

Pastor Letter: Peace and Harmony (11/24/22)

On this Second Sunday of Advent, we light the second purple candle of peace in the Advent wreath. Our scripture passages also highlight the themes of harmony and peace as we look for the "Coming of Christ." While contemplating what to write in this week's pastoral letter, two items came to mind.

While traveling on a 16-day mission trip to the Holy Lands in 1997, we encountered a Peace Pole in the garden of one of our hosts, who were attempting to bring peace and harmony among the Muslim, Hebrew, and Christian faiths. A Peace Pole is a 4-or 6-sided pole that is planted into the ground on a significant site. The words, "May Peace Prevail on Earth," are written on each side of the pole in various languages. A Peace Pole can currently be purchased from a credible vendor in various styles, erected in a significant public or private area, and dedicated to peacemaking efforts in the local community. Small individual poles are available for purchase for personal use.

On a more personal individual example of peacemaking, I would like to uplift two of my previous parishioners. One Sunday morning prior to the worship service, a middle-aged man was encountered standing alone in our parking lot. He was dressed in clean but well-worn outdated clothing. His once white shirt was yellowed with age and his slacks displayed faded spots of years of usage. He appeared to be wrestling with himself as if he had the courage to enter the building or leave before being spotted.

One of our saintly elderly widows met this man and asked if he needed any help. He remarked that he was contemplating coming to the worship service but he felt that he was improperly dressed for the worship service in such a nice church. I referred to this widow as my "general" because if I wanted anything to happen in the congregation, I merely suggested it to her and "the general" would make it come to pass in a hurry.

Before the stranger could make up his mind to leave, the general took him by the arm, marched him into the sanctuary, introduced him to a few parishioners, gave him a bulletin, and sat him down in her pew. During the worship service, the general helped the stranger to participate in each aspect of our particular liturgies, worship style, and individual parts of the service, in order that he felt comfortable in his new surroundings.

It was not long before this man was no longer a stranger but an active member of our community of faith. He realized he could be himself, dress as he desired, and trust he was accepted for the true person God had created. He was no longer a stranger because he chose to become baptized during one of our worship services. I was surprised when he said he wanted to be baptized but not join in membership with our particular flock. I later learned the reason why he chose not to become a member.

All during his school years, this man was in the "special education class." During his high school years, he dropped out of school to take care of his elderly parents on the farm. After his parents died, this man returned to high school because he wanted a high school diploma. He finally graduated from high school in his early to mid-20's.

He maintained the small family farm and augmented his meager income by driving the Amish families in the area to various destinations. The man had a calm, quiet, well-mannered disposition that allowed him to fit into a wide range of community settings. He was accepted by a wide range of local people. A select few high-minded individuals looked down their noses at this unique man. Unfortunately, some of those individuals were also members of our congregation.

About the time this man was baptized, he began to attend several of our Bible study programs and faithfully participate in our congregational functions. My wife, Debbie, directed a Christmas musical using the Church choir and Church members as actors. Since this man drove the Amish around, he invited so many of the local Amish families to the show that all the pews in the sanctuary and even the balcony was filled to capacity. The fellowship hall was filled after the show and we ran out of refreshments.

This faithful but humble man never wanted to be placed into the spotlight but chose to function in the shadows, behind the scenes, and out of the limelight. He was willing to perform those menial tasks that most of the church leaders refused to undertake. Although this man operated in the shadows, he had the amazing capacity to bridge those boundary lines that tended to separate human beings into artificial classes.

When I fell, needed knee surgery, and was forced to wear a leg brace, this man volunteered to drive me around for my required meetings, visits, and functions. Since the Amish community attended our Christmas musical, this man negotiated with the Amish bishop to allow him to use their van to drive me to my pastoral functions.

Almighty God richly blessed our community of faith that morning when “the general” encountered this man in our church parking lot. Both of them served our Church well until they both went to be with the Lord. Both of them had received a special anointing of the Holy Spirit to serve the Kingdom of God that fulfilled our morning New Testament passage from Paul’s epistle to the Romans, “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,” (Romans 15:5-6). Both of them harmonized their praises to the Lord.

They both served as peacemakers and instruments of Christ’s harmony in their areas of influence. The general operated by boldly barking orders while the man humbly functioned in the shadows. Although they operated in different ways, they became great friends and tremendous assets to the Church. They also brought others into Christ’s presence using their respective spiritual gifts as Paul writes, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God,” (v.7).

I trust each of us has other individuals in our lives that resemble the two examples I have highlighted in this letter. May each of us also strive to be instruments of God’s peace and harmony this Advent season through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I will end this letter with the benediction the apostle Paul used to close his epistle to the church in Rome, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit,” (v. 13).

Pastor Larry