



Sunday, September 6, 2020: Peace Within

Casting Out Demons in the Mirror by Henry Koenig Stone

Matthew 7:4–5

“Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (NRSV)

John 8:7

“When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” (NRSV)

Reflection: As we spend this month reflecting on ways to practice peacemaking, it is important not to skip the first step: wrestling with the causes of conflict.

Both personal and group conflicts often find their roots in the same human drives. Ego and lust for power can drive international conflicts just as surely as they do financial crimes. Fear of the “Other” leads down parallel paths to individual discrimination, racist structures and violence against immigrants and religious minorities. Personal insecurity, another form of fear, can lead to overt abuse or reinforce subtle forms of toxic masculinity or manipulation in relationships. It can also stop us from being willing to learn about the ways in which we, or the world, are failing each other. If we wish to be peacemakers in our relationships, communities and the world, we must first look within ourselves.

Can we really ever “cast out the demons” of fear, anger and hate? Can we ever silo away the impacts of growing up in societies full of racial stereotypes and toxic gender-power dynamics? No, not completely Jesus acknowledges in John 8 that we are *all* sinful, all flawed. Not even he picks up a stone. But he does call us to do harder work: to look in the mirror and cast out the log in our own eye.

Although war, injustice and violence are present at every scale of human interaction, the work of peacemaking starts within. This week, let us think about the tools we need to unpack the parts of ourselves that are most in need of Jesus’ grace, forgiveness and repair.

Practice for Peacemakers: Identify an area of peacemaking in which you feel disengaged or uninformed, and sit down for some self-education. You could choose to read “The New Jim Crow” or read a text on intersectional feminism. If you are feeling particularly brave, try and identify ways in which your own emotions are influenced by society’s biases, assumptions and values. You can do this on your own or in conversation with a trusted friend or therapist.

As you do any or all of the above, make sure this week to remember that there is room for grace. None of us have the self-control to be peacemakers at all times and in all places — and that is why it is so important that we be intentional about the work of peacemaking.

Prayer: Dear God, please forgive us when we approach peacemaking through the lens of judgment, rather than grace. Help us to look within ourselves and see the potential for your light, and then help us to approach our relationships, our community, and our world as makers of your Peace. Amen.



Monday, September 7: Peace Within

Finding Refuge in Stillness by Rev. Valerie Austin

Psalm 46:5–7,10a

God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; the Creator utters God's voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. ... "Be still and know that I am God!" (NRSV)

Reflection: In order to be effective peacemakers, we sometimes need to reconcile with our own inner turmoil before we can deal with broken relationships, harmed communities and a world that experiences the fires of climate change as well as violent conflict.

There are times when we will unwillingly have to sit with ourselves. For some of us, this can be as mundane as waiting for an appointment to begin, or waiting in line. Some of us have experienced this acutely during the pandemic season of social distancing. Whoever we are, and wherever we may be in life, there will be times in which doing *absolutely nothing* will be our best solution. To be still and not reach for the next activity, move on to the next chore, or write the next email, can be a great challenge for many. To be still, and be at peace with ourselves, is a gift that the Divine longs to give, if only we would learn to receive it. Sabbath time is preparation for the work Christ calls us to do.

Sometimes when circumstances are less than ideal, or when life has not yet met our expectations, we may begin to listen more intensely to voices that demand constant productivity in an attempt to gain a sense of control. This striving can cause tension within us as our spirits wrestle against busyness to find a space of stillness, even as we may remain in constant motion. This wrestling can be quite uncomfortable, and can even cause our physical bodies to become unwell. Instead of allowing moments of rest to be the restorative blessings that they could be, we are tempted to devolve into an internal tug-of-war.

Dear friend, we must allow ourselves to quiet these voices of demand, to be still in the simple satisfaction of who we are, as we are, with all the successes and all the disappointments, and just let them be. We are invited to rest. As we remind ourselves that each person is a marvelous creature, created in the image of the Divine, we can allow all these suppressed feelings to exist and fall under God's divine gaze. With God's grace comes far greater confidence for action.

Practice for Peacemakers: Find a place of stillness, preferably alone. Notice your breath, and take the time to reach a state of calm. Breathe slowly and deeply, filling up your belly. As you breathe, note whatever feelings and stresses arise. Perhaps there's tension or stress that feels tight on your shoulders or chest. Perhaps there is a sense of guilt or regret. You may notice more than one feeling, or not much at all. Imagine divine eyes looking upon each thing that you feel, a presence that is gentle and understanding. God accepts all these thoughts and feelings as you notice them. Continue slow breathing. Refocus yourself again by listening closely to your breath. On the inhale think "Peace," and upon your exhale, think "Release." Continue for however long you may need.

Prayer: Eternal, all-knowing one, you see that our hearts are restless and our spirits refuse stillness. You long for us to savor rest in your presence. Let us find the courage to be still in your grace. Let us dare to find peace within ourselves as a step on the path of peacemaking in your world. Amen.



Tuesday, September 8: Peace Within

Peace that the Earth Can Give by Madison McKinney

Job 12: 7–9

*“But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.*

Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?” (NRSV)

Reflection: The story of Job acknowledges that our walk with the Creator is not comfortable at all times. Throughout our lives, we have experienced and can expect more times of hardship and uncertainty. We experience injustice and betrayal, no matter how hardworking, loving or “good” we try to be. There are times when we pray to the Creator to guide us, and yet still feel lonely and unheard — as though God wished pain upon us. But we are reminded through scripture that we can connect to the Creator in any place and at any time. Even as everything around us screams, “Wrong!” there are constant signs of purpose everywhere. Sometimes, we just need to listen to what the Creation surrounding us can teach.

Finding inner peace is not just relying on God to find us and fix all our problems. When we turn to our environment, and all the living spirits that surround us, we can find the strength and inner peace we are looking for — long *before* wrongs are made right. Even in this world full of calamity and chaos, finding inner peace is a skill that can be built by living in harmony with the Earth and all the creations within it.

Sometimes the answers we are searching for in the midst of chaos may come in forms we often overlook in our day-to-day lives. When we are being tested and find ourselves in troubled waters, calling for help, the guidance we are looking for may be in the water itself. The Creator is always present: within us, around us and even in the ground beneath us. When you feel unheard, uncertain and lonely, remember that God may be answering your prayers through the nature that surrounds you.

Practice for Peacemakers: When was the last time you stopped and listened to the birds speaking their language? What were they saying? When the sun is hiding behind billows of clouds, and the rain is pouring, how do you connect to God? This week, take the time to be still, listen and find peace and strength from the Earth that surrounds you.

Prayer: Creator God, thank you for all your creations. Remind us that the whole Earth is your church, and that your spirit reaches far beyond the bounds of our physical places of worship, though we often do not recognize you. Thank you for being present in many forms, and for remaining accessible in our darkest moments. Amen.



Wednesday, September 9: Peace Within

Accepting Hope by Elder Susan B. Orr

1 Timothy 4:10

"For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe."

Reflection: On Epiphany this year, I was given my first “Star Word” by a Facebook friend. The premise is this: the magi followed the star to find baby Jesus, bringing their gifts. We too seek Jesus, trusting that the Spirit can and does use many signs (stars) to guide us closer to God. A “star word,” then, gives us one principle or goal to focus on throughout the year.

I was intrigued by the thought of having a guiding star word for 2020, and imagined how that might help me to focus on an aspect of our spiritual calling. I waited with anticipation for my FB friend to send me my word. I envisioned that the word might be *kindness, joy, love, serve* — you know, good churchy words. And then my word arrived: “Acceptance.” Huh? What kind of word is that? I was kind of grumbly about the whole thing, but I still propped that purple “Acceptance” star right next to my computer.

As the days and months unfolded and the Covid-19 pandemic made its unwelcome appearance, my carefully planned life began to unravel with cancellations of work-related opportunities and anticipated travel, and with separation from my loved ones. With each personal disappointment, my eye would rest upon my star word, encouraging me to take a deep breath, exhale and accept. As the news around the world revealed the pain and suffering caused by this new coronavirus, I struggled to accept the unknown science that couldn’t define why, when or how we would make it through. Yet even through the shadow of this valley of the pandemic, acts of kindness, care, creativity and ingenuity continually shone a light on our ability to thrive as a people through those extraordinarily difficult days.

Acceptance is not a flashy word. But sometimes, acceptance of the things we cannot change is essential to finding a path forward and doing the healing work that we are called to do. Although I did not want to hear it, that star word came at the right time to teach me that, although we toil and struggle, our hope is set on the living God who is the Savior of all people. I can accept that.

Practice for Peacemakers: Today, if there is a time when you are feeling overwhelmed or not in control, take a moment to breathe in deeply, exhale, and accept. Hear these words: “*You are God’s beloved child.*” Then, see if you can approach the issue with new strength and focus.

Prayer: Gracious, loving and faithful God, we are grateful for the guidance you provide us as we live our ordinary lives. Pour your power over us. Let it wash us, renew us and enable us to discern your will, that “*thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*” Grant us wisdom and courage — and, when we need it, acceptance — as we face this hour and the next. Amen



Thursday, September 10: Peace Within

Inner Peace in a Burning World by Rev. Ben Perry

John 16:33

“I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (RSV)

Reflection: What does it mean to cultivate inner peace in a world that's burning? I don't have a neat answer to this question, but I do have a fervent conviction that personal equanimity is not God's calling in this moment — particularly for white folks like myself. This year we have seen and participated in major protests against prevalent and repeated violence directed toward people of color, but in order for change to truly come, we need to do work far beyond those protests. “No justice, no peace!” cannot just be our public cry; it must be our private creed as well. There may be a time for seeking inward solace for its own sake, but that time is not now.

That said, we are no use to anyone if we become so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the world's injustice that we remain mired in despair or become numb. So, the task of tending to our inner life is still an essential one, but only insofar as it makes us more useful in healing a shattered world. Far too often, “inner peace” becomes an excuse for spiritual solipsism and a betrayal of the God we serve.

Our relationships are the key to navigating this inherent tension. Immersing ourselves in loving, justice-oriented communities gives us resources to turn to when the weight of public violence becomes too much to carry alone — but they also provide an important source of accountability to ensure that we do not recede into quietism. Indeed, this should not be a surprise: It's the kind of life Jesus modeled for us. Jesus was deeply intentional about cultivating a peaceful heart amid Roman oppression, but his interpersonal relationships ensured that his prayer, meditation and contemplation did not remove him from communal life. His friends called him to weep over Lazarus; his disciples accompanied him when he destroyed property protesting in the Temple.

His loved ones surrounded him as he lay dying on the cross. Christ calls us to the peace found in community — an active peace that thirsts for justice and tends to wounds inflicted in its pursuit of internally and externally overcoming a world of injustice.

Practice for Peacemakers: We can never truly feel the pain of other people. But today, try to be open to the stories of oppression communicated by people who experience less privilege (or different kinds of privilege) than yourself. Listen to and read the testimonies of those who have lost loved ones to hate crimes, police brutality, or to the prison system and mass incarceration. And allow these stories to change you and motivate you to be fully engaged in your community and in the world.

Prayer: God, fill our hearts with a peace that cannot rest while our neighbors are killed. Tend to our hurt without calming our passions. And speak to us through our communities, that we might follow your call into the streets. Amen.



Friday, September 11: Peace Within

Ritual for a Lifelong Peacemaker by Rev. Richard A. Koenig

Philippians 4:6b

... in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (NRSV)

Reflection: Scattered around the grounds of the Chautauqua Institution in southwestern New York State are more than 20 "Peace Poles." During the summer season, outside the Hall of Missions and across the brick walk from the Hall of Philosophy, people gather daily at one of these Peace Poles at 8:55 a.m. for a five-minute prayer service for peace.

Prayers for peace — made daily — in five minutes of ritual: not much time in which to transform a world filled with violent conflict! And yet I think of Bob.

Every summer while at Chautauqua, even into his early nineties, Bob faithfully left the breakfast table to make the walk to participate, adding his presence, his prayers to that daily Peace Prayer. That consistent act, that ritual, was a microcosm of Bob's whole life, and it continues to remind me of the power that this kind of consistency can bring in driving our individual commitment to peace.

In his role as a high-level denominational executive in the United Church of Christ, Bob had spent his whole life on the front lines, working for peace. Bob worked for civil rights and the anti-war movement in the 1960s, developed Christian Education materials in support of the Women's Liberation movement, inclusive language and LGBT rights. He traveled to South Africa during the time of apartheid and was fully engaged in the national conversations around peace and justice issues well into the early part of this century. He continued to march against the death penalty for decades past retirement.

Bob was a gentle, thoughtful man, who believed in confronting the principalities and powers of his time nonviolently, with humility, grace, love and a persistence grounded in a theological acceptance of God's "*peace that passes all understanding*" and in the knowledge that peace is intimately entwined with the divine call to "*let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.*" Bob understood that our "righteousness" before God is about seeking "right relationship" with the Divine Presence, a relationship that brings peace as we also seek justice in a broken world. His whole life was a testimony to that truth. Bob embodied the gospel in his personal, familial, communal and public life in a way that had far-reaching and profound impacts on the lives of those around him, and beyond. The search for peace is not a "one-time" or momentary thing. Every generation must learn anew how to live lives rooted in the gospel message of the Prince of Peace. It is in a lifelong journey of discipleship that we come to know the justice and peace of God.

Practice for Peacemakers: Take five minutes today to reflect and pray on the needs for peacemaking action in your community and in the world. Take five minutes tomorrow and do the same. As you continue throughout this month-long study, consider whether prayer and ritual may help to empower you to do more in the work for justice and peace.

Prayer: Ever-present God, in our prayers and supplications, renew us for the tasks of peacemaking. Give us the strength, courage and consistency to live into the peace that passes all understanding, our whole lives through. Amen.



Saturday, September 12: Peace Within

Wrestling with Toxic Masculinity by Rev. Carl Horton

1 Corinthians 13:4–8

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;

as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. (NRSV)

Reflection: I recently saw a TV ad for some sort of supplement with the lead line, “Man up, America!” The narrator’s voice had the tone and tenor of a World Wrestling Federation match announcer. “Guys,” he growled, “this is no time to be soft. Maximize your masculinity.”

From an early age, we are the recipients of a societal, slow-drip infusion of messages telling us what we are supposed to be like, look like and act like. Sometimes these messages are like foghorns: blasts of noise intruding in a commercial. More often, though, they are imperceptible and pernicious whispers that seep into our consciousness, needling our sense of self and scratching at the surface of our identities. Over time, their corrosive accumulation can become toxic.

We are in a time of reckoning for the societal structures and norms that have been in place up until now. Call it a shift, an earthquake, or an awakening, but 2020 seems like a socially- distanced “come to Jesus” year. Much of what we have accepted as “normal” is not and should not be “*normative*.” The curtain is being pushed away, the monuments are being pulled down, and power structures of the past are being revealed as fraudulent and certainly not “of God.” If anything, I think we’re being called not to “man up” but to “man down.”

Over time, our understandings of gender are deepening and the ideals of masculinity and femininity are cracking, opening up room for myriad expressions of our true selves. If we maximize anything, let us maximize the peace within that comes from loving ourselves kindly as the complete persons God has created us to be. Confidence in God’s vision for us goes much farther than any supplement.

Practice for Peacemakers: Consider an aspect of your identity that doesn’t “conform” to societal norms or expectations. Embrace, accept, love and thank God for that “nonconforming” part of yourself.

Prayer: God of love, turn us from conformity toward authenticity and help us love — even ourselves — as you would have us love. Amen.

Devotional Authors



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