

## ***Peace Within; Peace Without***

(Based on Psalm 3:1-6 & Matthew 11:28-30)

An Advent Message Offered by Toby Jones on Dec 2, 2018

Advent is a time when we church folk tend to talk an awful lot about peace. Whether it's the "Prince of Peace," "Peace on earth; good will to all," or "sleep in heavenly peace," this five-letter word makes its presence felt during the holidays. Today we're going to begin to explore this incredibly important word from as many different angles and perspectives as possible, and not just because of its importance to that first Advent 2018 years ago; but because I think peace may be the single most important thing to discuss and work on - even beyond the season of Advent. Peace and peacemaking are even more important now than they were when those shepherds and wise men welcomed Jesus to the world back then.

Mahatma Gandhi was known for his many brief but poignant one-liners. One of his best-known quips is "Be the change you'd like to see in the world." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. considered Gandhi his mentor and chief influencer. With deference to Gandhi, Dr. King altered that famous quotation to "Be the *peace* you'd like to see in the world." Whether we're talking about change in general or peace specifically, the quotation reveals one and the same truth; we cannot ask for nor expect something from the world out there, if we haven't first instilled and developed in here - inside ourselves. To me, all discussions of peace must begin with the individual human heart.

It might sound cheesy, but the old song really got it right: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me!" Think about it - what right do I have to want or expect peace on earth when I'm angrily bearing down on the slow driver in front of me, honking my horn and flashing my brights, because she won't accommodate my schedule with her pathetic driving? What right do I have to expect peace on earth, when my words - not to mention the thoughts behind them - are often mean or cutting to someone else? What right do I - or any of us - have to expect peace on earth, when we feel our blood boil and watch our hands clench into fists every time "those liberals on CNN" or "those conservatives on FOX news" report the latest thing President Trump did or said in a way that goes against our particular political perspective?

It seems to me that we've reached a point in the evolution of American society that we're all plugged into this I.V. drip of anger 24

hours a day. Our political leaders and our media conglomerates are now, more than anything else, in the business of exacerbating and intensifying our anger. It's true, isn't it? You tell me – do you feel more angry, more enraged more regularly nowadays than you did 10 or 15 years ago? I know I do, and while it's easy to blame outside forces – like “the media” or “Washington politicians – they can't make us feel anything that we don't already feel.

Buddhist monk Thicke Nhat Hanh believes that the lack of genuine inner peace in all of us is what makes peace in the world seem so impossible. One of his quotations I like reads as follows: “If in our daily lives we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone else will profit from it. This is the most basic kind of peace work,” Hanh says.

I think we can all agree, regardless of political party or religion or nationality, that what Hanh calls “peace work” and others might call “peacemaking” is desperately needed in the world today. But the first step is not getting all the superpowers to sit down together around one big negotiating table. The first step is for every single person on this planet – beginning with you and me – to look in the mirror, to look inside ourselves, and come to grips with the thousand little ways we bring something other than peace into the world each and every day. How do we talk to our children and grandchildren? How do we deal with long lines at the supermarket or on Main Street? How do we behave at a church meeting when the vote doesn't go our way? (Perhaps even more importantly, how do we behave in the kitchen, in the parking lot, or on the telephone in the hours and days following that church meeting where the vote didn't go our way?)

Inner peace is so incredibly important, and yet it is something very few of us truly work on and tend to. I'll admit right here and now that I'm 57 years old. I've been a follower of Jesus for 43 of those years, and ordained minister for over 30 years, and I'm only just beginning my journey toward inner peace.

So how do we get there? What do we have to do to achieve what many have called “enlightenment?” How do we get to a point where the peace in the world we say we long for actually starts taking root in our own lives? Well, it starts with some very necessary UN-plugging. It's not just Fox news and CNN that are pouring a steady stream of gasoline onto the fire of our fear and anger; it's our phones, our Facebook and Twitter feeds, our email inboxes. We've given technology complete and

unlimited reign over our ears and our brains. Is it any wonder their poisons have infected our hearts? Listen, I use technology as much as most people, and I can certainly see and attest to the many good things technology has brought to society and to my life. But bringing me inner-peace is NOT one of them. My phones and gadgets and being plugged into them during all of my waking hours has amped up my anger, multiplied my fears, destroyed my patience, and significantly shortened my fuse. That's one reason I'm so willing to freeze my you-know-what off in a deer blind every year from Nov 15 to Nov 30! I LOVE the solitude. I'm refreshed and enlivened by the silence, by not getting cell service out there. One day in a deer blind in the north woods – even when I don't see a single doe or buck – does more for my inner peace than a decade of having an i-phone in my hip pocket.

Maybe you can't go to a deer blind at this point in your life, but you've got to find a place that is accessible to you, where you can unplug and exert some personal force over your personal electronic devices and the endless 24-hour news cycle.

Another difficult but crucial step in achieving and enhancing your inner peace is to practice silence, to literally impose absolute and total silence on your life for at least 5-10 minutes a day. Now, as I've said before, I'm not talking about merely turning off the external noise, because we both know that silence on the outside doesn't guarantee silence on the inside – up here. It can be perfectly quiet all around us, and we can still manage to “talk” to ourselves by means of our constantly running mind. I'm talking about developing the practice of silence, where we use the silence we can all achieve on the outside of us to develop the ability to actually silence our minds, to make deposits into our silence bank account, so that the silence inside us will, one day, be strong enough to silence our minds whenever and wherever we need it to.

Friends, this silence business is very hard for me; it is not natural at all. But I can honestly say that I have spent more time in silent, mind-emptying meditation in the last few years than ever before, and guess what...? I'm sleeping better. I'm listening better. I'm not reacting or over-reacting to things the way I used to. In essence, silence – the discipline of being absolutely quiet both outside and inside – slows...me... down. One of my favorite new expressions is “I'm going to have to think about that for awhile. I'll get back to you in a day or two.” The faster we go, and the noisier we allow our lives to be, the more

likely we are to be impatient, easily angered, and reactionary. None of those things, by the way, make for peace.

It's so interesting to me that Jesus summarized his rabbinical yoke – his take on what the deepest truth of the ancient scriptures – in the following way:

*“Come to me, all who are weary and over-burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke – my teaching – inside yourself and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. In me you will find rest for your souls.”*

How great is that? How enticing is that? Jesus promises us that following him results in rest for our souls. Some translations have Jesus saying that if we take his yoke upon us, we will find “inner peace.”

The Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thicke Nhat Hanh is one of our greatest living teachers when it comes to finding inner peace. Here are a few of his gems:

*“Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.”*

*“When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help. That's the message he is sending.”*

*“When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce. Yet if we have problems with our friends or family, we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like the lettuce. Blaming has no positive effect at all, nor does trying to persuade using reason and argument. That is my experience. No blame, no reasoning, no argument, just understanding. If you understand, and you show that you understand, you can love, and the situation will change.”*

*“Breathing in, I calm both body and mind. Breathing out, I smile...The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are quiet and attentive, you will see it.”*

Friends, we live in very troubled times. Fear and anger are swirling around us constantly. But this Advent season- if it's about anything – is about peace. Are we contributing to peace? Or are we simply multiplying and intensifying all the anger and fear around us? We cannot expect a peaceful world until each of us has developed peace of heart...and peace of mind. Amen.