

Title: Jesus' peace means stirring the pot

This is the third Sunday in our season of peace and peacemaking.

According to various definitions, peace can carry several different meanings. Peace can be a state of harmony or the absence of hostility. "Peace" can also be described as a non-violent way of life. "Peace" is used to describe the cessation of violent conflict. It can mean a state of quiet or tranquility— an absence of disturbance or agitation. Peace can also describe a relationship between any people characterized by respect, justice and goodwill. Peace can describe calmness, serenity, and silence. This latter understanding of peace can also pertain to an individual's sense of themselves, as to be "at peace" with one's own mind.

The concept of peace, and its experience, is something that people have been seeking from the earliest human experiences. In many ways, the history of human beings, is a reflection of searching for peace. I suppose this search for peace is spurred because so much of our lived experience is characterized by varying degrees of conflict, both internal and external.

The most common concept of peace has been characterized as the absence of war. In fact, the word peace comes from the Latin word pax, meaning compact, agreement, treaty of peace, or absence of war". This isn't surprising given how much of human history has been plagued by warfare. Modern warfare, especially as experienced in World War One and Two led to such utter devastation that it stands to reason that such institutions such as the United Nations came into existence. The pure physical exhaustion and trauma inflicted by such devastating wars took their toll. The Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO declares that "since wars begin in the minds of people, it is in the minds of people that the defences of peace must be constructed." This sentiment carries the notion of peace as, not just the absence of war but something of the interior experience of people as well.

Lao Tzu, the founder of philosophical Taoism, famously said:

If there is to be peace in the world,  
there must be peace in the nations.  
If there is to be peace in the nations,  
there must be peace in the cities.  
If there is to be peace in the cities,  
there must be peace between neighbors.  
If there is to be peace between neighbors,  
there must be peace in the home.  
If there is to be peace in the home,  
there must be peace in the heart.

Albert Einstein said, "peace is not only an absence of war, but it means or includes the presence of justice, law, order or government in the society." Likewise, Martin Luther King Junior said, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: It is the presence of justice."

Johan Galtung, a Norwegian peace scholar, and viewed as a founder of peace studies, developed the idea of 'negative peace' and 'positive peace' (e.g. Galtung 1996). His use of the term Negative peace refers to the absence of violence. He describes it as negative because something undesirable stopped- a truce took place, or a ceasefire was enacted and the violence (a negative) of war stopped. Positive peace on the other hand, is described as positive because it is characterized by positive content such as a restoration of relationship, the creation of social systems that serve the needs of the whole population and the constructive resolution of conflict.

In this light, his Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, said, "Peace, in the sense of the absence of war is of little value...peace can only last where human rights are respected, where people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free."

The absence of justice means the absence of peace.

It is in this light that I wish to turn my attention to Jesus' calling his disciples to pay attention to the widow giving her offering, everything that she had, as recorded in the gospel of Mark. This passage has long been interpreted as Jesus extolling the virtue of the widow in terms of her sacrificial giving and has often been paired with 2 Corinthians 9:7, "... for God loves a cheerful giver." Just doing a google search of this passage reveals much about how this passage is often handled. From traditional churches through to prosperity gospel churches the lens most often taken is that of encouraging generous giving. In my search I came across a Church growth website which talks about how to integrate the story of the widow's mite into a bigger church growth strategy. Joy Allmond from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association blog states, "What matters to God is our heart toward our money and our possessions. Do we see them as ours, or as His? Regardless of how much we give to Kingdom work—whether it is \$10 or \$10,000—Jesus makes it obvious to us in that He is most pleased with those who had to sacrifice to give that \$10. What is your "mite?" Are you sowing sacrificially from your resources?"

When one reads this passage within its context, one learns that such applications are actually perverse. Biblical scholars such as Addison Wright, Craig Evans and Ched Myers have made a very convincing case that Jesus isn't bringing attention to the widow as a form of praise but rather as a lament.

This particular story of the widow is situated between Jesus' condemnation of religious leaders (Mark 12:38-40) and his prediction of the Temple's demolition (Mark 13). When you read the story in this context, you find verbal connections between the widow's gift to the Temple and Jesus' predictions of judgment. Jesus is not talking about generosity or self-sacrificial love, but rather pointing out how corrupt the religious leaders are.

Here is what Jesus says immediately before the widow's story in Mark 12:41-44:

"Beware of the scribes who like walking around in long robes and respectful greetings in the marketplaces, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour

widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."

We are meant to pick up on the verbal clues between this warning and the story of the widow's offering. Another clue comes into focus when Jesus departs from the Temple predicts the Temple's destruction:

"As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down." – Mark 13:1-2

So rather than an act of praise, Wright, Evans, and Myers convincingly suggest that Jesus is lamenting in response to the widow's offering. It is a form of oppression and exploitation. The tension has been building throughout the previous chapters between Jesus and the religious elite in Jerusalem, and Jesus' witness to the plight of this widow provokes a call to his disciples to bear witness to what the poor are subjected to in this unjust system.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the call to act justly is centered around care for the widow, orphan, and stranger in your midst. Isaiah 1:17 says, "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." Yet, what Jesus is observing is a system that is doing exactly the opposite.

Because matters of Justice are at stake here, Jesus isn't trying to smooth things over to "keep the peace." No, he challenges the establishment at every turn to reveal just how far it has departed from the call, as psalmist says, to "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy." Proverbs 31:8-9

A couple of weeks ago, as part of my work, we hosted an advocacy Symposium entitled "solidarity in a COVID-19 world." Speakers from various parts of the global south came together for our online forum and spoke about what solidarity in a COVID-19 world looks like to them. Indigenous people from the Amazon, Guatemala, and here in Canada. People from South Sudan, South Africa, Lesotho, India and the Philippines, sharing how life in a COVID-19 world has set back many of the world's poor and marginalized. A young woman by the name of Rachel Angok, shared with us how girls' education in places like South Sudan has been severely set back because of the pandemic as many girls and young women have not returned to school due to economic and social pressures to work or get married.

One of the speakers I invited was Sister Katleho, from Lesotho in Southern Africa. I share what she has to say with you:

"The pandemic teaches us that we need each other, that we are all responsible for a healed world. We can choose to continue excluding developing countries or we can choose to include them. I believe it is about time developed countries realized that whatever major

decisions they make impact the poor, impact us. Can we hear the loud cry of the poor now? The poor are not just there to receive left over vaccines when wealthy countries have excess in storage.... My major concern is that some rich countries are already considering booster shots for their immunocompromised populations yet the majority of us have not been vaccinated. We continue to lose our loved ones in the pandemic. Introducing Covid-19 booster shots when vast populations in other parts of the world have not been vaccinated is a failure in solidarity with the poor. If rich countries get booster shots, it will worsen Africa's vaccine wait. Even though some scientists believe that a booster shot could further protect already vaccinated populations, booster shots should be a secondary concern when some countries have not received the basic vaccination."

When I hear Sister Katleho and the many other speakers from this conference, I can imagine Jesus saying to me, "come here Pieter, see these people sharing their stories. I lament with them. As I take time to pay attention in my interior being, I can hear God's voice of lament in the voices of the poor.

Peace requires Solidarity and solidarity requires us to address matters of justice, to stir the pot and challenge unjust structures.

I encourage you to call upon your elected officials to ensure that Canada:

- fulfills and strengthens existing pledges to COVAX, with public reporting on its progress.
- Improves its delivery schedules through COVAX and African Union's African Vaccine Acquisition Trust (AVAT) so that vaccines arrive where they are needed before they expire.
- Reduce barriers to the production and export of vaccines by taking steps at the World Trade Organization to ensure that the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) Agreement do not take priority over human life.

Jesus calls us to lament with him and to act for justice, to act for peace, even if it means stirring the pot.

Sources:

Addison Wright's "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament? – A Matter of Context".

(Johan Galtung, —Violence, Peace, and Peace Research||, Essays on Peace: Paradigms for Global Order, ed. Michael Salla, Walter Tonetto & Enrique and Martinez, (Central Queensland University press,1995), p. 1.)

<https://www.afro.who.int/news/less-10-african-countries-hit-key-covid-19-vaccination-goal>