

MAKING PEACE

Luke 24: 36-48; Acts 10: 34-43

Have you ever had to make peace with another person, a situation, a disappointment in your life, a hurt, a betrayal, a failure? Have you ever had to make peace with any of that? Is making peace a surrender of some kind, a compromise, a letting go, an acceptance of something that can't be erased or changed? And what about justice? At what point is making peace inadequate without justice? At what point is compromise or letting go a permission for injustice to continue without sufficient accountability and redress?

These are all big questions and I'm sure many of us would have lots to say in response. But whoever we are, whatever we've been through and whatever we've got to face in our lives, making peace is something we all have to do at some point and in some way. We have to make peace in ourselves, we have to make peace with others, and we have to find peace in situations and circumstances beyond our control.

And this is true not only in our personal lives. It is just as true for our collective well-being as societies. We live in particularly polarized times where many prefer to blame, shame and attack others rather than seek ways to make peace. Calls for justice are too often tinged with a desire for retaliation, rather than part of a larger journey whose goal is genuine peace.

On the other hand, some want to make peace too quickly rather than recognizing peace is a journey through repentance, reparation, healing and forgiveness. Making peace without justice is no peace that is true. Putting a band aid over a gaping wound is not healing. How are the claims of others against us something we must listen to with an open heart in order to heal and come to a more authentic peace?

Well, let me begin by offering a few real-life examples, and then let's seek out some revelatory guidance from our scriptures.

My first example is Justin. The first time Justin, his partner and their baby came to church, they had clearly entered a place that wasn't familiar. They were given a bulletin and guided to a seat. They followed everyone when standing and sitting but they barely looked at their bulletin. What they did do was cry... all the way through the service. I greeted them afterwards and wasn't surprised that they left quickly, trying to collect themselves. But they did come back and kept coming back week after week. And like the first time, they would cry more or less through much of the service. After several Sundays, I asked if I could visit them. They agreed. I went over to their home. Their baby was asleep. But even before I had any of the

coffee they brewed, they told me they had had a second child, an older child, who had died. "What happened?" I asked. Justin had been driving with the child in the back seat strapped in a car seat. A squirrel had suddenly made a run for it across the road and Justin swerved to avoid hitting it. He ended up in a ditch, slamming on the breaks. He got out and quickly checked things out. Everything seemed fine. But when he opened the back seat to check on his little one, there was no movement or breathing. The EMS were there in minutes, but it made no difference. The child was dead. His neck had been snapped with the sudden jolt of the stop. How tragic! How sad!

But here's something more. Justin blamed himself completely for what had happened. He shouldn't have been distracted. He shouldn't have swerved as much as he did. He could have avoided the ditch. It was his fault his child was dead. He could never forgive himself. Even as his partner assured him this could have happened to anyone, Justin was tormented with guilt. Even as worship, therapy and the kindness of family helped, he could not find peace. My heart ached for Justin.

Second, there was Lara. Lara had recently started renting space in our church hall as she led classes in yoga and meditation. One afternoon, I came out of my office and went into the sanctuary to check on something and I found Lara sitting in a pew with her eyes closed. As I went to the chancel she opened her eyes and asked whether I was the minister. "Yes", I said. A conversation ensued. Lara was a fascinating person, very spiritual, but had left the church of her childhood because she had cut off from her family who were very religious. But after many years rejecting church because of its association with her family, she wanted to explore church and faith again. Our conversation had opened a door for her. She started attending worship with her husband and children.

In time, however, she also confided in me the source of her family struggle. Her mother had died when she was a child. Her father tried his best to raise her, her sister and an older brother. But he was always away at work and the children were left on their own a lot. One summer day, her brother came home with a group of friends. One thing led to another and Lara was sexually abused. She said nothing to no one because she was threatened, and she felt ashamed. And if this wasn't awful enough, this continued throughout that summer and beyond. Had she told anyone, I asked? She had, but everyone, other than her sister, denied it ever happened. Lara was lying and making it up, they said. Besides, her brother was now a police officer, married, with his own children. Was she trying to ruin his career with these false allegations? But Lara had received therapy. She had tapped into her anger. She was angry with her father because he wanted to make peace between his children without dealing with the abuse. Her sister was supportive but also afraid of her brother, his bullying and his threats. She didn't want to get involved. She wanted

Lara to let it go. But Lara couldn't let this go! How could she get justice, find healing and peace?

Finally, as some of you know by now, I am half Greek and half Armenian. My mother's mother was a refugee from Turkey escaping a genocide against our people. This happened a little over 100 years ago and millions of Armenians were rounded up and slaughtered in a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Armenians are particularly angry about this not only because of the scale of the atrocity, but by the fact that the government of Turkey refuses to recognize what happened. In war-time, they say, there's always killing that happens, and both sides are to blame for that. And yet, the reality and the evidence tell another story. The further sad part about all this is that even to this day Turkish people don't learn about any of this history in their education. It's blotted out as if it never happened. This only re-traumatizes Armenians as if their ancestors never existed.

But here's the thing. We have neighbours who are Turkish. So do my parents. Growing up, my mother learned Turkish from her mother who grew up speaking it. The language of the oppressors was forced to be their language too. My mother and we too, approach these people as neighbours. They are very kind, gracious and generous-hearted. But they know little of their history or what happened to us Armenians. We have told them. They have listened. My mother even speaks with them in Turkish and they claim that we could be family, given how culturally similar we are in many ways. But how can she and we let go what's been done even if it's 100 years ago? How do we welcome them as fellow human beings even though they are part of a race that has acted so systematically to wipe out our people? How do we welcome them when they have no recognition of the atrocities their people were responsible for committing against my people?

Making peace is about historic injustices yet to be atoned for. Making peace is about our own heart and soul given tragic mistakes we've made in our lives. Making peace is about our relationship with others, especially when they have abused us and done terribly hurtful things to us causing us pain and suffering. How do we make peace?

Let's dive into our scripture readings. Both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are written by the same author. It's like part one and two of a big story. Part one is the gospel ending with the resurrection of Jesus. Part two is the story of the Jesus' movement which becomes the church. But here's what links them together: peace. The first thing the risen Christ tells his disciples when he meets them in his risen state is this: "Peace be with you." And the way the apostle Peter encapsulates the gospel message to the first gentile converts in Acts is this: "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ..." It's all about peace.

But what does peace mean? Here's what Jesus tells his disciples: "These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the scriptures must be fulfilled... Thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations beginning from Jerusalem..." And Peter does this very proclaiming just months after saying: "He commanded us to preach to the people...that everyone who believes in him (that is, open their hearts to his way of peace) experiences forgiveness of sins through his name."

The way to peace is about repentance and it is about forgiveness. This is why the suffering of the messiah is so central. On the cross God in Christ becomes a victim with all victims. Those who do the crucifying are confronted and challenged to repent. As Christ forgives his enemies from the cross, he invites all enemies to walk through a doorway to healing and reconciliation through repentance before their victims. And what about victims? Victims are challenged to take their power back not by retaliation, revenge or bitterness, but by offering a hand of forgiveness to those who come forward in repentance. This is how healing and reconciliation can happen and this is why the cross of Christ is the centre of the gospel drama. In a world of conflict, hurt, betrayal, abuse, racism and violence, only a journey of repentance and forgiveness can heal broken relationships and broken people.

OK, but what if you can't change what's been done? What if you can't bring back victims who are dead? What if there is no repentance from your abuser? What if the damage done by your mistakes is irreversible? How can we as victims rise up and get our power back? How can we as perpetrators heal when we cannot change what we've done? Let me get back to my stories.

After about a year, Justin and his partner only came to church sporadically. I would see him near the church walking his dog. One day we ran into each other and stopped to chat. He wanted to thank me. The church had been a very important part of his healing journey. It provided a safe space for him to face his grief openly before God and his dead child. He still carried the wound of his child's death. He still couldn't say he forgave himself. He still couldn't let it go. But, he had also found ways to honour his dead child's memory and spirit. By raising his living son with love, by being a caring and attentive husband, by finding ways to be caring to others, especially those hurting and broken, he could find some healing and peace. He was on a journey toward peace. He hadn't got there yet, but he was closer than before. The church had been instrumental in that.

And what about Lara? She asked me if I would be willing to broker a meeting with her father. He wanted to see his grandchildren, but Lara was angry with him and needed him to hear her out. He agreed to us meeting. Lara, her father and I met at

the church. Lara spoke her truth openly. She wept. Her father listened. Then, he too started to cry. He accepted her truth as the truth. And then, Lara and her father hugged. This was a new chapter for them and in Lara's journey toward peace.

But Lara was not going to shove the pain of abuse by her brother under the carpet either. What ended up happening over the next few years is that Lara's father and sister reconciled with Lara, but her brother refused to face anything of what he was accused of doing. It wasn't a question of forgiveness, but of repentance. Lara got her power back as her father and sister aligned themselves with her. Her brother was now on the outs with the family. Whether that would change over time was uncertain. But Lara's peace was about getting her power back, opening her heart to love within her family and keeping a door open, even to her brother, a door of forgiveness through repentance.

Finally, my family and our Turkish neighbours. My mother has led the way for me in this regard. Her approach has been not to blame Turkish people today for the sins of their ancestors. Opening a door to friendship and love is a better way to heal and build bridges than building walls. We would not hide the truth of the crimes against humanity committed against our people. But we would open a door to a better way. Making peace is about letting some things go. It's about a commitment to truth without carrying hate. It's about honouring the memory of our ancestors by not internalizing the hate used against us. Love would win and we would be the victors. That's how we best honour our dead.

Making peace is not easy. God in Jesus went to the cross to show us the way when bad things happen. Repentance and forgiveness are not just about other people. They're about us too in our lives, our relationships and the situations and circumstances in which we find ourselves. God in Jesus has shown us the way to a deeper peace through love. How does this awaken, inspire, provoke and challenge you to make peace in your life, in a particular relationship, situation or circumstance? How do you, how will you make peace? Let us pray: Give us clarity, O God, give us courage... Give us enough love... and give us your Spirit to take us there... Amen.