

Blessed Are The Peacemakers

November 19, 2023

Nate Dirks

I'm a big fan of the line, "Obviously it's not meant to be taken LITERALLY. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products." It's a bit of a reminder to stay humble when we think that we're interpreting the words of Jesus, maybe in a moment like this, with any form of wisdom and discernment.

That being said, 'Blessed are the Cheesemakers' may not be EXACTLY the quote from Jesus that we have recorded. Whether or not you've seen Monty Python's version, you may have heard the original line that they're spoofing. According to Matthew, one of Jesus' disciples, Jesus proclaimed to his early audience, soon into his ministry, "Blessed are the PEACEMAKERS, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9). But for all of the ways that this passage tends to be either ignored, or glossed over, or assumed, our understanding of it may actually not be much further along than what this Monty Python crew take out of it.

If you're anything like me, when you hear this line, the overarching impression is something akin to Jesus giving a condescending pat on the head to people who are too gentle to fend for themselves ("aw, you're sweet"). Or maybe who aren't even really a part of the action of life and are just off to the side, ineffectively instructing the people who are clashing in the thick of it, to "cool it, guys!", unheard and ignored. And Jesus, because he's loving and compassionate, sees these peacemakers and offers them the kindness of naming them and offering them some consolation: "Blessed are the peacemakers".

But there may be more to it than that. The blessing of the peacemakers may actually be consequential enough, and powerful enough, to overwhelm the most frantic values that the world desperately tells us cling to, and instead anchor us, moment by moment in a completely different reality: the immovable, intimate presence of our loving Creator.

In the winter of 1569 in the village of Asperen in the Netherlands, a man named Dirk Willems lowered himself on a rope made out of knotted rags from a prison window. You may have heard this story. Dirk had been thrown in prison for faith convictions that weren't in line with the religious establishment of the day. Others, holding the same convictions as Dirk, had already been executed. But now, Dirk had managed to cleverly escape. He lowered himself the rest of the way down the prison wall and let himself drop to the snowy ground. A thinly frozen pond lay between him and freedom. He edged his way onto the surface, and in a strangely fortunate twist, thanks in part to the meager prison rations he'd been surviving on, the ice held. By now, a guard had spotted Dirk and had pursued him to the edge of the pond, and seeing Dirk managing his way across had followed suite.

Any doubt about his escape was erased when Dirk heard the guard behind him break through the ice over deep water. Flailing in the icy water, the guard cried out for help. None of his fellow guards, who by now had stopped short at the edge of the pond, could reach him. As he struggled, Dirk...paused. And, stopping his own life or death escape, he turned around. Edging his way back across the further compromised ice, Dirk reached out and somehow managed to pull his captor to safety.

What led Dirk Willems to this perspective? For Dirk and his community at that time, there was a specific element of the life of Jesus that they found inescapable and compelling,

woven through EVERY part of Jesus' life, from before his birth to after his resurrection. It was world-changing, by inviting people to change the ways that they perceived THEMSELVES, and EVERYONE around them. It had the power to eliminate fear and uncertainty. To IMMEDIATELY transform enemies into allies. It was Jesus' way of PEACE.

Now Matthew, the first of Jesus' four known biographers, had been a tax collector for Rome, arguably the most powerful empire in history in Jesus' day, ruling over the land of Israel. As Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth and then emergence as an adult, ready to unfold the role that he was born for, he describes in detail Jesus' first proclamation about what he was going to be all about. And people were eager, even DESPERATE, to know. When someone has shown they are destined for POWER, AUTHORITY, GREATNESS, we want to KNOW what they are all about.

For any sports fans out there, a couple of cases in point are Connor Bedard and Victor Wembanyama, hockey and basketball phenoms, respectively. These guys are both teenagers, but because they're both going to have incredible athletic careers, we want to KNOW what they have to say, what they like, what their favourite food is...Connor is from Vancouver and his favourite is sushi. And Wemby is French, but his is BREAKFAST TACOS!

By the time that Jesus has emerged in public, people want to hear what he has to SAY, what he's all about! I mean, the signs are there that he may be the king that the people of Israel have been waiting for. He's from the line of David, Israel's greatest king and the one who was promised to have descendants who would rule forever; he's from Bethlehem, where he was born, where the ruler, the shepherd of God's people would be from; but somehow ALSO from the town of Nazareth, where he was RAISED, where it was prophesied that the eventual savior of the Israelites would be from. Jesus emerges, and begins RALLYING people to himself. He physically manifests the power of HEALING, from town to town to town, and the news spreads, and crowds gather! And when the crowds reach a critical mass Jesus goes up the side of a mountain and turns around. And the crowds are ready to hear whatever he wants to say. WHAT is he going to be all about?

As a newly emerging leader would do, and a would-be ruler should do, he describes what things are going to be looking like now that he is inaugurating a new kingdom. And right off the bat, he names who this new kingdom belongs to now that it won't belong to the Roman oppressors anymore. He says "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" (Matt. 5:3). And Jesus' audience hears this and recognizes themselves in it (one modern translation puts it "you're blessed when you're at the end of your rope" – ok, the Jewish people are oppressed and at the end of their rope), but it's not what they were expecting. Especially as Jesus goes on and names blessing for those who mourn...and are meek...and are merciful. This is not what you anticipate from the new leader who will stand in opposition to the power of Rome. And then Jesus says, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*" (Matt. 5:9).

Jesus' listeners are ready to hear that he's going to defeat their enemies, to achieve peace. Instead, he invites his followers into the ACTION, the EMBODIMENT, OF peace. It's a strange moment, and we shouldn't miss it, because it's a shift that DEFINES the followers of Jesus: the ACTION that the followers of Jesus are called to is PEACEMAKING, and the BLESSING is in THE GIFT OF THAT LIFESTYLE! Our expectations are totally different than this. We expect that the blessing IS the peace that will come, and the ACTION that is required is the VIOLENT –

FRENETIC – EFFORT it will take to get us there. So let me say it again: the ACTION that the followers of Jesus are called to is PEACEMAKING, and the BLESSING is IN the gift of that lifestyle. The gift is that we GET to live lives of PEACEMAKING. If this isn't earthshattering for us, then it's because we've tuned ourselves out from it, or acclimatized ourselves an incorrect version of this invitation.

The lifestyle of peace has a specific term in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. It's the word 'Shalom'. Shalom is difficult to describe, but we all know it to see it or experience it. For example, can you think of those rare moments in your life where everything, ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING, is right with the world? Your mind is calm, your body is relaxed, your circumstances are exactly what resonate most deeply with you? Everything STOPS and you don't need a thing? I hope that you've received that at some point.

St. Augustine, an African bishop from the fourth century, describes Shalom as the ultimate vocation, action, or what some translate as "employment" of followers of Jesus. He calls it living in a "perpetual Sabbath" where we "rest and see, see and love, love and praise". The author Dallas Willard calls it the restoration of all things, utter fullness, where there is: "Repose, yes. But not as quiescence, passivity, eternal fixity. It is, instead, peace as wholeness, as fullness of function, as...restful but unending creativity...that continuously approaches but never [exhausts] the goodness and greatness of the triune personality of God, its source." In the Book of Isaiah, Shalom is described simply as 'quietness and confidence forever' (Isaiah 32:17).

Shalom. Peace. With ourselves, with God, and with everyone and everything.

It's Shalom that is the invitation of Jesus. And it's because it's an invitation to this QUIETNESS AND CONFIDENCE FOREVER that Jesus' kingdom is so utterly REVOLUTIONARY. Because it doesn't depend on any external factors to be in place for anyone to RECEIVE Shalom. Unlike worldly peace it's not for later, for after the violence and dependent on defeating enemies. It's for now, and forever.

And so this changes the way that we interact with ourselves, and with our enemies. For ourselves, Shalom is receiving the gift of seeing ourselves the way that God sees us. This too is a never-ending and beautiful picture of being, for example, loved and precious and honoured in God's sight, as it says in the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 43:4). And because we RECEIVE this in Shalom, OUR Shalom EXTENDS this outward towards others, and we are invited to see others in the same way. At this point, our English term "peacemaking" may seem a bit crass, but THIS IS peacemaking.

For Dirk Willems, his identity of as a PEACEMAKER, as someone who embraced Shalom and wanted to pass it on, had a direct impact on how he VIEWED his enemy, and how he INTERACTED with him, which was completely contrary to the expectations of his culture, or pretty much any culture. Except for the kingdom of heaven that Jesus inaugurates. This perspective is COMPLETELY in line with Jesus' invitation. Dirk was human, and he wasn't perfect, but if he was living in receptivity to the PEACE OF CHRIST, to Shalom, then he couldn't help but experience this man drowning behind him in a different way. Not as an enemy, but as someone loved and precious and honoured in God's sight. And if Dirk was embracing being at peace with himself, with God, and with this fellow image-bearer of God, then his reaction to him makes sense. In THIS kingdom, this kind of sacrifice makes sense.

But what does this mean on a daily basis? Living as PEACEMAKERS, as people embracing Shalom, isn't all waiting around for the opportunity for grand gestures of sacrifice. It's a bit more prosaic than that, and a lot more immediate.

A few weeks back we recited what's been called 'The Prayer of St. Francis'. It's also often called the "Prayer for Peace". There's a line in the prayer that basically says, "**O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek...to be UNDERSTOOD as to UNDERSTAND.**" (**The Prayer of St. Francis**) I don't know how that struck you when we prayed it, or even now, but I find that line so challenging.

When is the last time that you were misunderstood? Not because you were so intelligent that people couldn't even comprehend the lofty things that you knew. But misunderstood because people were wrong about what they thought your intentions were, or what you had ACTUALLY said or done? How did you react to that?

If you're like me, you were incredibly indignant. You wanted to make sure that nobody could have thought that those were your intentions, or that you would have said or done something like that! You were anxious to make sure. Or maybe angry, and started to push back, or maybe questioned THEIR intentions. Maybe it was even with a loved one.

Why would the author of this prayer possibly ASK God to help them seek to understand others rather than to be understood? I think that the answer may be connected to Shalom. The reason that Shalom is an invitation to quietness and confidence is because it does not require us to CLAMOUR to get what we want. To WIN peace through DOMINATION. If we see ourselves the way that God sees us, precious and honoured in God's sight, loved by God (Isaiah 43:4), SECURE in the midst of EVERYTHING and ANYTHING, then we don't need to fight to win peace. As Jesus says, he doesn't give as the world gives, his peace he freely gives. And because it's freely given, I'm not in competition with others for peace. It belongs to all of us. I can be secure in my identity with God, and not be threatened. Not be defensive. Suddenly, instead of being indignant at being misunderstood, I'm secure and at peace regardless.

This eagerness to understand rather than be understood is vital in peacemaking, because it is often OTHERS who will be the ones to reveal to us when there is a lack of peace. It's others who reveal when the peace that I am experiencing is actually a false peace, where it's others - who - have - been - subjugated - for - the - peace - that - I - am - experiencing... That's not peace. That's not Shalom.

This can be true at a personal, relational level. But it can be true at a communal, systemic level as well. Consider the various experiences of different Indigenous Peoples in and around our communities. The land defenders at 1492 Land Back Lane, one hour from here, are sacrificing daily to defend the land that was given to them in a treaty 250 years ago. I'm not experiencing any conflict related to this land defense, and I may barely be aware that it's happening. But people are struggling in ways that are related to me, to my history, to my government, to the structures that help me feel safe but which are causing my neighbours to be unheard and destabilized. That's a lack of Shalom that I need to be made aware of, and to actually listen and respond to. It may be easy enough to imagine that there's peace because I DON'T FEEL oppressed. But it's not a true peace if it's not peace for others.

This same thing happens at a relational level as well, when someone in our life NAMES that there's a lack of peace. That there's hurt. How often when we hear about someone else's hurt that's connected to us do we try to explain it away? Do we either deny any wrongdoing, or

simply name what our intentions actually were and how, because of these intentions, the other person really shouldn't feel hurt? That's ME weekly, if not daily. But the Shalom of Jesus reminds me who I am, and centres me on how Jesus sees me beyond what I've done. And then extends from me to the people around me. The work it takes to receive this perspective is anything but weak and ineffective. This is as powerful a life as there is.

In all of these circumstances, Jesus simply reminds us of a reality that we're invited to receive. That the peace that the world offers is one-sided, and that in that one-sidedness EVERYONE misses out on a peace that's personal, a peace that's offered, and a peace that's SHARED. But for those willing to extend peace, to sacrifice the need to be understood, there's the BLESSING of settling in to the Shalom that God offers instead, quietness and confidence forever in the knowledge of who we are, and whose family we are a part of. As Jesus puts it: ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."*** Jesus is putting everything into perspective for us. The empires of this world can offer national citizenship that put us at odds with those who are not fellow citizens. The kingdom of Jesus offers us a family where everyone is welcome.

Dirk Willems had been unjustly imprisoned, and having won his freedom back he made a choice when he realized that that guard was going to drown. After making his way back across the ice and helping pull the guard out, at the prompting of the guard's superiors Dirk was grabbed by that same guard and once again arrested. A few months later he was executed. For those in his community who recorded his story 450 years ago, there isn't a sense of tragedy about what happened to Dirk. There's a sense of different priority, as they wrote that Dirk died "with great steadfastness...having commended his soul into the hands of God".

Dirk had different options available to him, and what he CHOSE was done in a framework of values that don't necessarily line up well with the cultural values around him, OR with our cultural context five centuries later. But the kingdom that JESUS inaugurated, that he named to all of those followers as he stood on that mountainside, DIDN'T FIT WITH THE WAY THAT THE WORLD OPERATES EITHER. But it was a kingdom that was meant to SLOWLY and STEADILY gain the ground, not of domination, but of Shalom IN lives and BETWEEN lives.

That CHOICE is available to us as well, and for the next few weeks we are going to spend time examining what it means to choose LIVES of PEACEMAKING. Of Shalom. That Shalom is available to you and I right now, and my prayer for all of us is that TODAY we actively receive and actively give the blessing of peacemaking.

Let's pray.