

How Will We Prepare for Peace Building?

Beloved friends, on this second Sunday in Advent and a day when we will gather for an imaginative and celebratory meeting of our congregation, we are invited to wonder: how will we prepare for peace building?

Let us pray. Spirit of God, Spirit of fathomless peace, you have gathered us today in our Sanctuary, built by our ancestors in faith on land that has been in relationship with your Dakota and other indigenous peoples for millennia. We long for you to disturb, challenge, comfort and empower us. As you invite us to wonder about what it will take to build peace, grant us serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

“89% of respondents are excited about where the church is headed. This is truly remarkable for a church of your size.” These encouraging words are about us – People’s Congregational Church! They are words from Rev. Dr. Anna Hall, a consultant from an organization called Convergence who analyzed responses that twenty of us recently offered through the in-depth Vital Church Assessment tool.

I recently had opportunity to review the results of our responses with Rev. Dr. Anna Hall. She kept saying things like, ‘This congregation is quite healthy!’ – referring to our perspectives and attitudes including skills for navigating change and conflict. She would say things to me several times like, ‘your church really resembles a church plant,’ poised in our posture for new life and growth.

When asked, ‘When you think about the next 2 years of this church, what do you hope you'll be able to say about what you all have done together as a congregation?’,... *“Themes were growth and community impact.... It will be crucial,” she notes, “to bring all your energy into alignment to thrive in the future, as little congregations that try to do too many things risk burnout and fatigue.”*

Here are a few key recommendations that I think fall so well on our Sunday of building true, deep, lasting peace. Three recommendations from Convergence for us – People’s Congregational Church:

1. ***“Continue strategic collaborations. Increase your capacity and impact through your existing partnerships and the collaboration/merger with another congregation that might be on the horizon.”***
2. ***“At your size, the most powerful thing you can do right this minute is right-size everything. You are a small group of believers who gather to pray, learn, and love your neighbors. That is a more Biblical church than most these days. A small group can have a big community impact, too, if strategic about the way they work together. However, you may be trying to do too much right now for your size. If it’s not essential to your mission, don’t do it. If your mission isn’t specific enough to tell what’s essential, choose one clear focus...”*** [And here’s the part about peace.] ***“Only if given space to listen will you be able discern a singular community impact focus going forward. Discernment is a season for listening, and to do that, you need to turn down the noise and weariness of trying to do business as usual.”***
3. ***“As you begin the work of discerning a particular and singular focus for impact, reach out to anyone who could use your building as an affordable source of space for their groups/nonprofits. This will help you connect with more community members and also increase your financial sustainability to fill your current gap between giving and budget.”***

Well, thank you Rev. Dr. Anna Hall for helping us to see clearly what we are working so diligently to be and do together.

And now let us turn to the scriptures for today to see how they can enlighten our work toward deep peace building. On this morning in Advent 2022, we hear with fresh ears a great promise of Scripture. Hear again these words from the prophet Isaiah: ***“Then a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse; from Jesse’s roots, a branch will blossom: The Spirit of God will rest on you—a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and reverence for God.”***

I invite you to imagine the possibility that the Spirit of God is resting on you personally and that the Spirit of God is resting on us as a community. Where do you most feel your weariness? If you feel weariness, perhaps it's across your forehead or in your shoulders. It could be in your heart or your gut. We all work hard – in our personal lives and in our life as a community. Let today be a day you open yourself even further to feeling the Spirit of God resting alongside any weariness you also feel.

As Mary shared when introducing this reading, the “shoot of Jesse” referred to a wise, just, compassionate leader who would rise up from within the lineage of King David and his father Jesse before him. We also heard these words from Isaiah: *“You will delight in obeying God, and you won't judge by appearances, or make decisions by hearsay.”*

Developing a practice of making space for the Spirit of God to rest on us makes possible a fruitful experience of discernment. Space for discernment is space for growth in effective living. **I wonder, what is one small step you could take to create space in time for the Spirit of God to rest on you, inviting you into discernment?**

Let's turn now to our New Testament scripture readings to explore this promise of the Spirit of God resting on us. Both the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans and the writer of the gospel of Matthew seem to want us to understand the work to which we are called as followers of Jesus – Jesus, that uniquely powerful shoot from the lineage of Jesse.

Paul encourages us to praise and glorify God by living harmoniously within community: *“May God, the source of all strength and encouragement, enable you to live in perfect harmony with one another according to the Spirit of Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and one voice, you may praise the God of our Savior Jesus Christ.”*

This order of harmony is a tall order – one that feels nearly impossible when we observe how adept we are at polarizing ourselves within our society. Yet we as People's Congregational Church look to Jesus – the Promised One on whom the Spirit of God so clearly rested – as our example to follow in the struggle toward harmony.

Presbyterian minister, theologian and author Frederick Buechner lived from 1926 until this past August of 2022. Among many influential statements, Buechner wrote this about Jesus' work toward peace: *"For Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love."*

Indeed, Jesus faced directly into struggle, embodying by love. When he found himself in a discussion about ethics and moral values, he engaged the other respectfully and from a sense of grounding in God's inclusive love and justice. When someone on the margins of society was being bullied or ostracized by others, Jesus spoke out and came to the side of that person. I imagine Jesus' voice trembled with vulnerable love as he spoke about justice. **I wonder, in your life, what is a current struggle that is calling you to face its center directly, with courage born of love?**

Finally, In the gospel reading from Matthew, John boldly urged people to take risks – to make dramatic changes that might lead them toward more fruitful living. We heard at the beginning of the reading, *"At this time John the Baptizer appeared in the desert of Judea, proclaiming, 'Change your hearts and minds, for the reign of heaven is about to break in upon you!' It was John that the prophet Isaiah described when he said, 'A herald's voice cries in the desert: Prepare the way of our God, make straight the paths of God!'"*

Confronting those who seemed to only be going through the motions or following the crowd without much personal conviction, John challenged (and here I quote from the biblical paraphrase, *The Message*), *"Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin! The main character in this drama – compared to him I'm a mere stagehand – [the main character] will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out... Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire...The grain will be gathered into the barn, but the chaff will be burned in unquenchable fire."*

John foreshadowed Jesus' passion for building peace through processes of fiery, clarifying discernment.

As we engage in our congregational meeting today, **I wonder, how might we build deeper, fuller peace through processes of clarifying discernment?**

In the words of Frederick Buechner, *“For Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love.”* May we embody the presence of love in our peace building because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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December 4, 2022 (2nd Sunday in Advent)
Isaiah 11:1-10 , Romans 15:5-13, Matthew 3: 1-12