

The Pursuit of Peace: Cheap Peace vs. Costly Peace

Matthew Bolton, 22 August 2010

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Prologue:

Please forgive my conceit for one moment as I read you a passage from the great theologian and resister of the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in which I have replaced the word “grace” with “peace”:

“Cheap *peace* is the *peace* we bestow on ourselves. Cheap *peace* is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap *peace* is *peace* without discipleship, *peace* without the cross, *peace* without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

“Costly *peace* is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a *person* will gladly go and sell all that *they have*. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a *person* will pluck out the eye which causes *them* to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

Act I: In which the Speaker’s Blockheadedness and Contributions to Human Idiocy are Reviewed

The Gospel of Mark is, I feel, unfairly overlooked. It is often skipped over for the slicker writing of Luke, the deep mysticism of John or the rootedness of Matthew. However, I feel drawn to Mark’s tendency to relish highlighting the thickheadedness, arrogance and stupidity of the disciples – a theme we see echoed throughout the Gospels. Jesus constantly has to over-explain his teachings to his disciples. Jesus’ followers argue pettily about who will be the greatest in heaven. Peter is forever doing things that are not very well thought through, like chopping the ear off a guard in the Gethsemane. Mark’s subtext is that “If these clowns were the ones most faithful to Jesus, you can do it too.” It doesn’t take anyone special to be a disciple. But implicit too, is a warning – a clear-eyed message that humans are all too frail and frightened, all too myopic to see the whole picture, all too easy to tempt with power, money and prestige. It is thus both a reassuring and chastening message; one that both comforts and unsettles me as I consider my own tendency toward hubris, pride and ambition.

I grew up in very diverse setting. About 85% of my classmates in school were of South Asian descent; they were joined by first and second generation immigrants from the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, China and elsewhere. Coming to college at Graceland, I snootily believed that I was above racism and was the perfect cosmopolitan – comfortable and capable in cultural settings other than my own. I was disabused of this mistaken notion largely as the result of a college summer break spent in Kenya with the WorldService Corps.

It seems cliché to say those two months changed the course of my life, but they did. They convinced me that I needed to contribute my career to understanding, alleviating and explaining the horrifying situations of poverty and conflict faced by so many people in the world. However, it also had a less self-aggrandizing, less noble-sounding effect.

Living in a country deeply shaped by the legacies of colonialism undeniably confronted me with the enormous privilege my white, straight, middle-class, male, English-speaking identity afforded me. Though I was only 19, I found myself being treated with cloying servitude. I was the center of attention – an object of exotic interest. People much older and wiser deferred to me simply because I was white. And then, about five weeks into my trip, I suddenly had the terrifying realization that I liked being treated this way. It made me feel powerful, important, alive. (For this reason, I always feel suspicious of the over-effusive returnee from a short-term mission who exclaims, “I love Africa. I love the way of life there.” I suspect that often actually means, “I love being a white person in Africa and the privilege it affords me.”) This realization represented the peeling back of the onion skin of race privilege and seeing the rot underneath. Over the next few months, I burrowed down deep into the strata of my sinfulness, in which I discovered how much my identity was made up of layers of prejudice and undeserved power. Deep inside, I was – am – a racist, a sexist and a homophobe – I benefit from unjust social systems and sometimes have even enjoyed it.

This was an immense blow to my self-esteem. But it was a much-needed one. I realized that if I ever wanted to be of use in the long struggle to make the world a more humane place, I would first have to grapple with my own brokenness, with the ways I contributed and benefited from the very systems that were causing harm. I have not finished wrestling with my inner bigot, and sometimes I become complacent, allowing him to get comfortable and grow. Christian conversion is a process, not an event. Even after the Apostle Paul’s great Damascus Road experience, he struggled to overcome his own weaknesses, calling himself the “chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15) and “the least of the apostles” (1 Corinthians 15:9).

Act II: In which the Congregation is Requested to Indulge the Speaker as he Uses His Own Love Story as an Allegory for the Pursuit of Peace

Falling in love is scary. Yes, it is thrilling, exciting, affirming and, well... dreamy! But it is also frightening. The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard was afraid of loving the woman of his desires because he was overwhelmed with his own brokenness. Personally, I had the opposite problem; I was so in love with myself that I hadn’t really allowed myself to love another person – to actually *let them in*.

But then I met Emily Welty, the wonderful woman I am lucky to call my wife. I fell head over heels in love with her, with her commitment to making the world a better

place, her fierce independence, her intelligence, her humor and... well... her attractive body!

But true love is not a form of consumption. It is not like going to the supermarket, picking something you like and enjoying it. Loving meant letting down my guard. It required the enormous risk of being hurt. I have also discovered that love often actually invited more conflict into my life. Every decision now requires a dialogue, a process of compromise, sacrifice and give-and-take. As Emily and I found our own path, it sometimes brought us into conflict with our own families and friends. When I reflect on this, I wonder if this is what Jesus meant in that highly uncomfortable passage from Matthew when he declares, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:33-35). Loving and being loved requires a steady lowering of one's armor, disarmament of one's emotional defenses. But in doing so, we often find ourselves being challenged, stretched and up-ended. Loving requires a risk, a leap of faith, a willingness to be vulnerable.

I want to make clear here that I am not advocating that we consent to or condone being abused by those we love. The Psalms say "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18). I recognize that too often the refrain of 'sacrificial love' has served as a cover for patriarchy and demands that women in particular, serve their spouses and put up with abuse and neglect. This, I believe is actually about an unwillingness of the dominant partner to let their guard down and sacrifice themselves. Moreover, for the victimized partner to stand up for her own worth takes courage and risk and can sometimes seem more frightening than allowing abuse to continue.

Human relationship thus involves risk, a peeling back of the layers that we use to protect ourselves and encouraging others to do the same. But in light of the brokenness and sinfulness we reviewed in Act I, without allowing others in, we never have anyone to point out where we are incorrect, unhelpful or selfish. Before I was with Emily, I never realized how often I am wrong about things! The Christian journey is a social one – we congregate, reunion and conference – and in the encounter with others we discover love and grace, but also conflict, which is not necessarily a bad thing. The faith journey, and the journey to peace, is not an easy one, it is one riven with conflict, trial and anxiety. The image in our minds should not be a wide-eyed Precious Moments angel sculpture or soft-focus Thomas Kinkade painting, but rather that of Jacob wrestling the Angel and Job arguing with God.

Act III: Reflections on Cheap Peace and Costly Peace

Doctrine and Covenants 163 calls on us to "Courageously challenge cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God. Pursue peace." (D&C 163: 3b) This passage echoes Psalm 34's command that we, "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34: 14). Both these texts imply that peace requires a choice, a commitment, a change

in behavior. To “Turn”, “seek” and “pursue” are all active verbs. They bring us back to the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus is overwhelmingly portrayed as a man of action – who *does* things, who takes risks, who leaps and bounds beyond the comfort zones of both himself and others. Mark’s Jesus commands us to, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15)

But what peace should we seek and pursue? Peace is unfortunately such a broad word with so many competing definitions that it has the danger of becoming all things to all people. This evening I want to put before you two possible options:

There is the peace we pursue by avoiding conflict, avoiding those who might challenge or unsettle us. This is the peace of the ‘inside’ – inside the bubbles we create for ourselves by fencing ourselves off from the rest of the world. This cheap peace – plastic peace – if you will, requires little sacrifice, little empathy, little recognition of the people beyond one’s own private sphere. To assuage our guilt, this cheap peace may spawn the occasional ‘random act of kindness’ – courtesy to a stranger or spontaneous moment of charity – but it remains essentially that: random. It requires no fundamental restructuring of life and society. It requires no long-term commitment to persons outside one’s enclave. Personally, I must admit that I too like to hide, to avoid people who are different, shrink away from disagreements.

By contrast, there is the pursuit of peace that actively wades into the troubled waters of conflict. In this, the peacemaker courageously faces their fears of ‘The Other’, the people on the outside of the fence – by letting strangers in and going out to strangers’ turf. This ‘Costly Peace’ requires risk, commitment, sacrifice and a willingness to be changed, converted and transformed.

Unfortunately, I think that it is for the former that our society, and our church, tends to opt. The sociologists Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, even before September 11, observed a trend in America toward “forting up” – a “new fortress mentality” in which Americans withdraw into gated communities, controlled, privatized spaces, secured with fences, gates and walls, seceding from public life and the public sphere. Interestingly, research has shown that crime does not appear to be lower in gated communities than other communities of a comparable wealth. In this area we have seen a flight of whites to the suburbs, abandoning Kansas City for Blue Springs, Overland Park and Lee’s Summit. Other scholars have observed similar processes in other parts of the world – whites in South Africa withdrawing into highly securitized suburbs, Israel slicing fortified roads into the West Bank to serve highly militarized settlements. In Iraq, the US occupation officials rhetorically divided Baghdad into the Green and Red Zones, one over-protected and over-served and the other left to fend for itself. Inside, people were civil to each other, outside was considered ‘Indian Country’ – to be managed through force and coercion.

This division of the world into safe ‘inside’ zones and supposedly unsafe outside zones, encourages the persistence of irrational fear and prejudice of the people on

the other side of the fence, whom one only meets in movies, newspapers or TV news. It breeds the kind of insidious public discourse that we hear about the Muslim Community Center proposed for Lower Manhattan or the demands that a massive, expensive, ugly wall be built along the border with Mexico.

Unfortunately, I fear that our church may have fallen into this path. Church headquarters appears to me to be becoming more like an enclave. Herald House has been closed and moved into the Temple, as have many offices once housed in the Auditorium. There are electronic locks on the doors to the inner sanctum of church administration. At conferences, top officials move around with bodyguards. The redundancies undoubtedly leave those who remain with an uncertainty about their jobs and a nervousness about rocking the boat. There is a culture of risk management, an aversion to stirring up debate and making members feel uncomfortable. Simultaneously, many of our congregations fail to engage seriously with the communities and neighborhoods that surround them. How will we know when we are wrong if we are creating obstacles for those who might tell us?

The church is not engaged seriously with the areas of the world truly at conflict. There is not a single church official assigned to support peace efforts in areas of armed conflict. Unlike the Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren, we have no dedicated system of training and sending our members to work for peace where it is needed most. Most of the time, in terms of what happens there day to day, the Temple is not dedicated to the pursuit of peace, but rather the pursuit of church administration.

To me, then, much of the rhetoric and material that the church produces on peace rings hollow. It is sentimental not systematic, nice-sounding but not committed, well-intentioned but not disciplined. It is too often the cheap peace, the peace of the safe inside, removed from risk. We are a church that talks about peace but rarely engages in a sacrificial pursuit of it.

Indicative was the way the nuclear weapons legislation was dealt with at the recent World Conference. Nuclear proliferation is one of the most desperate issues of our time. It poses a central existential challenge to our world. And yet the best the body could do was refer it to a committee, i.e. shrug the responsibility onto someone else.

Some of you may feel I am being too harsh, and perhaps I am. But to offer a contrast, let me take you back to Kenya, where Emily and I lived for six months last year. While there, I worked with Catholic Relief Services' Kenyan Justice and Peace team. My assignment was to help Cornelius Korir, the Catholic Bishop of Eldoret, in Western Kenya, write a booklet reflecting on his experiences in grassroots peacebuilding in one of the most tense and conflicted areas of the country.

Bishop Korir is an unassuming man, not immediately impressive. He has a tendency to mumble and to avert his eyes when speaking. But he has immense courage. In 1992, he actually stepped between police and 20 armed local youths as they

prepared to do battle. When the post-election violence broke out in Kenya in 2008, he and his staff sheltered some 10,000 people in his diocesan compound. In the aftermath, he has been instrumental in nurturing local peace efforts, using the moral weight of his cassock and collar to urge an end to violence and suspicion. His diocese has worked quietly and systematically to bring people of conflicting communities together to discuss their problems and possible solutions.

But we shouldn't just engage in hero worship of Bishop Korir. Many other people were involved, taking enormous risks for peace. In the Burnt Forest region, the Diocese's efforts were greatly helped by a woman who was basically a moonshiner. She had been selling homemade beer to people of all backgrounds for years, and so was able to connect people, to act as a go-between. Those who stepped out and made the decision to follow Bishop Korir's urging and speak to 'the other side,' faced immense risks and had to overcome enormous emotional hurdles. As I interviewed them, they told me what it was like to talk to people who they saw as their enemies:

"The first meeting was very tough, with a lot of nasty words."

"To start with it was very hard to face each other."

"At first it was very tricky and hard. The community was seeing us as betrayers."

"To transform yourself from a victim of violence to a peacemaker was very difficult."

"We still have people who are not happy about this."

These efforts didn't result from 'random acts of kindness' or haphazard rhetoric about peace. This was peace pursued, requiring immense risk, commitment, sustained effort, courage, training and discipline. It was messy and political, because conflict is political. Bishop Korir and the village peacemakers were struggling with very real divergences of interests, values and identities.

I should be clear here that I am not calling for an idolatrous commitment to reckless risk-seeking and martyrdom. I am not saying we should actively seek out persecution and death for its own sake. I just feel that we, myself included, should feel chastened by the fact that a village moonshiner has done more for peace than me and probably many of you.

At the center of Bishop Korir's commitment to this costly peace, is his unshakable faith that every person is made in the image of God. He told me, "Building peace requires conversion ... recognition of the image of God as displayed by the other, even one's enemy." And of course, one cannot love one's enemies if one has no contact with them. The Bible says over and over again that we are to show kindness and hospitality to the stranger. Costly peace thus involves letting in those outside our protective fences, or going out to meet them on their own turf, just as the Kenyan village peace committees invited villagers from 'the other side' to eat with them and stay with them in their own homes. This is dangerous, scary and unsettling. But Bishop Korir told me, "It is not enough to talk of Christian witness. We must show it and live it. It is not enough to sympathize with the victims of

violence if we fail to seek for the root causes of the problems and together search for solutions.”

Peace is not about withdrawing into a protective shell inhabited by like-minded people, who look like you, speak with your same accent, share your class and education, skin-color, damning the rest to the ‘red zones’ of the world. As Jesus chastened us, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

This is a deeply challenging, unsettling passage. It may seem irrational, even foolhardy to invite the risk that comes from seeking costly peace. But this is the role of faith. Reason alone cannot lead you to the choice to love, to reach out beyond the bounds of comfort and risk-aversion. To overcome our “fear and trembling” we must take Kierkegaard’s leap into the unknown, trusting in divine grace and mercy.

I am not telling everyone to go out tomorrow and buy a plane ticket to the hottest war zone there is. In answer to the question “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus pointedly showed that our enemies and conflicts are often very close to home. Going into all the world may for you mean going into your own neighborhood, your own family, or the next town over. The world is not short of conflicts to be transformed. Rather my challenge is for us to pursue peace, wherever it may be needed, as if it were that pearl of great price.

Our church as an institution has not yet begun to pursue costly peace. I fear that so far it is only a church of cheap peace. But I have faith, that institutions, not just individuals, can be converted, transformed. But it require, you, you, you, me, all of us to be willing to take that courageous leap of faith, to jump into the uncharted pathways toward peace.

Epilogue: A Return to Bonhoeffer Paraphrased

“Costly *peace* is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a *person* must knock. Such *peace* is costly because it calls us to follow... because it costs a *person* his life, and it is *peace* because it gives a *peace* the only true life. ... Above all, it is *peace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly *peace* is the Incarnation of God.”