear, ^[]_[SEP]
- For Just Peace with the Earth- so that life is sustained, ^[]_[SEP]
- For Just Peace in the Marketplace- so that all may live in dignity, ^[]_[SEP]
- For Just Peace Among the Nations- so that human lives are protected ^[]_[SEP]

Peacemakers are needed to bring about this Just Peace.

We are children of God ... and we are called to be peacemakers for we are called to BE A BLESSING! We are called to live into our beliefs. It's an awesome charge, and an awesome responsibility. Perhaps we can take comfort, and inspiration, from Jesus' words:

⁶ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* No. 360. Passages in Swedenborg's theological works are numbered consistently in all translations. Swedenborg wrote in Latin, *Heaven and Hell* was first published in 1758

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*⁷

We are not promised an easy path, if we choose to follow Jesus' example. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian who was executed in Germany shortly before Hitler died, made this clear in his distinction between cheap grace and costly grace in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*.⁸ He wrote:

"... **cheap grace** is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."

By contrast,

"... **costly grace** confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'"

Costly grace requires us to let go of our ego and make the choice to live our lives intentionally, according to our professed beliefs. Costly grace is costly because it requires us to commit to reflect, repent (which is to turn around, change our minds, turn again toward God), reform and renew our commitment to following Jesus' teachings. We are not required to be perfect (thank God!); we are required to be honest with ourselves and to humbly seek to do better.

So Vonnegut's comparison of the beatitudes to the ten commandments as guides for our lives makes sense: as believers, as those who follow Jesus, we are asked to become as the disciples were, to live our lives in accordance with Jesus' teachings because those are our deep, internal beliefs. As children of God, let's turn this beatitude around and ask: how we are to be peacemakers in a world turned upside down? How can we see and honor and respect the Divine spark in those who differ from us? Those who are doing what they think is right and defending their loved ones ... just as we are doing.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are the children of God, for they shall be called peacemakers. I take heart in the child in the stroller at the Women's March in Oakland. I, too, am a "peacemaker in training". That is a choice I can make and can strive toward. As we move into a moment of reflective silent prayer, let's think about how each of us is called to be a peacemaker. It seems a large task,

⁷ John 14:27

⁸ Quotes taken from Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cost_of_Discipleship (accessed on 27 January 2017). Bonhoeffer's grandmother was Swedenborgian and he was familiar with Emanuel Swedenborg's theological works. Information on Bonhoeffer is available at: <http://www.dbonhoeffer.org/> (accessed 30 January 2017).

... and it is. I find comfort in Margaret Mead's words: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world."⁹

God has work for us to do and has given us the means to choose the aspirational path: to **BE a Blessing!**

Amen

⁹ <http://www.interculturalstudies.org/faq.html>