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December 9, 2007

No Way

Psalm 72 & Isaiah 11:1-10

On November 14, 2001 the House of Representatives and the United States Senate passed an unprecedented concurrent resolution establishing a 'National Day of Reconciliation', to take place Tuesday, December 4 of that year. The resolution stated "... with the Chaplain of the House of Representatives and the Chaplain of the Senate in attendance --(1) two Houses of the Congress shall assemble...; and (2) during this assembly, the Members of the two Houses may gather to humbly seek the blessings of Providence for forgiveness, reconciliation, unity, and charity for all people of the United States, thereby assisting the Nation to realize its potential as the champion of hope, the vindicator of the defenseless, and the guardian of freedom."

This was a most impressive, worthy, and needed undertaking for our national leaders. The differences within their own bodies between Democrats and Republicans and then between those within each party had not disappeared. And they were only too aware of the dividing walls in our society: religion, politics, race, ethnicity, national origin, divisive issues, and more.

Becky Garrison reminds us in her book, *Red and Blue God, Black and Blue Church*, it did not take long for ideological turf battles to flare up, again. People on both sides of the political spectrum felt the fight for the soul of America had to continue. We know that this fighting continues to this very day, and will on into the future.

Reconciliation, obviously needed now in our country and around the world, has been needed since the beginning of human life on this planet. This is reflected in the writings in the Bible. The prophet Isaiah was only too aware of the things wrong in his country, of the divisions within it that needed to be overcome, and of the divisions that were so evident in other countries and in the realm of nature. He paints a picture portrait of an idealized time when the messianic king will reign. This king will have the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. The king will be just, righteous, fair, and faithful. The spirit of the Lord will abide on this king, equipping him for his royal tasks.

We see this also reflected in the Psalm of the day. In it the king is to be the guarantor of justice for the helpless. The poor and the needy are to be of particular concern of this just king. They are to be able to appeal to the king when there is no other way of gaining justice. The rule of this righteous king is to be universal because he is totally committed to delivering the weak and the poor from violence and oppression.

Isaiah takes into account not only human societies but also the realm of nature. As is found in the notes in one of my bibles: "His reign will be 'paradise regained'; the disorder of nature will be restored to its pristine harmony." Isaiah's picture has the wolf living with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, the cow and the bear grazing with their young lying down together, the lion eating straw like the ox, and infants playing with snakes and not being harmed in any way. And our initial reaction might very well be - No Way!

Edward Hicks was a 19th century painter who lived in Pennsylvania. He also became a Quaker minister. His most famous painting is "The Peaceable Kingdom" - a painting of Isaiah 11:6-9 showing nature restored to peace and harmony. And actually there is not just one painting of the Peaceable Kingdom by Hicks. He did over 100 paintings of this subject from 1816 to 1849. A Carolyn J. Weekley has written, "in his dual roles in life as a Quaker minister and a painter, Hicks taught moral and religious values based on the Isaiah prophecy of peaceful coexistence. His art and ministry together embraced universal concerns and the challenge of attempting to solve them peacefully." - what I would call reconciliation between different factions.

The Peaceable Kingdom are paintings of this basic picture: on the right side there is a small child, standing with a group of animals. Often the child has its arm wrapped around a lion's neck. Nearby stands an ox, and perhaps a bear or a wolf. In the foreground a leopard lies down with a lamb. In many cases there is a group of Quakers on the left side of the painting, standing in the background, usually under a large oak tree. Around some of the earlier versions Hicks painted a border with these words:

The wolf shall with the lambkin dwell in peace,
His grim carnivorous nature then shall cease;
The leopard with the harmless kid lay down,
And not one savage beast be seen to frown;
The lion and the calf shall forward move,
A little child shall lead them in love.
When MAN is moved and led by sov'reign grace,
To seek that state of everlasting PEACE.

Dr. Philip G. Ryken, in writing on Hick's paintings, commented that Hick's series of The Peaceable Kingdom paintings changed over the years, becoming less peaceful themselves. It is as if he had abandoned his hopes for peace on earth; instead reflecting the belief that God's peaceable kingdom cannot be established on this earth. There seems to be a more realistic view of human nature in the progression of the paintings.

With what humanity has gone through from the beginning, and what we have experienced in this country and around the world since 9-11, it is not hard for people to agree with the view that God's peaceable kingdom cannot be established on this earth. And yet I admire those who still try, who seek to bring about reconciliation between opposing individuals and/or groups, who work that there might be some peace and justice in our world.

Growing up I was aware of the divisions between Protestants and Catholics. As children of a Presbyterian minister, my sisters and I were not to even think about dating anyone who was Catholic. Then after Pope John XXIII and the Vatican II Council in the early 1960's, there was begun in this country what was called 'Living Room Dialogues'. These were opportunities for Protestant and Catholics, lay and clergy, to gather in small groups in people's homes for conversation, to get to know one another. My parents participated in one of these.

Their attitudes changed, along with those of countless others across this country. I am not aware of any struggle my parents had when my older sister began dating a Catholic young man in college, fell in love with him, and became engaged to him. And I am not aware of any struggles they had when my sister decided to become Catholic, which she did right before her wedding in 1969.

This past October, a group of 138 Muslim scholars and clerics sent an open letter to Christians around the world, “A Common Word Between Us and You.” It was issued on the eve of Eid al-Fitr, the great Muslim feast that marks the end of Ramadan. In it they wrote:

Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.

The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbor. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbor is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity.

A group of scholars at Yale Divinity School’s Center for Faith and Culture wrote a response, “Loving God and Neighbor Together”. To date, the response has been endorsed by almost 300 Christian theologians and leaders, The response begins by acknowledging that:

...we were deeply encouraged and challenged by the recent historic open letter. ... We receive the open letter as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians world-wide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors.

... ‘Let this common ground’ – the dual common ground of love of God and of neighbor – ‘be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us,’ your courageous letter urges. Indeed, in the generosity with which the letter is written you embody what you call for. We most heartily agree.

An editorial in the October 13 issue of the “Arab News – The Middle East’s Leading English Language Daily” stated:

The letter ... has the potential to create a new spirit of cooperation and harmony between Muslims and Christians to replace the ignorance and suspicion that over the centuries pushed the followers of both faiths ever further apart. Indeed, in the aftermath of 9/11, ignorance and enmity seem to have grown, as bigots on both sides of the divide preach hate and violence to build their own power bases.

The letter also is a clear summons to both Muslims and Christians to spurn the call of those who long for a clash of civilizations. ...

Here is the Ummah, the Muslim community worldwide, speaking out as with one voice, a voice that is mainstream, that believes in peace, that is concerned about the future of all of us on this planet, not just Muslims, and that sees Christians not as historic enemies but as partners, under one God, for peace.

On a local level, the Rev. John Lentz, pastor of the Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian, in Cleveland Heights, OH,

sensed a partisan divide in his church from the bitterly contested 2004 Presidential race, and he wanted to explore why the tension existed. He assembled about a dozen members from different political and social perspectives in December 2004 [something like one of the Living Room Dialogue groups in which my parents participated.]

Early on the conversations were tentative. But as participants began to listen to one another and share their fears, concerns and spiritual beliefs, they found inspiration in the values and the faith they shared. ... When we seek and share God's values our differences can lead to creative dialogue instead of confrontational disagreement.

'Make peace, not fear' is the message of the Forest Hill group. 'Those whom we fear cannot teach us; those we make afraid cannot see God's love in us,' the group declared in its guiding principles. ... Religious people must resist the temptation to build themselves up by tearing others down,

We are only too aware that we cannot bring about this kind reconciliation on our own. We need the help of God. Again, quoting from the words of Dr. Philip G. Ryken as he wrote about Edward Hicks, "... the true basis for peace is this - that through Jesus, God has reconciled 'to God all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Col. 1:20). One day God will make good on God's promise, for when Christ returns, the leopard will lie down with the lamb."

Until that day, we know that God calls us to be about the work of reconciliation, of practicing the love of neighbor, the justice of God, and extending mercy, kindness, and love to one another. We can be encouraged and nourished for these efforts as we eat of the broken bread and share in the cup, reminders of God's reconciling work through Jesus Christ.