

The Spirituality of Peace

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I want to begin by telling you about two saints who've been instrumental in my life: Peter and Elizabeth Storey. Peter, was my favorite professor in seminary. Before coming to the U.S. to teach at various theology schools, Peter was the Methodist bishop in South Africa and heavily involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. If you're not familiar, apartheid was the system of government set up in South Africa from the early 1960s through the early 1990s that forced black South Africans to live in blacks-only townships, that refused them the right to vote, and responded violently to any act of defiance. The whole system was designed to enshrine white supremacy in government, economics, and pretty much at every level of society. It ended in 1994 when South Africa held their first free elections and Nelson Mandela became their first black president.

Peter worked side by side with people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu to lead a non-violent protest movement against the apartheid government. And he did this at great personal cost to himself and his family. He was thrown in jail. He was beaten. And he was once almost shot in his own pulpit.

You see, the South African security forces had wire tapped his church so they could hear what he was saying from the pulpit because they knew he regularly preached against racism and apartheid. One Sunday, as Peter was preaching, the apartheid police entered the sanctuary. The captain told Peter to end the service. But Peter ignored him. He kept going with his sermon, and I don't know whether this was what he had planned to say or if the Holy Spirit -- in the form of men with guns entering his church -- changed his sermon a little, but instead of ending the service, he said, "And I say to the prime minister of our country that apartheid is a grave sin against God!"

At that point, the captain pulled out his gun and pointed it at Peter's face and said, "Maybe you didn't hear me. I said end the service." Peter looked at him directly in the eye and said, "God has called me to preach and that means you have no say in the matter. So if you are going to shoot, then go ahead and shoot, but hear this, apartheid is a sin against God."

The captain backed down. Peter finished his sermon.

Peter has become known all over the world. I've even recommended his memoirs, *Protest at Midnight* to some of you. Peter's wife, Elizabeth never became as well-known as her husband, but she was just as instrumental in the struggle and, maybe more than anyone I've ever met, lived out within herself this marriage of strength and grace, of toughness and kindness. Elizabeth was Desmond Tutu's secretary and Peter's partner in ministry.

And she taught Peter what it truly meant to be a person of peace. Both Peter and Elizabeth were pacifists. Inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in our country, they believed that the path forward for South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement must be

a commitment to non-violence. At least Peter said he believed that until someone slapped his wife.

They were at a protest, holding up placards and so forth, when a man came by, looked at them and then spit in Elizabeth's face and then he slapped her. I heard this story from Peter and Elizabeth's son Alan and he says that it was the only time he ever saw his father almost resort to violence. But before Peter hit the man, Elizabeth grabbed his arm and said to him, "Don't you know that I'm strong enough to be hit without needing you to hit back?"

Today, we're continuing our Spirituality of sermon series by talking about the spirituality of peace. I wanted to tell you about Peter and Elizabeth because when we talk about peacemakers in the world, we often think of peace activists – people like Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and so forth. These people recognized that true peace is not the absent of conflict but rather the presence of justice that then allows us to live in harmony with one another. But they also understood that evil cannot cast out evil – that they cannot bring about a just world using violence. As King said, "Only love can drive out hate."

Peter and Elizabeth stand in that tradition, and I wanted to share a bit of their story because even though we are not living in apartheid South Africa, I think their story has some important lessons for us. An obvious lesson is their commitment to stand up for justice no matter what the cost must be. If we want to be people working for a world of justice and peace, which I would argue is exactly what Jesus asks of us, then we too must recognize that peace and justice don't just happen. It takes people courageously working to make it happen.

But there's a deeper lesson in Peter and Elizabeth's story that I want us to focus on today. Peter was a busy activist, so busy in fact, that sometimes he forgot to take time to pray. In one seminary class, he was very honest with us about his prayer life or lack thereof. Elizabeth, on the other hand, prayed multiple times every day. She was one of the most deeply spiritual people I've ever met. And that's why she knew that she was strong enough to suffer whatever she must suffer to protest apartheid. She had an inner peace that transcended whatever turmoil or conflict was raging in the world around her.

You see, when the man attacked Elizabeth, Peter, intellectually, knew what Elizabeth wanted him to do. He knew that she was committed to nonviolence. But when the moment happened, he didn't act out of what he knew Elizabeth wanted. He didn't act out of his commitment to nonviolence. Instead, he almost acted out of his rage and anger at what someone had done to the person he loved more than anyone else.

And I would add understandably so. I can only imagine how I would react if someone attacked someone I loved dearly – my spouse, my kids. But what Elizabeth needed to remind Peter is that she had already made the choice how she wanted to respond to violence and that it was her choice to make. You see, Elizabeth had cultivated a life of such inner peace and grace that not only was she able to nonviolently respond to her attacker, but her first reaction after being

attacked was to make sure Peter responded non-violently as well. She could act peacefully because she had done the internal work of being at peace within herself.

A number of years ago, Father Richard Rohr started the Center for Action and Contemplation. Rohr is a Catholic priest in the Franciscan tradition who looks to St. Francis, the person whose prayer we offered as our call to worship today, as their founder. Rohr has also been deeply involved in a number of social justice movements and what he realized is that often activists were so focused on action that they neglected the practices of contemplation, meditation, and prayer. They were so focused on working for peace in the world that they forgot to do the things necessary for peace within. He writes, "There is a deep relationship between the inner revolution of prayer and the transformation of social structures and social consciousness. Our hope lies in the fact that meditation is going to change the society that we live in, just as it has changed us."

For Rohr, the first step in bringing peace to the world is to finding a spirituality of peace within ourselves.

So what does this mean for us? Most of us aren't putting our lives on the line every day in a non-violent protest movement. And while I have no doubt that over my years in ministry, I've probably offended a few people by my sermons, no one has ever shoved a gun in my face because of what I said from the pulpit. Are these stories about Peter and Elizabeth Storey just stories that might inspire us but don't have a whole lot of relevance for our own lives? I don't think so...really for two reasons.

First, we don't know what the future holds or what might be asked of us. We are living in a time where global fascism and white supremacy are both on the rise. Many experts believe that the effects of climate change will lead to conflict. I pray I am wrong about this but we all may find ourselves in a time when hard things might be asked of us. We might find ourselves in a time when we are called to be people of justice and peace in ways that are costly – a time like Peter and Elizabeth Storey found themselves in. And if we do come to that time, we need to have cultivated a spirituality of peace so we will have the internal strength and grace to face whatever it is we might have to face.

And secondly, whether I'm right about the first point or not, all of us find ourselves living in an incredibly divisive time where it's much easier to wish harm on our enemies and to celebrate their failures, than it is to cultivate an inner peace and faith that allows us to not only tolerate them but to even love them. We see this conflict not only on a macro level but even on a very local level – at town meetings, in church conflicts, or even around the dinner table at Thanksgiving. It feels that we are living in a time when it is harder and harder to live in peace with each other.

The apostle Paul could relate to both of these scenarios. He was persecuted as much or maybe more than any other leader in the early church. He was beaten, thrown into jail, and ultimately killed by those seeking to stamp out Christianity. But as the founder of multiple churches, he also knew first hand what it was like to have two people just not be able to get along with each other. In the passage we read earlier, Paul wrote the beautiful words that have been repeated thousands of times over the years – “ may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

But friends, let me share with you the part of the Scripture we didn't read earlier. This passage began with Paul saying, “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” This beautiful scripture did not arise out of a manifesto of nonviolence after Paul had been thrown in prison. Rather, it was Paul's response to two people in the church bickering with each other.

Toward the end of his discourse, Paul says, “Finally, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[4] these things.” Friends, I don't know about you, but when I'm in conflict with someone, it's so easy for me to not think about beautiful things. I might think about what I would really like to say to them.

And it's not just my conflict with that person that makes it hard. There is a whole industry out there that makes millions and millions of dollars by trying to make us outraged about something or someone. It takes a lot of internal work to not accept a place of outrage and contempt as our default setting because so many external forces are trying to drive us exactly to that place.

But we don't have to accept that as our default.

We can be upset about things that are wrong in the world. We can forcefully stand up for what we believe in. But we can do that from a place of reaching out our hand rather than clenching our fist.

Cultivating a spirituality of peace is about choosing to stop and take a breath when it seems there are so many forces that are trying to make us angry about something.

Take a breath and Breathe in peace....breathe out anger

Breath in forgiveness...breathe out resentment

When I can simply pause and breathe, I often find myself centered once again.

Friends, cultivating the spirituality of peace is about preparing ourselves for times when hard things may be asked of us, but it's about far more than that. Cultivating the spirituality of peace

is about being able to live free of things like resentment and anger and malice – things that usually do more harm to ourselves than to the one we're angry with.

So today, friends, I invite you to breathe in peace, to pray for those with whom we're in conflict, and to trust that through these practices, God will lead us to being people of peace in our homes, in our local communities, and throughout the world. Amen.