The pursuit of peace
by Lester J. Start
Undated


My text for this morning touches upon a theme that is of vital interest to us today, - peace. As the news reports fill us with a growing hope that the peace for which we have been working and praying is indeed near at hand, our minds are turning to the problems of peace. We have moved from the position of arm-chair strategists of military affairs to consider the problems of postwar planning, made even more acute because of the election this fall. And so we begin to think of the problem of reconverting a whole world from the ways of war to those of peace, a problem which involves infinitely more than the reconversion of industry, for it means the reconversion of our ways of thinking. The text that we will think on this morning gives us a clue as to what is required of us to bring about the peace for which we pray, for peace of the enduring kind, the only true peace, cannot come automatically with the cessation of hostilities. The text is an exhortation by the writer of I Peter to those who would be Christians. Let such a one, he says, seek peace and pursue it. It is not enough merely to look for peace, the text implies; if we are to find it, we must actively seek it out and pursue it to make it ours. The implication is that peace, just as any of the great and worthwhile things in the world, does not come of itself; it must be sought, and sought with a desperate intensity if it is to be possessed, for only as we win it are we worthy to possess it. Peace is terribly hard to win Our own experience and the long and sad history of the human race teach us this. Peace needs so many adjustments and reconciliations so many victories of good-will, so many surrenders of pride and passion for power and expression, that it must be followed with an intense and desperate eagerness if it is to be found and made to work. Thus if one would find peace, “let him seek peace, and pursue it.” The original meaning of the word translated ‘pursue’ in our American Standard Version means to chase, in the sense of eager pursuit; it was often applied to the way hounds chased a trail without swerving from their object. This idea is reminiscent of Francis Thompson’s famous poem, The Hound of Heaven, in which he compares God to a hound seeking him out to save him, and never leaving the chase although the poet tries to escape from Him. This is a strange figure but an effective one. Similarly it may seem strange at first to think of the pursuit of peace, to think that it is something we must chase, for we usually think of peace as something which just comes. But as we think on this idea we will see that peace must be pursued if it is to be won.

As we consider the pursuit of peace, first of all, let us consider what it takes to find peace in our own hearts, for we cannot expect to seek peace in our relations with others unless first of all we find it in ourselves. The first task in the pursuit of peace is to find the way in which one can be at peace with oneself. The human spirit is such a complicated mess of conflicting passions and desires, that it is a rare individual who can keep all these in check, making them serve him instead of being their master. Many lives are in reality the battlegrounds of inner civil wars, by which I mean that there are so many conflicts that arise in our lives, between what we want to do and what we ought to do, between what we are and what we want to be, that it is the rare person who is at peace with himself. I suppose the psychologist would call such a condition a lack of integration because the person’s total personality is not properly adjusted to his environment, and
certain wishes and desires are out of focus with the general purpose of his life. Plato had the same idea centuries ago, when he compared a person’s life to a chariot with two horses. One of the horses is desire, and the other will; the driver is reason trying to control these steeds in ourselves which so often become unmanageable, trying to control and guide them in the proper road so there will not be a wreck, because of a wrong turning. The peaceful life does not depend upon a quiet and harmonious environment necessarily; a person can be at war with himself when everything surrounding him should make for peace, and a strong character can retain an inward serenity and peace of mind when he is in the midst of strife and confusion. The difference lies in having a single dominating purpose and value to follow in life, a beacon upon which all our energies are focused. Civil war begins in our lives when we seek to follow too many values and purposes or when we can find no purpose for our lives. And this condition is a result of the disease which might be called spiritual nearsightedness, which exists when we can see no purpose in life other than pleasing ourselves, and no values besides pleasures.

Selfishness is one of the greatest forces which prevent our being at peace with ourselves. Selfishness narrows our interests and our values to such an extent that it is impossible to be happy for long while selfish, for the world is not geared to center about one person. When we call only those things good which benefit ourselves, we will find more bad things than good ones in the world, and little reason to feel at peace with ourselves. But if we expand our selves, so that our interests include the well-being of all around us, and not just ourselves, we will find more reason to be pleased with the world as it is, as we rejoice in the good fortune of others instead of seeking just our own. How much better it is to identify ourselves with a larger purpose, as a part of that humanity created by God, in whose well-being we find our own peace and happiness, than to remain isolated and insulated from others by our egocentric selfishness. Selfishness will erect barriers of false pride and sensitivity which prevent our being at peace with our fellows or with our better selves; it will set us apart and isolate us when there is no reason for it. Robert Burns must have had something like this in mind when he wrote the lines “O wad some pow’r the giftie gie us, to see ourselves as others see us.” He wrote these lines in a poem written to a louse, a louse that he had seen on the bonnet of a woman sitting in church, a woman dressed in all her finery and feeling herself better than those about her.

To find the peace which we seek, we must destroy that selfishness which prevents our finding it, and identify our interests with a larger purpose. Jesus taught the same thought when he told his would-be followers Deny thyself. This is not an easy thing to do; that is why we must constantly pursue this peace which comes from unselfish living, and merging and submerging our selfish interests into a broader, more inclusive purpose. This purpose should be to live in all that we do according to the best that we know, in the smallest things we do to live according to the purpose of God as we understand it revealed in the life of his Son. If we can feel that we are working for God in our everyday lives, we will have identified our interests with that larger purpose which makes our efforts worthwhile, and makes us feel that we are accomplishing things, giving us the peace of inward satisfaction. This attitude of mind is nowhere better expressed than in George Eliot’s poem describing the character of Stradivarious, the great violin maker. He writes:…

when any master holds ‘Twixt chin and hand a violin of mine, He will be glad that Stradivari lived, made violins, and made them of the best. The masters only know whose work is good:
They will choose mine, and while God gives them skill I give them instruments to play upon, God choosing me to help Him.” No master workman can create his works of perfection unless he identifies his efforts with such a larger purpose as helping in the work of God. But you may say, this may be easy for the artist; how about the humdrum affairs of life? How can one feel like this while washing dishes, for example? And yet even this is possible, if we believe the writings of a person like Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a monk whose duty in the monastery in which he lived was to tend to the cleaning and cooking in the kitchen. Even monks must eat, and he was the chief cook and bottle washer. He might have felt unhappy that he had to do such work while the others were busy studying, copying manuscripts, and engaged in more important tasks. But Brother Lawrence knew that his menial task was just as important in the eyes of God, and he poured out his feelings of joy and thanksgiving for his tasks in delightful verses to the God of the pots and pans. Even the tiniest things are important in the symphony of life, contributing to the whole, just as the short flute solo in a symphony is just as essential as the violin passages which are more apparent. One may not always see the significance of little tasks well done; but their results often crop out unexpectedly. Daniel Webster was a firm believer in the idea that a successful lawyer must follow details faithfully. Once when a young lawyer asked him for advice on what to study to improve himself, Webster answered, Turnips, pointing out the need for knowing all sorts of details. The young man took him literally and applied himself to the study of turnips so faithfully that he was soon quite an authority. Not long afterward a case came to the attention of Mr. Webster which concerned the theft of a special strain of turnip seed. Webster turned the case over to the young lawyer who so astounded the court with his knowledge of turnips that his reputation was made. And he began a long and successful career.

To be at peace with oneself, to be thoroughly happy and content, is a condition which does not come automatically. It requires a searching, intense pursuit. But the pursuit will find what it is seeking if it searches along the right road, and seeks peace not selfish satisfactions, but in the satisfaction which comes when we identify ourselves with a higher purpose, and seek our own peace in following the will of God even in the smallest things. Then we will find true peace which comes when we know that what we are doing is right and worthwhile, working for the right master and the right cause. (Ill. of Wilson).

If we can find peace in ourselves, we are then ready to pursue it in our relations with others. This pursuit of peace is almost impossible unless we have a serenity of disposition in ourselves to begin with, for when we feel irritated at ourselves we are all too likely to take it out on those about us. When we get up on the wrong side of bed, fail to overcome the petty annoyances which, like mischievous gremlins, are always ready to upset us, then everyone around us suffers, and instead of pursuing peace we chase it away. But even when we feel serene in our own minds it is not always easy to find peace with others; again a constant endeavor is required, an unceasing pursuit of peace. We often fail to find peace in our relations with others because we suffer from a too exacting sense of equity. We’re willing to meet people half-way, we say, but if they won’t meet us half-way, we won’t have anything to do with them. ‘The trouble is that half-way isn’t quite enough; we must go a little farther so that there is an opportunity for a little overlapping. And how do we know when we have gone just half-way anyhow?’ Jesus told us to go the second mile when we are required to go one. If we are sincerely seeking peace, we must not be afraid to exert ourselves in that direction; we must never stop with the idea that we have
gone half-way and can go no farther. I suppose when a car on the road won’t meet you half-way as you pass and insists upon taking his half of the road out of the middle, it is not fair to be forced off on the shoulder. But in such a situation very few would insist upon their rights, but in the in interests of peace gladly move over. In the same way much friction can be avoided in our everyday affairs if we avoid the many opportunities we find to assert ourselves and have our rights. If we sincerely pursue peace we must forego these chances of friction, and not be side tracked by them, because our vision is fixed upon the higher ideal of the peace of God. The ideal must constantly be kept in mind; it must forever be zealously pursued, for our experience teaches us how easy it is to slip back into bitterness and recrimination when others fail to act as we feel they should. There is no limit to the effort required. When one of Jesus’ disciples asked him if it were sufficient to forgive another seven times, and Jesus answered that he must forgive seventy times seven times, he was emphasizing this very thing. This does not exalt the Casper Milquetoast character which out of sheer timidity submits to all sorts of injustices and outrages, as many have interpreted it. Rather it points to the need for a constant endeavor in the pursuit of peace, a never ceasing attempt to promote peace no matter how difficult the obstacles to it may be. There must never occur a time when peace is forgotten; even when nations war, it is with the intention of making a more stable and enduring peace. The pursuit of peace as the uppermost ideal in mind does not mean that we must compromise with injustice. Rather it is the attitude of mind which always seeks ways of preventing or curing injustice, so that the ideal of peace may be realized. How much more sensible such an attitude is, than the opposite, which ceases all attempts at peacemaking once the hypothetical half-way mark between mutual obligation has been breached. For if we once lay aside the pursuit of peace, there is no chance to find it.

The function of peacemaking is not restricted to certain times or seasons, nor is it restricted to certain individuals only. Everyone who would call himself a Christian should follow the ideal of living at peace with those about him. And the most important sphere where this ideal of peace must be lived is the home, for it is the atmosphere of the home that sets the tone for the country at large. When the homes fail in their influence, the nation inevitably becomes weak. The importance of the home as the center of influence, as the place where Christian ideals must first of all be lived, was emphasized over and over again by Paul. His letters are full of instructions and exhortations to the various members of the family, husbands, wives, children; all designed to promote the peace which is the Christian ideal; and today the need is just as acute. Again this is not a task which fails upon one member of the family - all have an obligation to pursue that peace which is the only healthy atmosphere for a home. The husband must not take out his irritations on the family, - like the old Vermont farmer feeling out of sorts who set out for home at dinner time determined to raise hob if dinner wasn’t ready, and refusing to eat it if it were. Nor should children be allowed to indulge their every fancy and show their temper when crossed. But we cannot expect that they will grow into anything but healthy young savages if parents are not willing to instruct them in the proper values. It is curious and sometimes unfortunate the way children mirror the actions of their parents. Watch any group of children playing house, and you will get an illuminating picture of the kind of homes they come from. Any parent is inevitably an example whether he wants to be or not; the realization of this should fill him with a sense of sober responsibility. Thus the pursuit of peace in the home must be a joint endeavor with the responsibility resting upon the older members to teach the ideals of peace in the young, for if they do not learn there, they are hardly likely to learn elsewhere.
As peace is learned in the home, as its influence pervades more and more homes, its spirit will grow in power in the nation and the world at

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