

UU Church of Waterville – Message for 09/18/22
The Wisdom of the St. Francis Prayer by Dennis Perkins

Let's begin with two readings:

“We often think of peace as the absence of war, that if powerful countries would reduce their weapon arsenals, we could have peace. But if we look deeply into the weapons, we see our own minds- our own prejudices, fears and ignorance. Even if we transport all the bombs to the moon, the roots of war and the roots of bombs are still there, in our hearts and minds, and sooner or later we will make new bombs. To work for peace is to uproot war from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women. To prepare for war, to give millions of men and women the opportunity to practice killing day and night in their hearts, is to plant millions of seeds of violence, anger, frustration, and fear that will be passed on for generations to come.”

— **Thich Nhat Hahn, “Living Buddha, Living Christ”**

“Our capacity to make peace with another person and with the world depends very much on our capacity to make peace with ourselves. If we are at war with our parents, our family, our society, or our church, there is probably a war going on inside us also, so the most basic work for peace is to return to ourselves and create harmony among the elements within us—our feelings, our perceptions, and our mental states.”

— **Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Living Buddha, Living Christ”**

As has so often been the case, the Beatles got it right when they sang, “I get by with a little help from my friends.” I am fortunate to have had the same best friend for 70 years now. For the last 36 of those years we have taken fall hiking trips, a few days either in the mountains of New Hampshire or more recently the woods of Maine. As is always the case with old friends, we can go for long periods of companionable

silence and then fall into the most interesting of conversation. Recently on one of these rambles one of us noted that every human being drops into the world right in the middle of things (and leaves in the same way incidentally). There is always something going on. He and I dropped in six days apart in the spring of 1947. The United States was just recovering from the turmoil of WWII and already preparing for its next conflict in Korea. Always something (often unpleasant and alarming) going on.

Everyone here this morning was born in one decade or another over the last hundred years into something going on. What was going on? 1920's: building financial excess to stock market collapse and the largest government corruption scandal in the nation's history; 1930's: worldwide depression; 1940's: WWII; 1950's: Joseph McCarthy and the fear of atomic annihilation; 1960's: the war in Vietnam, race riots in American cities and the assassination of a president; 1970's: Watergate, Kent State shootings, resignation by a president; 1980's: inflation, sky-high interest rates, Fox News appears; 1990's: Persian Gulf War, World Trade Center bombed; 20 aughts: 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, threat of worldwide banking collapse; 2010's: Occupy Wall Street, 2016 election, impeachment, Syria; 2020's: Jan 6, reversal of Roe V. Wade, Ukraine.

No matter what decade you were born in, as Gilda Radner titled her book, published just shortly after death, "It's Always Something." And so, in France in 1912, there appeared in a tiny Catholic magazine called *La Clochette*, edited by Father Esther Roquerel, with a tiny circulation of 8000, an anonymous prayer, called a prayer for peace—later retitled *The St. Francis Prayer*, since it was thought to capture the core of that saint's message. In the hundred years since its publication the readership of this prayer has grown into the tens, if not the hundreds, of millions of every faith and of no faith. We'll read this

prayer together in a moment, but first, why did it appear when it did in a small Parisian religious magazine?

In the previous century France had either directly or indirectly participated in 51 wars and military engagements in Europe and around the world. In 1912 the awful rumblings of WWI were beginning to be felt and France knew she once again would be combatant. The author of this simple prayer sought guidance. If it has been the fate of the human condition for each of us to be born into turmoil, what can we do to be part of a solution?

Let's read the prayer of St Francis aloud together:

Creator, make me an instrument of your peace,

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Spirit,

Grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

--Anonymous, from La Clochette magazine, December, 1912 edition

While some of us might find difficulty with the first word or the last lines, who of us could disagree with humble sentiment of these thoughts? What first intrigued me about this prayer is what it asks for. It asks really for one thing only: peace. Possessing that, I can then become an instrument through which peace can begin to work its quiet magic. Why is it important that I first open myself to the presence of peace before I can myself become a peaceful presence?

Thich Naht Hahn's words heard capture this, I think:

“If we are at war with our parents, our family, our society, or our church, there is probably a war going on inside us also, so the most basic work for peace is to return to ourselves and create harmony among the elements within us—our feelings, our perceptions, and our mental states.”

Before I engage the world in emotional, verbal or even physical battle, before I react, I would do well to first access the channel of peace prayed for in the La Clochette prayer. How shall I do that? Pause and as one of the greatest of the Psalms says, “Be still...”

Meister Eckhardt, a 13th century Catholic mystic, had this to say about silence:

“There is a huge silence inside each of us that beckons us into itself, and the recovery of our own silence can begin to teach us the language of heaven. For, silence is a language that is infinitely deeper, more far-reaching, more understanding, more compassionate, and more eternal than any other language... There is nothing in the world that resembles God as much as silence.”

Silence is the access. Silence opens the door to the presence of peace, to the flow of peace. It is the peace which begins the transformation of hatred into love, of feeling wronged into forgiveness, of discord and confusion into harmony, of darkness into light and so on—first within myself and then through me—if only a little—into the moments of the world in which I find myself. Moments with my family, with my associates and, most particularly, with those who feel like adversaries.

First within myself. I want to look briefly at two current areas of contention, both of the “It’s Always Something” variety, that have caused turmoil in me and thwarted my ability to be a peaceful presence concerning them. The first concerns immigration. The mention of a “wall” raised my hackles immediately, enflamed my emotions and made my head noisy. Not much of a channel for peace there. Then, very recently, in a quiet moment I read the following thought: There can never be progress in the debate over immigration until two things are both accepted: first that we are a nation whose promise and whose strength have come from the very beginning from the waves of immigration that have blessed our shores. More than 99% of our population are either current immigrants or the descendants of immigrants. And second, that our nation must have and has a right to have secure borders. In silence I could finally embrace both of these concepts. Then, and only then, could I enter any conversation with anybody by beginning with these two concepts held hand in hand. I could begin to become a peaceful presence.

Another area of tension that could expect to feel within myself concerned the political right vs the political left. My brain would be flooded with feelings of “us and them”. It is a rare family today that hasn’t felt somewhere the pain of separation—child from parent, sibling from sibling, friend from former friend—resulting from this sense of antithesis. I must first let silence cleanse this us-them feeling from my thoughts. Only then can peacefulness allow me to see that

both individual freedom and social responsibility—the ying and yang dance of democracy—like the dance of welcoming immigration and securing borders—are both necessary for progress. Holding both of these concepts in peaceful silence, I can then begin a conversation with anyone and start to work as a peaceful presence.

It is a rare person who will disagree that both of these concepts—individual liberty and communal responsibility--although in seeming contradiction, are both central and important to the health of democracy. And it is evident that the natural tension between the two Ideas creates a shifting of balance from one to the other over time depending upon circumstance. This also brings up an important aspect of the meaning of peace.

Most often, peace is thought to mean an emptiness, an absence of both motion and commotion. If true, that would make outer space the most peaceful place there is. I think, however, that is a misunderstanding of peace. Everything in existence is either in the process of accretion or of deterioration—either coming into being or going out of being. Peace, therefore, is not the absence of tension, the absence of the eternal processes of building up and tearing down. It is the moment of temporary balance between counter-valences. Jesus is reputed to have said to his followers: “My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives. Let not your hearts be troubled.” Perhaps this what he, seeing into the nature of man and the world, meant: that spiritual peace would be living with these tensions.

One person who lived the last half of her life as a peaceful presence became known as Peace Pilgrim. Mildred Lisette Norman was born on a poultry farm in Egg Harbor City, New Jersey, in 1908.

At age 30, she woke up from a bad dream. There was fighting in the world and disagreements everywhere among her neighbors. She felt

she owned too much while others owned too little. But what could she do? One little woman—who had grown up with chickens. She got out of bed and walked through the woods near where she lived until she came to clearing flooded with moonlight. She felt a great peace settle over her. She made a decision. Somehow, she would share this peace that she felt.

She thought, she read, she studied, she sat quietly, and she prayed. She made her life simpler, less cluttered with things. After about 15 years of preparation and increasingly speaking out about what she was learning, she found herself walking at the head of the Rose Parade in California. Then she decided—she would just keep walking. And walk she did: 25,000 miles over the next 25 years. Living day to day off the kindness of strangers, she became a living peaceful presence wherever she walked.

There is a feeling of always being surrounded by all the good things, like love and peace and joy. It seems like a protective surrounding, and there is an unshakeableness within, which takes you through any situations you need to face... There is a calmness and a serenity and unhurriedness - no more striking or straining.

The Prayer of St Francis was originally written in French and begins, understandably, addressed to Seigneur, “Lord.” I told a friend that a more accurate address, more accurate even than Creator, would be to the Taoist symbol of the Taijitu, the Ying-Yang, opposites flowing into each other in constant motion, and yet as a symbol, frozen at the moment of perfect balance, the moment of peace.

You are the salt of the earth. May the peace of this little prayer, the peace that surpasses all understanding, enable you to enrich and preserve all the frustrating, saddening, yet empowering, tensions both within you and around you for as long as you live.