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Speaking Peace as a Military Chaplain

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On the top of a sandbag ammo bunker built into the perimeter of an 81mm mortar pit, the chaplain in dusty fatigues, Bible in hand, waited for the Marines of Alpha Company to assemble for the memorial service. The mortar pit, carved like an outdoor amphitheater on the top of a mountain slope overlooking a deep, green valley, was the place where the men usually gathered to pay their last respects to friends who had suddenly dissolved into abstractions called U.S.M.C.K.I.A. Memorial services were part of the routine here—along with Vietnam's monsoon rains, knee-deep mud, booby traps, and combat operations that never quite lived up to their grand names: Operation Swift, Operation Pursuit,

Operation Mameluke Thrust.

The first Marines to arrive at the mortar pit sat on the neatly constructed sandbag perimeter. The others would have to stand in rows behind them. There was little to be heard from the group besides the voice of the company gunnery sergeant as he hurried up the stragglers. The chaplain watched the men shuffle into place, forming a thick semi-circle in front of him. Beyond them the sun, beginning to set behind a distant mountain range, strangely illumined the five pairs of empty combat boots that stood evenly spaced in a straight row at his feet—Alpha Company's way of symbolizing fallen comrades. Boots can look as tired, dirty, and lined as soldiers' faces—but not these boots.

They were new, borrowed from the company supply tent for the occasion. Hardly appropriate symbols, the chaplain thought to himself, and then wondered which pair was supposed to represent 2nd Lt. Fred Cobb. This memorial service would be especially difficult for the chaplain. Fred was a close friend. He remembered how often Fred had spoken of his wife—and how eagerly the two of them anticipated the birth of their first child, due any day now. It was only a week ago that the chaplain, whose own wife had recently delivered their first child, had asked Fred whether he hoped for a boy or girl. It hadn't taken him long to say that he wished for a daughter who would resemble her mother. It would give him the opportunity, he had said, to enjoy seeing a copy of his wife growing up.

All the men of Alpha Company who could attend the memorial service were now in place. The chaplain began with words he had used before, "We have come together in worship of Almighty God and in memory of . . ." Each of the men to whom the empty boots bore mute witness was mentioned by name. The chaplain spoke of them in well-measured eulogies, calling them for a moment out of the abstractions they had become as war casualties, to life again as they had lived it among their friends. This was not the time to say the grand things that might be said later—perhaps at a Memorial Day Service in a flag-festooned Veterans' Park of some American town. Then it might be said that these five died for the noble cause of freedom—and no one would spit in disagreement. To the men of Alpha Company sitting and standing around the mortar pit, the five and all the others before them had died for no other reasons than that they had been sent to Vietnam—a place where everyone tried to survive for thirteen months in a test that some passed and some, through no fault of their own, failed. It was as simple as that, and had nothing to do with freedom.

The chaplain read a passage from the Bible after which he closed the book and looked at the faces around him before speaking again.

Like a desperate corpsman trying to stop the bleeding that won't stop or alleviate the pain that will not fade, the chaplain began his message—attempting with everything he could muster within himself to speak the words of the Gospel in a meaningful way to all the men and lift their fallen spirits. After a brief prayer, the chaplain invited those sitting on the sandbag perimeter to stand with the others for the farewell blessing which he spoke intently with lifted arms, "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

The sun had set, though a few streaks of light remained in the sky as the men dispersed—some to stand guard duty; some to man the mortar pits and the 106mm recoilless rifle; some to assume radio watch in the command bunker; some to move out in small patrols under the cover of darkness to set up ambushes among the rocks, tall grass, and scrub trees; and some to talk awhile before hitting the rack for a few hours of sleep. The corporal from the supply tent stopped to pick up the five pairs of boots—then faded into the dusk with the others. The chaplain watched them go, and slowly repeated to himself, ". . . the Lord turn his face toward you and give you *peace*."

To a chaplain peace is more than a word; it is his mission as a pastor. For this reason, he cannot help but feel the heavy irony in his efforts to bring peace to the soldier caught up in war. The peace he brings is not the cessation of hostilities. That is the business of governments. Yet the cessation of hostilities might well be the kind of peace that the soldier desperately wants more than anything else simply because it will mean going home to his loved ones. The peace the chaplain brings, rather, can perhaps best be called a peace of mind or spirit, an internal peace in spite of the circumstances of combat—so that the soldier, unencumbered by a paralyzing fear of death or the restraints of a troubled conscience, might fight more fiercely. In other words, the chaplain brings peace for

the sake of war. It is impossible to minister as a combat chaplain and not feel one's integrity (and soul, for that matter) torn by this crazy irony.

It is an irony seen not only in the chaplain's combat ministry, but also in his ministry in the military training camp. A number of years ago, there was a regularly scheduled "Shooters' Mass" for Marine recruits who spent part of their boot training at Camp Pendleton, California, where they had to qualify on the rifle range for the first time. The pressure to do well was very intense. Drill instructors, looking for personal honors at the end of the training period, did not want to see any low scores among their companies to bring their overall rating down. Shooters' Mass was an ordinary celebration of the Mass by military chaplains. It was designed, however, to give Catholic recruits a peace of mind and spirit that would help them hold steady on the rifle range, take careful aim, and slowly squeeze the trigger.

In the more civilian context of the chaplain's mission the nagging incongruity of peace for the sake of war is not felt—for which he is usually somewhat relieved. The chaplain can experience a profound joy in bringing peace to a troubled home, for example. The hard work of the chaplain's pastoral counseling brings him ample reward when he can see a husband and wife reconciled—actively trying to make of their marriage the experience of "one flesh." There is reason for song and thanksgiving in the heart of the chaplain when he has been used of the Holy Spirit to bring peace into the life of a dying man—who, before the chaplain's ministry, had trembled in terror at the thought of entering the next life without the assurance of forgiveness. Something there is within the human soul that wants the record clean before death. What is it—the natural desire of one created with a moral nature or simply an intuition of judgment? There is a deep satisfaction too for the chaplain in preaching the Gospel—and thereby bringing peace into the lives of those who make up

the Sunday congregation. Challenged and sometimes threatened by a host of different worries, crises, and temptations—they come to experience the word of peace.

People desperately long for peace above all else. Given the fact that individual lives are largely marked by conflict (both within and without) and that human history is largely the history of war, this persistent longing for peace is strangely surprising. After all, conflict and war seem to be the norm for human life, as indeed they are for much of the non-rational creation. Perhaps the longing for peace arises out of the mind's hazy memories of Eden. Long ago there was a time when peace was the established norm, the original norm. The memory of that time continues to be the standard against which the present is measured. In spite of the conflicts they continually experience inside and outside of themselves, people agree that there *ought* to be peace.

Though people long for peace both within their souls and their world at large, it would seem that if it could be had in only one of these two places and not both, most would choose peace in the world. People can live with a little conflict within themselves as long as there is peace in their streets—and they don't face the immediate possibility of having to dig for their loved ones in the rubble that was once their homes. Because war, wherever it happens in this shrinking world, is seen as a threat to peace everywhere (including Main Street, U.S.A.), the people of our home towns are very concerned about military action in places like the Falklands, Iraq, Afghanistan, Poland, parts of Africa, South America, and most vividly in Lebanon—especially the city of Beirut. To see a modern skyline of high rise resort hotels, apartment buildings, commercial and government offices, cultural buildings, and hospitals in shattered ruins and burning is an ominous sight—not easy to push out of the mind. Is it a symbol of what *could* happen to the skyline of those cities Americans call home—or is it something stronger, a portent perhaps of what *must* be someday?

The concern for peace in the world has reached the high anxiety level in the anti-nuclear movement. Church leaders as well as a great cross section of people from every level of society are calling loudly for the reduction and ultimate scrapping of all nuclear weapons. Their determination is understandable. The total destructive power of such weapons is so awesome that it is difficult to find appropriate terminology or units of measurement that the mind can grasp. The effort is a little like trying to understand the distances of stars by referring to light years. If the issue of the sixties was civil rights, and that of the seventies the Vietnam War, the issue of the eighties is certainly nuclear weapons—an issue fed by a deep desire for peace and fear of war.

Some argue that nuclear weapons are themselves the guarantee of peace. Because their initial use (perhaps limited) would quickly escalate to the unlimited barrage unleashing the unimaginable, those who control them (so the argument goes) would never use them. Use would be suicidal. There would be no hope of winning—therefore no initial use and the peace, although fragile, will be maintained.

The argument has some credibility as long as one can assume that the human beings who happen to be national leaders are indeed always guided by clear reason and enlightened self interest. Given the historical record, however, rational restraint does not appear to be something that can endure without lapse. There is a flaw in human nature. "Man likes to make roads and to create, that is a fact beyond dispute. But why," asks the Russian author Dostoevsky, "has he such a passionate love for destruction and chaos also. Tell me that!"

There is an unmistakable pessimism about world peace today. Talk of building a "lasting peace" sounds as outdated as the talk about building the unsinkable ship—before the Titanic went down. It could only happen at least sixty years ago, in another era, that Carl Sandburg, poet of America's working people and soldiers, would write a

poem called "The Four Brothers" in which he spoke of how the four allies (France, Russia, Britain, and America) were sweeping the last of the old tyrannies into God's great dust pan. The poem reflects the optimism with which many Americans entered the first world war—the one that would end all wars and make the world safe for democracy. The last lines of the poem go like this:

Look! the four brothers march
And hurl their big shoulders
And swear the job shall be done.

Out of the wild finger-writing north
and south, east and west, over the
blood crossed, blood-dusty ball of
earth,

Out of it all a God who knows is
sweeping clean,

Out of it all a God who sees and
pierces through, is breaking and
cleaning out an old thousand
years, is making ready for a new
thousand years.

The four brothers shall be five and
more.

Under the chimneys of the winter time
the children of the world shall sing
new songs.

Among the rocking restless cradles
the mothers of the world shall
sing new sleepytime songs.²

Sandburg was wrong. The first world war would bring no millenium of peace—and another poet in another part of the world understood this clearly. Like Sandburg, W.B. Yeats saw a new era beginning, but he did not see it in a vision of domestic tranquility—mothers singing "sleepytime songs" to their cradled infants. Speaking of the new "millenium" dawning, he asked with horror,

And what rough beast, its hour come
round at least,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be

born?"

The growing pessimism about the possibilities of peace present the chaplain or pastor with an urgent context in which to carry on his ministry, leading people in worship—and delivering to them the Aaronic blessing, “. . . the Lord turn his face toward you and give you *peace*.”

It is not surprising that all of the world's major religions speak of peace. There is some common understanding of humankind's fallen conditions—so universally characterized by conflict and war. As the very term “Islam” suggests, the Moslem finds peace, a personal peace, in his surrender to Allah. The Buddhist finds peace in ridding himself of all desire—so that he can look on the world in passive detachment. In still another way, the Hindu finds peace through the discipline of yoga by which his soul blends with Brahman—and the self, that caldron of conflict, is no more.

But what do we who are ministers of the gospel of peace—what do we mean by peace as we carry that word into the pulpit, the counseling room, the hospital ward, the prison, and even the battlefield? What do we really mean by peace?

The Bible certainly uses the word “peace” often enough. In the New Testament alone it is mentioned nearly a hundred times and can be found in every book of the New Testament canon. Let's sort through the Biblical material in order to arrive at as concise a definition as possible.

First of all, peace is set forth in the Bible as the proper state of affairs—in other words, the condition that ought to exist were it not for the intrusion of sin into that which was created good. Paul underscores this point clearly when, dealing with some of the turmoil in the church at Corinth, he writes, “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (I Cor. 14:33).

If peace is indeed the proper state of affairs in the creation, it follows that the gospel of peace we preach has to do with the recreation of that state. What was corrupted

by sin must be restored again through Christ so that its condition is once more what it was meant to be.

Second, peace is the word used to describe our relationship with God after we are justified (or made right with him) through faith in Jesus Christ. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,” says Paul (Romans 5:1). Peace in this context does not so much denote a pleasant, inner composure of the mind as it does a re-established relationship with God. Whereas we were once enemies of God in our sin, living in a camp hostile to his and therefore under the wrath of his judgment, we are now at peace with him through Jesus Christ.

Third, peace is often used in the Bible to describe the relationship that must exist between people when they are at peace with God. Something salutary will of necessity follow the restored relationship with God—something good and beneficial. Peace with God is not a religious experience that can be confined to a hermit's cave. That something salutary, which becomes as much an obligation as forgiveness after we have been forgiven, is peace. Paul tells Timothy, “. . . pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (II Tim. 2:22). In a similar way, he reminds the Ephesian Christians, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). James, the teacher of a practical faith, says, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; than peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:17-18). And Jesus sums it up when he says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9).

Fourth, the Bible uses the word peace to describe the eschatological salvation of the whole person. This is its most important use in the Bible. The Old Testament view of

salvation in all its fullness at the end of time is not described as some mystical experience of peace, a kind of bovine tranquility, while the world falls apart and burns. Rather, it is described in terms of flesh and blood people living in peace with each other, God, and the creation.

In the last days, says Micah the prophet, God

. . . will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong
nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into
plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against
nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.
Every man will sit under his own vine
and under his own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the Lord Almighty has spoken.
(Micah 4:3-4)

The prophet Isaiah, describing the reign of the “shoot (who) will come up from the stump of Jesse,” says,

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the
goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling
together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the
ox.
The infant will play near the hole of
the cobra,
and the young child put his hand
into the viper’s nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the know-
ledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
(Isaiah 11:6-9)

Salvation in the Bible is a very down-to-earth sort of thing. It is not described as an escape from the physical creation—the reunion of the soul with Brahman, the spirit’s trek to a happy hunting ground, or the eternal bliss of the immortal soul in heaven. The salvation of which the Bible speaks is something that concerns the whole person. It begins with the forgiveness of sins, proceeds with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit as He chisels away, making the person anew in the image of Christ, and it culminates in nothing less than the resurrection of the dead—and life on the earth, itself made new. Perhaps this is the reason why the Bible, when describing the fullness of salvation in terms of peace, pictures that peace in such an earthly way as people living together in peace with God and the creation.

The Messiah who would bring about the condition of peace is called the “Prince of Peace” in Old Testament prophecy. When he appears in the fullness of time as the babe of Bethlehem, angels use the sky to make their cosmic announcement, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).

The angels’ reference to peace is not to be taken as a sentimental wish, but as a declaration that the salvation of which the prophets had spoken in misty visions had come now to earth.

After his earthly ministry—marked by wondrous signs that pointed ahead to the fullness of salvation to come—and after his death and resurrection—mighty works of grace and life by which the power of sin and death had been broken—He left us his legacy saying, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

The peace the Savior leaves us is the objective fact of our salvation—a work as real as the construction of a new house. It is a work whose foundations were laid when Jesus Christ died on the cross and made possible the forgiveness of sins. It is a work whose progress is steady and sure as the Holy Spirit

goes about his task of teaching us and reminding us of the words of the Savior. It is a work whose completion will be marked by our rising from the dead, and the coming into being of a new earth beneath a new sky.

The reason why this work of salvation should be called peace is really quite obvious. The objective fact of our salvation assures us of ultimate victory in the struggle or life to which we are called. Because victory is an absolute certainty, we have peace now.

Let's try to illustrate the point with a military example. After the Normandy invasion of the Second World War, the allied soldier knew he had the victory, and that the Nazi enemy had been given a mortal blow. Though the soldier still had to fight through miles and miles of Europe, it was a different task from what it had been before the invasion. Victory was his; it was only a matter of time. Peace was already within his grip.

As ministers of the gospel of peace, we preach a peace that is both here—and yet to come. The peace of the gospel can be experienced now as people put their faith in Christ and are made right with God—to know, as his sons and daughters, the blessedness of forgiveness and love. This peace, however, is not all there is to the Christian experience. It is a foretaste and a surety of the peace yet to come at the end of time—when the Lord returns and the Kingdom of God is complete: the will of the Father done on earth as it is in heaven.

Perhaps it is this tension between the “already” and the “not yet” that accounts for the disagreement among Christians regarding the compatibility of Christian discipleship and military service. Some Christians are conscientious objectors when it comes to war, while others are conscientious participants. The first group tends to emphasize the fact that the Kingdom of God is *already* here—planted in the lives of men and women who must live out its principles of love and peace. The second group seems to emphasize the fact that the Kingdom of God is *not yet* here in all its fullness. In the mean-

time, sin remains a formidable power, sometimes taking the shape of organized lawlessness and tyranny. When that happens, it must be firmly restrained and put down by lawful authority. Real peace can only be built on the foundation of justice, and justice is something that needs enforcement. This is why Paul says that the state “. . . does not bear the sword for nothing” (Romans 13:4).

Rudy Wiebe, a Mennonite novelist, has written an intriguing novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, about a Mennonite community in Saskatchewan, Canada, during the Second World War. In this novel we meet Deacon Block who has dedicated himself to the establishment of a peaceful Mennonite community that will follow the ways of the Fathers—in isolation from the world bent on destroying itself. His firm determination, born of terrible persecution in Russia, leads him to violence—the very contradiction of his intentions. His daughter, unmarried and growing older, becomes pregnant by a half-breed Indian farm hand. The shame and outrage Block feels are greater than any sorrow he could have for his daughter who miscarries and dies of an internal bleeding. With the aggressiveness of a military leader, he does all he can to dispossess the Indians of their land and build the walls of isolation higher—lest he lose his son too.

The war within the peaceful heart of Deacon Block is no less ironic than the chaplain raising his hands in blessing over his flock outfitted for war, “. . . the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.” In both cases it simply boils down to the fact that we wait and pray for the Kingdom of God to come in its full manifestation: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Until then, the dark impulse of anger and hatred found even in Deacon Block must be checked (at times with force) for the sake of peace, justice—and even the Kingdom.