

A sermon delivered Sister Maxine Shonk, O.P., at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 5, March 17, 2013.

“Blessed are the Peacemakers”

Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

***(Part VI of VIII in the Sermon Series
“Blessed Are You!”)***

Good morning and Happy St. Patrick’s Day. Half of me says, “Top o’ the morning,” and the other half says, “Guten morgen!” I am thrilled to be here to pray and worship among you once again. I want to thank Revs. Tim Ahrens and Janine Wilson and all of you for this focus on the beatitudes. There is a great need for us to revisit them in the world that is happening around us today.

A good friend of mine from First Community Church sent me a quote by a Jesuit, Greg Boyle of Creighton University, which says, “Scripture scholars say that the more exact translation (of the word beatitude) if you were to be really precise (if a little awkward)— wouldn’t be ‘blessed’ or ‘happy,’ it would be, ‘You’re in the right place.’ You are in the right place if you are merciful. You are in the right place if you struggle for justice. You are in fact in the right place if they persecute you, or insult you; you’re in the right place. It’s about social location. It’s about where we choose to stand. The Beatitudes is not a spirituality, it’s a geography. It tells us where to stand.”

I have been asked, as a Dominican Sister of Peace, to reflect on “Blessed are the Peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.” And I want to say that when/if we take this beatitude to heart in our world today we are indeed standing in the right place.

Perhaps it’s not insignificant that in my Roman Catholic world this week, our newly-elected pope took the name of Francis for Francis of Assisi, whose most fervent prayer was “Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace “.

As you may know, the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs, your neighbors up the street, have had a name change. Four years ago, we joined in union with six other Dominican congregations across the country and became Dominican Sisters of Peace. Coming to that name was in itself a long process of peacemaking . . . if you can imagine 600 women trying to agree on one name! But once that name found us, we have all been re-energized to discover just what it means to be peacemakers, what it means to build peace in our ministries, what it means to be peace to one another and what it means to preach peace by our lives.

It's also worth noting that the beatitude blesses "peacemakers" not "peacekeepers." We are standing in the right place when we are making peace. It's not about searching for peace and happily settling in there. It's about creating peace and inviting others into it. It's a verb and not just a noun. Peacemaking requires us not just to search for places of peace but to search out the places of "unpeace" so that we might be peace, build peace, and be instruments of peace *there*.

This is infinitely more challenging because it means stepping out of my comfort zone and believing that God steps with me. It means acknowledging the homeless person as my brother or sister and not just someone who wishes they could be me. It means reaching out to the one who is so different from me and seeing them with God's eyes. It means extending my arms across the aisle, whatever that aisle represents to me. It means opening the door to, or knocking on the door of, the estranged family member. It means opening a dialogue with the one who has betrayed or hurt me or the one whom I have betrayed. It means that, along with Mary in today's gospel, pouring the precious perfume of peace into the community even when there are those in the group who think it's better used someplace else.

It means seeing myself as God sees me broken and healed, sinful and forgiven, undeserving and loved beyond measure. It means seeing in myself the very image of the God who created me and shows me mercy. It's not either/or for God. It's both/and. And If I can truly celebrate God's image in me how much more likely I am to live more deeply into it.

St. Paul himself in chapter three of his letter to the Ephesians prays for us, "I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that God may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that rooted

and grounded in love you may have strength to comprehend ... what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with the fullness of God. “

And if, as my inner self grows strong, I can see even a shadow of God's image in myself, how much more likely it is that I might find an image of God in you. Tell me . . . Is more peace made by remembering the goodness of another or by remembering their defects? God sees both and loves it. Do we? What peace might there be if we could. God has sung us all into being and sometimes it's as though we have forgotten the tune . . . our own and others.

When a woman in a certain remote African tribe knows she is pregnant, she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends and together they pray and meditate until they hear the song of the child. They recognize that every soul has its own vibration that expresses its unique flavor and purpose. When the women attune to the song, they sing it out loud. Then they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else. When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child's song to him or her. Later, when the child enters education, the village gathers and chants the child's song.

When the child passes through the initiation to adulthood, the people again come together and sing. At the time of marriage, the person hears his or her song. Finally, when the soul is about to pass from this world, the family and friends gather at the person's bed, just as they did at their birth, and they sing the person into the next life.

There is something inside each of us that knows we have a song, and we wish those we love would recognize it and support us and sing it. How we all long to be loved, acknowledged and accepted for who we are!

In this African tribe, there is one other occasion upon which the villagers sing to the child. If at any time during his or her life, the person commits a crime or aberrant social act, the individual is called to the center of the village and the people in the community form a circle around them. Then they sing their song to them. The tribe recognizes that the correction for antisocial behavior is not punishment; it is love and the remembrance of identity.

When you recognize your own song, you have no desire or need to do anything that would hurt another. A friend is someone who knows your

song and sings it to you when you have forgotten it. Those who love you are not fooled by mistakes you have made or dark images you hold about yourself. They remember your beauty when you feel ugly; your wholeness when you are broken; your innocence when you feel guilty and your purpose when you are confused.

Isn't it at least worth a try to learn each other's song? But how does this apply to our nation, our world, so vast. so many? It is worth remembering that peace only happens one person at a time. We will not solve our nation's problem until we turn our attention to one person at our side or across from us or the person within.

I leave you with a true story that might teach us all how to heal and bring peace, through the example and simplicity of a 3 year old.

Like any good mother, when Karen found out that another baby was on the way, she did what she could to help her 3-year-old son, Michael, prepare for a new sibling.

They found out that the new baby was going be a girl, and day after day, night after night, Michael sang to his sister in mommy's tummy. He was building a bond of love with his little sister before he even met her.

The pregnancy progressed normally for Karen, an active member of the Panther Creek United Methodist Church in Morristown , Tennessee. In time, the labor pains came. Soon it was every five minutes, every three, every minute. But serious complications arose during delivery and Karen found herself in hours of labor. Would a C-section be required? Finally, after a long struggle, Michael's little sister was born. But she was in very serious condition.

With a siren howling in the night, the ambulance rushed the infant to the neonatal intensive care unit at St. Mary's Hospital, Knoxville, Tennessee. The days inched by. The little girl got worse. The pediatrician had to tell the parents there was very little hope. Be prepared for the worst. Karen and her husband contacted a local cemetery about a burial plot. They had fixed up a special room in their house for their new baby but now they found themselves having to plan for a funeral.

Michael, however, kept begging his parents to let him see his sister. "I want to sing to her," he kept saying. Week two in intensive care looked as if a funeral would come before the week was over. Michael kept nagging

about singing to his sister, but kids are never allowed in Intensive Care. Karen decided to take Michael whether they liked it or not. If he didn't see his sister right then, he may never see her alive.

She dressed him in an over-sized scrub suit and marched him into ICU. He looked like a walking laundry basket. The head nurse recognized him as a child and bellowed, "Get that kid out of here now. No children are allowed."

The mother rose up strong in Karen, and the usually mild-mannered lady glared steel-eyed right into the head nurse's face, her lips a firm line.

"He is not leaving until he sings to his sister," she stated. Then Karen towed Michael to his sister's bedside. He gazed at the tiny infant losing the battle to live.

After a moment, he began to sing. In the pure voice of a 3-year-old, Michael sang: "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine; you make me happy when skies are gray."

Instantly the baby girl seemed to respond. The pulse rate began to calm down and become steady.

"Keep on singing, Michael," encouraged Karen with tears in her eyes.

"You never know, dear, how much I love you, please don't take my sunshine away," he sang.

As Michael sang to his sister, the baby's ragged, strained breathing became as smooth as a kitten's purr.

"Keep on singing, sweetheart," Karen said.

"The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamed I held you in my arms," he sang, and Michael's little sister began to relax as rest, healing rest seemed to sweep over her.

"Keep on singing, Michael."

Tears had now conquered the face of the bossy head nurse.

Karen glowed.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. Please don't take my sunshine away.”

The next day – the very next day – the little girl was well enough to go home. *Woman's Day* magazine called it “The Miracle of a Brother's Song.” The medical staff just called it a miracle. Karen called it a miracle of God's love.

I call it the miracle of peacemaking . . . we are standing in the right place wherever we are!

Copyright 2013, First Congregational Church, UCC