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6/18/06

The Architecture of Peace

Ephesians 2:21

On Sunday, September 3, 1939 the dark shadow of war was spreading across Europe. Adolph Hitler was poised to invade Poland. On that day, Westminster's pastor, Walter R. Cremeans, stepped into this pulpit to preach a sermon in which he warned against a destructive force that he called the "war system." He described one of his early encounters with this war mentality in these words:

One of my most humiliating failures in speaking at a public meeting came during the World War of 1914-1918. I was a young and enthusiastic minister just out of university. I thought that people would listen to reason. A young lawyer and I were sent to a country school to address a meeting and urge them to buy Liberty Bonds. I prepared a carefully reasoned address to show them why it was necessary for them to buy bonds in order to finance the war so that America might win. I marshaled my facts in logical array and had what I thought an unanswerable argument. But my address was received without enthusiasm and fell completely flat. I don't think I caused a single person to change his mind. The young lawyer understood the war mind better than I. He threw reason to the winds and appealed to their passions and racial animosities and patriotic loyalties. In a few minutes he had them yelling and shouting. They fairly spat their hatred at the few German people who lived in the community. If they had been at liberty I have no doubt that many would have been glad to do personal violence to some law-abiding citizens who happened to be of German blood. When this man was through, many of them were ready to sign their names to the subscription of Liberty Bonds far in excess of their ability to pay.¹

Cremeans was warning his people not to be enslaved by the war system.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul states that Jesus provides an alternative to the war system. In this letter Paul finds himself caught in the crossfire of the cultural warfare between Jews and Gentiles. Paul recognizes that it begins with the walls of hostility that have kept these groups apart and suspicious of one another. Paul describes Jesus as the one who breaks down the walls of hostility so that a new structure can take its place. This structure is based on love and understanding. It all begins with the love of God in Jesus Christ. The coming together of Jews and Gentiles in the early church was for Paul a sign of God's intention for the world. The place where these former enemies meet becomes the temple of the Lord. It is the place where God lives. That is the architecture of peace.

The proponents of the war system make much of the inevitability of war. But the truth is that we make choices every day about whether to allow ourselves to be defined by the walls of hostility. In my recent studies of the Reformation I was astounded to learn that the long history of warfare between Protestants and Catholics almost didn't happen. One of the 16th century reformers that I had never heard of was an Englishman named Reginald Pole. Pole was a cousin of Henry VIII who refused to endorse Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and consequently spent many years living in exile in Northern Italy. There he led a group of reformers who agreed with Luther and Calvin on many issues but chose not to leave the Catholic Church.

As Europe was breaking apart and creating a new wall of hostility Pole refused to take sides. He had friends in both camps. He believed that the Catholic leadership could accommodate itself to the reformers and keep the church from fracturing. Pole's vision was so convincing that in 1549 he came within one vote of being elected Pope. Just one more vote in the College of Cardinals and our history could have been profoundly different. Pole never did become Pope. Seven years later Pope Paul IV set a very different direction for the church. He believed the only way to deal with Protestants was to kill them. He also made it clear that there was no place in the church for a peacemaker like Reginald Pole. He summoned Pole to Rome to go on trial for heresy, which would almost certainly result in Pole being burned at the stake. The reformer died of the flu before the Pope's order could be carried out. The war system prevailed but not by much.²

The vulnerability of the war system is explored in E. L. Doctorow's novel, *The March*. The novel tells the Civil War story of Sherman's march from Atlanta to the sea and then through the Carolinas. I was particularly interested in the novel because two of my great-grandfathers were part of that history. One made that march as a 19 year old private in the Illinois 31st Regiment. The other was a 17 year old drummer boy in the South Carolina regiment of Wade Hampton. He was taken prisoner by Sherman's troops in Georgia. The novel describes the large number of people who followed Sherman's army. The destruction of plantations, towns, and cities along the way created many refugees. People followed the army looking for food. The army had confiscated more food than it could eat. What the soldiers couldn't consume they passed on to the refugees. There were many recently freed slaves who followed the army because they did not have any place to go.

A central figure in Doctorow's novel is a young woman named Pearl, a former slave, of mixed race. This is her first time to leave the plantation grounds in Georgia where she grew up as a slave. Along the way she receives many unlikely gifts of food, money, and friendship. An elderly former slave who cannot make the march gives her the extravagant gift of two golden eagle coins worth \$20 each. This was his life's savings. In Savannah Pearl forms a most surprising friendship. There she finds Mattie Jameson, the wife of her former owner, who was also Pearl's father. Mattie has lost her husband and her home and has become, in Pearl's words, not quite right in the head. She is following the army and looking for her teenage sons among the Confederate dead. Pearl had always hated this woman but now she comes to know her in a different way. Pearl watches over her former owner and Mattie reciprocates by teaching Pearl to read. The wall of separation between master and slave has come down.

As the army moves into North Carolina, Pearl finds Mattie's sons who are also her half brothers. One is dead and the other is a prisoner. With the help of a soldier friend Pearl arranges to get the young man out of the prison camp. She tells him how to slip away with his mother so that they can make their way back to the ruined plantation. Doctorow describes what happened next in these words:

Pearl took the knotted handkerchief out of her skirt pocket, untied it, and gave the boy one of her precious gold eagles. He looked at it in his hand. This is twenty dollar Fed'ral.

That's right, brudder two. It will keep you awhile. And you will have your whole life to 'member it was me, Pearl, got you your freedom to go home.

The boy turned the eagle over in his hands. That's my Roscoe's coin from a life of nigger work I given you, Pearl said. And nothing you will ever do in your life will be enough to pay us back. I jes want you to know that.

Pearl turned to Mattie and took her hand. Bye-bye, stepma'm. I thank you for the reading lessons. Your boy will take you home.³

The greatest gift that Pearl receives on the march is her introduction to the architecture of peace. She is part of a structure of supportive relationships where former enemies become friends. This is the dwelling place of God.

Endnotes

1. Walter R. Cremeans, "The World's Major Stupidity—War," sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, 3 September 1939.
2. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, pages 214-217, 234-237.
3. E. L. Doctorow, *The March*, pages 290-291.