

Peace Work: Pew to Pulpit

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Two cats live in our house. One is black, the other gray. The black one was here first. The house is her “turf.” So are we. The gray cat is a recent immigrant from Maine, brought home by a son whose college ruled the only pets allowed in dormitories were those that could live for twenty-four hours under water.

Like most cats, ours sleep most of the time, but warily. They are sensitive to each other’s presence, suspicious of each other’s intentions. Their reasons seem sound, at least as far as humans can understand the reasoning of cats. The black one is possessive of us and “her” house and jealously wants to retain control. During their brief periods of mutual wakefulness, the gray one likes to play, to tease, to chase Midnight whenever he can. She defends herself, hisses, then runs away.

But it is not always like this. Jealousy, tension, envy, position, status, turf are put aside twice a day, at mealtimes. They use separate bowls, but are more than willing to sit side by side and be fed. Hunger is a fact of life. Because of the deep need it creates, even those who do not seem to like each other can sit together and be fed at a common table.

Christians are a lot like cats who live under the same roof but have difficulty giving ground even when it would make the shared life more nourishing for all. We eye each other warily, envious of positions or possessions, jealous, fearful. We hurt inside, alone, not knowing and afraid to ask about the hurts of our neighbors. Yet on Sunday mornings we gather from our isolation, from our week’s worth of work, of chasing after or striving for, at a common “table” to share the good news of the gospel. We sing and pray and hear, and our lives are affected, at least briefly. Then it’s back to the tension of daily living, to the occasional defense or hiss or chase, and the nourishment we shared frequently is forgotten.

The following are some of a reporter’s thoughts on a topic that has become important in his life. The Presbyterian Church and I have been doing peacemaking in a formal way for nearly a decade. We got into it for different reasons and with different expectations. In all its parts — examination and reflection and proclamation and action — peacemaking has meant a lot for the church and it has meant a lot for me.

The stirrings for a formal peacemaking effort first were felt after the civil rights battles and the Vietnam war were fought. Peacemaking always had been a part of the church’s ministry, but until the mid-1970s Presbyterian General Assemblies had given no definite directions of what to do or suggestions that would help the whole church do it. The 1975 Assembly started the process, requesting the Advisory Council on Church and Society (ACCS) “to reassess the concept of peacemaking and the direction of our country’s foreign policy in

the light of our biblical and confessional faith and a markedly changed situation in the world today.”¹ The ACCS reported to the 1980 General Assembly that while it had analyzed the changes in the world, it was asking the Assembly “to focus for the church a fundamental dimension of biblical faithfulness in a moment of great peril and to call the church to a new seriousness in obedience.”² This led to an affirmation that peacemaking was the work, indeed the responsibility, of the church. *Peacemaking: The Believer’s Calling* described three particular dimensions: “(1) The church is faithful to Christ when it is engaged in peacemaking . . . (2) The church is obedient to Christ when it nurtures and equips God’s people as peacemakers . . . (3) The church bears witness to Christ when it nourishes the moral life of the nation for the sake of peace in the world.”³

The Assembly agreed with the presentation and accepted the recommendations which included specific directions for a special churchwide emphasis on peacemaking and a request that “each session and congregation” undertake “a program of study and action for peacemaking.”⁴ It established the churchwide Peacemaking Offering, to be received each year on World Communion Sunday, with one-fourth of the proceeds to be retained by congregations to support their local peacemaking efforts. Finally, the 1980 General Assembly ordered the creation of a permanent staff, the development of program resources, and the appointment of an Advisory Committee to assist in this new work.

Knowing what happened at the beginning is important to an understanding of what is happening now. The church remains faithful to the directions set a decade ago. The program calls the church and its people to recognize their special vocation as peacemakers. Staff spends most of its time developing resources and leading workshops and training sessions that serve to nurture and equip the people of God to be peacemakers. The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program has helped the church to understand that nourishing “the moral life of the nation” has many dimensions, that effective peacemaking is much more than just working to end conflicts among nations.

This reads like a commercial for peacemaking. And indeed it is, at least insofar as it reflects the enthusiasm that I have developed for the work. I have spent my career telling people who listened to radio stations around the country what was happening in their world. Much of the news has been of conflict, inhumanity, injustice, racism, greed, oppression, hardly the stuff of which a calm, placid life is made. But life is not calm and placid. It is full of turmoil at all levels. People hurt. Families are torn apart. Communities and congregations fight within themselves and stand against outside forces. Nations do the same. When I am on the radio, my job as a journalist is to give my listeners a fair sense of what is newsworthy that day. I hope that they will want to know more and will seek additional information from newspapers, magazines, books, and personal contacts. And I hope that some of those contacts will be with the church, which has people everywhere who understand the realities of life in various trouble spots, whether close to home or in remote places.

When the 1980 General Assembly was working on its commitment to peacemaking, I was trying to keep track of the presidential campaigns of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush. Peacemaking was not on my

agenda. But I had said that I wanted to get involved in some part of the work of the church at the national level, having spent many years on the session and on presbytery committees. After the campaign and election, I was called and asked to be a member of the Peacemaking Advisory Committee. It was an important call, one that would have a profound effect on my life. It would bring me back to something that was set aside when I decided to stop being under the care of presbytery and to put my skills to work in the church as an active lay person. But that work never involved preaching until the call came to serve on the advisory committee.

We hear a lot these days about the distance between the pulpit and the pew. There are complaints that preachers are out of tune with the wants of church members. That may be true, but it means that many members are missing the essence of a preacher's vocation, which is to proclaim the Word of God. Remember the people in Isaiah 30:10 who told the prophets to keep quiet? "Don't talk to us about what's right. Tell us what we want to hear. Let us keep our illusions." Your congregation probably has folks just like that. Illusions, however, are not the fabric of faith, nor are they honest evaluations of the realities of life to which preachers must speak.

But if there is a perceived distance between the pulpit and the pew, what about the other direction? Some enterprising academic somewhere probably has worked on this question, leaving the answers between dissertation covers forever unnoticed in a seminary library. My observation, confirmed anecdotally but not empirically, is that the distance from the pew to the pulpit is great, even though there is no reason it should be. The church has many talented, well-trained, thoughtful ordained persons doing its preaching. But it also has many lay persons with the same qualities. In the large suburban congregation to which my wife and I have belonged for more than twenty years, lay persons have done an occasional "minute for mission." High school seniors put four or five short and heartfelt speeches together each spring to let us older folks know that the church has meant something special to them. But I can only recall one occasion in two decades when one of the elders was called upon to fill the pulpit and preach a real, honest-to-goodness sermon. This may or may not be the experience of other congregations. If it is, it is too bad, because it means an important view of faith and its interactions with life is not being expressed in the church's key forum.

Preachers are called to be in the pulpit week in and week out, year in and year out. Much thought, prayer and study are involved in regular sermon preparation, and preachers must live with the consequences, enduring the often outrageous "slings and arrows" of the pew sitters. Their words affect lives long after being filed away or forgotten by most of the folks who sit on the oak.

Preachers belong in pulpits, even those close-to-heaven places that are up several steps and equipped with "lids" that reflect the sound instead of dropping down to silence someone who has droned on too long. But I am not convinced that they belong in the pulpit every single Sunday. It should be shared occasionally so the congregation will have a chance to benefit from others' thoughts and insights. This is particularly important for the majority of Presbyterian and other "mainstream" churches that do not have the luxury of

multiple-member staffs.

Getting out of the pulpit once in a while provides more than a usually well-deserved break in the regular cycle of sermon preparation. It allows time to concentrate on other dimensions of ministry, or time to attend a continuing education program without having to worry about the next Sunday's sermon. It also can provide a quiet day or two for recreational reading, or a trip to a museum with a spouse, and it gives the congregation a sense that the preacher is confident enough to allow someone else to take over temporarily.

But there is something else to consider here. Having lay persons preach, especially visitors, provides opportunities for things to be said from the pulpit that resident preachers might be reticent to say because of potentially grumpy feedback. This is not to say that preachers should cop out on tough issues. There simply is no excuse for anyone to "use" lay persons as a way to evade the clear responsibility to be prophetic, to help people understand how the word of God applies to the challenging situations of their lives. Nor am I saying that lay persons should use the opportunity to vent their spleens of a variety of outrageousnesses.

But when it comes to peacemaking, lay persons can be a big help to preachers. In some congregations, including my own, "peace" and "peacemaking" evoke strong reactions, many unfortunately negative. Some people seem to believe that peace means scrapping all authority, eliminating military forces, and making the United States of America "number two" again. For some people, peace means weakness, which for them is the worst possible condition for individuals or nations. It is seen as a call to give up turf and authority, to cede to those of different political or economic systems the strength that many see as God's gift to the "chosen people" who inhabit our part of the planet.

While some stand opposed to the peacemaker, there are many for whom peace work is nourishment and peacemaking a high calling. That is true for me. The practice of peacemaking at all levels of life is an exciting opportunity to put the truth of God's Word to work in some very special ways. It is feeding and strengthening and working with and for others, using the risen, present, servant Christ as the model.

Peacemakers take the word, as well as the Word, seriously. "Peacemaking" is active. Not something that can be done from the sidelines, it requires real, personal involvement with concerns and issues that are at the center of the lives of people, congregations, communities and nations. Jesus insisted throughout his ministry that God's people could not be satisfied with the easy and comfortable; they were called to serve God in the world as workers for justice, reconciliation, and peace. After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples behind closed doors (as we reporters would say), giving a blessing, "Peace be with you," and a commission: "As God has sent me, so I send you." He was saying, "You can't stay here. You must face the reality of the world." At the Transfiguration, Jesus made it plain that ministry meant involvement, leaving the mountaintop to return to life's valleys and work for positive change.

These words, orders if you will, were directed at the whole church, not just preachers. They are for the pew sitters as well as the pulpiteers. So what to

do? I doubt any “magic formula” will break down what I see as a resistance to lay preaching, nor is there one that will convince lay persons to jump at the chance to do the praying and studying and thinking necessary to develop a meaningful sermon.

Here is some of what happened to me. I became involved in peacemaking because I was invited (which is the way most of us get involved in what we do), but the invitation came because someone knew I would be receptive to it. Initially, the thought of preaching about peacemaking never entered my mind. I was a reporter, not an advocate, a person who spent his life telling people things they should think about, but not telling them how they should think. We journalists are supposed to tell stories accurately, however disagreeable or discomforting they might be, so that our audiences can make informed decisions about issues and events that affect their lives. This striving for fairness and accuracy is an important responsibility, one that most journalists take quite seriously.

Preachers are not journalists (for which we can all be grateful), even though they do have Good News to report. They are supposed to understand the Word of God and interpret it for their congregations. What does this scripture say and how does it apply to all of life? What is God saying to individuals in trouble and a world in turmoil? Let the reporters tell of the woes of the week while the preachers help their people understand what they can and should do about them in the name of Christ.

But since preachers have no monopoly on wisdom or insight, my argument is that some of the people in the congregations, even journalists, should be invited to preach from time to time. This would create a real opportunity for some church members, forcing them to think about scripture and its meaning for daily life. Seeing things from the perspective of the preacher, even if it is only a slice of his or her work, would give the lay person a much better understanding of the challenge the preacher faces every week.

This opportunity has been meaningful to me. Those of us who do radio news broadcasts have little time to think about the stories we report and less time in which to report them. The average radio network news story is less than thirty seconds long. And things happen at such a rapid pace in the world that journalists seldom can get beneath the surface before being forced by developments to move on to something else. In most cases there is no time to dig deeper, to apply the perspective of history or place the story in a contextual web that will help an audience to understand its relationship to other things that are happening. This was particularly clear during the time that the walls were crumbling in Eastern Europe. World War II was seldom mentioned, and historical “perspective” often seemed limited to quick mentions that the Berlin Wall had been in place since 1961. Except for occasional reports outside the regular news broadcasts and some newspaper sidebars, there was scant attention given to the role of the churches in the extraordinary changes that took place with head over heels speed.

Preparation for preaching is on a different scale, in a different time frame. One is not locked into the fifty-five minutes between broadcasts to prepare the next one but has a whole week, interrupted, of course, by meetings and

hospital calls and chicken and peas suppers and unending telephone calls. But during the week, regardless of the busy-ness, one takes time to study and think, wrestling with the Scripture until its meaning is clear and then doing something with it. It is a complex process that I am sure many of you who read this journal find particularly rewarding. Lay persons can reap those same rewards if they are given the opportunity and challenged to do the serious reflection that preaching demands.

Words like homiletics and hermeneutics scare the hell out of church members. They are long and mysterious, sound Greek and give preachers an air of authority. Maybe they ought to be used more often, by preachers and lay persons, since everyone "tells stories" to "explain things." The difference between preachers and the laity is one of location. Preachers occupy pulpits. Lay persons do not.

They should.

And this means more work for the preachers. There probably are a few lay persons eager to do this, but it seems more likely that preachers will have to seek out people and convince them that they have something valuable to share. And when it comes to peacemaking, people in the pews who already are suspicious probably will need even more convincing. This means that not only must a preacher be willing to invite lay persons to fill the pulpit once in a while, he or she must encourage them and then, at least in some cases, be willing to serve as a resource as the individual works on the sermon. This, of course, assumes that the preacher already has an understanding of peacemaking and has at least begun to lay the groundwork for further exposition.

A couple of cautions are necessary here. It is crucial to the success of a venture such as this that preachers not impose their views or interpretations on the lay persons, but help them develop their own understandings. Many won't have any problems doing it on their own, but preacher/resource persons may find that some of the most thoughtful work comes from those least sure of themselves. They need encouragement and support to bring their thoughts together into a fruitful sermon.

The second caution grows out of an unpleasant personal experience. I once was asked to fill the pulpit of a very large church on a summer Sunday. When I got there the preacher, as I knew he would be, was away on vacation. But people seemed a bit surprised by my presence and no one seemed to know quite what to do with me. After the service, everyone vanished except one couple, who saw my wife and me looking bereft in the parking lot and invited us to lunch. It was an act of kindness by two gentle people who "made our day." Presence is important, either physically as liturgist or in making arrangements to insure that your guest is not left alone in a wilderness of strangers.

Lay ministry takes many forms. Preaching is only one, but it is very important. If we really believe that evangelism is the sharing of the Good News, then every Christian must have opportunities to proclaim as well as practice the Word. And if peacemaking is central to the gospel, as I believe it is, then preachers and lay persons must work together to proclaim it and live it with vigor and enthusiasm. Since peacemaking puts the church to work on some of life's toughest problems, it is crucial to emphasize the dimension of action, of

putting faith to work on the needs of society. George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, makes the point:

I simply argue that the cross should be raised at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town's garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan they had to write his title in Hebrew and Latin and Greek; . . . at the kind of a place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what he died for. And that is what he died about. That is where church-people ought to be and what church-people ought to be about.⁵

MacLeod's message is a challenge to be about the business of proclaiming peace and justice to all the world all of the time. If our Christianity is to be an active, present tense faith with meaning for our lives and times, all of its people must be prophets. Preachers and lay persons alike must practice what they preach, rather than just preaching and hoping someone else does the practicing.

This is not an argument for calling the bluff of those folks who come out of worship services saying, "I could do a better job than the preacher did this morning." Rather, it is an appeal to give them a chance to put their investments in the faith to work in a new and effective way. As Charles Rice wrote in these pages, congregations would be better served if instead of owning the preacher, they had a real sense of owning the preaching.⁶ One way to accomplish this would be for pastors to become liturgists occasionally and call upon lay persons from their congregations or from the "outside" to preach. Whenever I have had the opportunity, I have found it rewarding, especially when there has been a time after the service for further exploration of some of the concerns people have about peacemaking. Each time has been one of personal growth. I do not claim to do things better than the regular preacher; I see them from a slightly different perspective.

The distance from the pew to the pulpit does not have to be a gulf between the pastor and the pastored. There is someone in your congregation now, or someone you know elsewhere in the church, who is ready to be encouraged to share his or her thinking on peacemaking as an opportunity from God to do something to make life better for everyone.

NOTES

¹ *Peacemaking: The Believer's Calling* (New York: Office of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1980), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

⁵ MacLeod is quoted by Donald DeYoung in *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, (June, 1988), 14.

⁶ *Journal for Preachers*, (Easter, 1987), 19.