

## Exploring Progressive Christianity 6

August 25, 2024

Rev. Anna Hubbard

In my preparation for this week, in thinking about justice and peace for all and for all the earth I kept coming back to Jesus' refrain of – "you have heard it said... but I say to you". We find these words as a litany in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. The most notable of this refrain is in vs 28 – when Jesus says, "You have heard it said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you do not resist an evil doer. You have heard it said love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. For the same God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous and the same sun to rise and set on the evil and the good."

You see, in these texts in Matthew Jesus is trying to get the disciples, and the authorities, to see the world as not yet complete. A world with rules that are different than what exist for them in the world around them. A world where everyone prospers, and everyone is included. A world where there is enough for everyone. A world where everyone has value. Karoline Lewis preaching chair at Luther Seminary tells us that, Jesus's words, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you" is a call to fulfill righteousness. *Fulfill* is an important word here and for Matthew's Jesus in general. Synonyms include "bring to completion or reality." "Achieve or realize." "Bring to fruition." "Follow through." "Bring about." "Make happen." "Live up to." "You have heard it said ... but I say to you" then poses the question we need to ask ourselves and those whom we accompany on the journey for justice and peace—are we fulfilling righteousness? Are we fulfilling justice? Or does our doing stop short, accepting adequacy all too quickly? Do we tend to defer to the norm because the norm is easier and expedient? Jesus' antitheses might sound antagonistic or like a "do better" moral motivational mantra. But Lewis argues that's the easy way out of his true ask—to hunger for righteousness, to thirst for justice, and then to exceed the norm (5:20). And this friends, has had me really thinking about what this whole justice and peace thing looks like in the here and now.

Peace, feels like is a lofty goal and a tricky thing to come by. There are so many things in the world that I would love to set right. So many systems that need up ended. So many people who could benefit from equal rights, or less war. So many resources that could be shared instead of hoarded. But all those problems and issues seem bigger than myself or my power to bring about change to them. So, what does it look like for you and me to pursue and work for peace and justice? What does it look like for DCC, to seek peace and justice? I am not sure we can answer any of these questions today with a plan of action, but my hope is that the questions might lead us

down a path of dreaming and reimagining what the world might look like. We might have eyes like Jesus to see the kingdom of God already at hand.

There is a podcast that I love to listen to called The Moth. It is a non-profit podcast that celebrates the commonality and diversity of human experience through the art and craft of true, personal storytelling. There is a particular story that has always stuck with me about a grocery store experience that immediately came to mind when I started thinking about the ways we can bring about peace in small ways and what humanity is capable of when it comes to building connection in unlikely places.

The storyteller of this story is Bryan Kett. He begins by telling the audience about how he moved to LA from Chicago on a whim but found himself really, really lonely. He just didn't have a lot of human connection in his day to day, he worked from home and he hadn't really had the opportunity to build community and so on the day that he received a letter from his landlord to renew his lease, he was hesitant and felt like what he really needed was a sign that he was supposed to stay in Los Angeles. So, he set off to work at a coffee shop where he tried to engage the barista by asking the barista what pastry was his favorite and all he received back was this blank stare. So, he got a croissant, and he sat down and he asked the lady next to him to share her electrical outlet and she looked at him like he'd asked for a kidney. That was all it took, he decided there in the coffee shop he was going to pack up and go back to Chicago. He spent the rest of the day working with his head down in silence. At the end of the day, he remembered he was out of shower soap, so he headed to the local Albertson's grocery store to pick some up. Albertson's, he said was slammed. It was as if everyone from the community was there. It took him forever to get to the soap, and on a whim decided to also grab some chocolate milk. When he finally gets up to the checkout line, he sets his chocolate milk and his soap on the conveyer belt and there is a big haired woman in front of him who turns around and scoffs at him. He claims he understood. If you buy one item it's an errand, two items – everyone assumes you are going to use the items together – so he understood what she must be thinking but chose to ignore her and her look. He simply added it to the days signs he should move, this lady who surely was picturing him in the shower with his chocolate milk.

But about that time, he felt a light tap on his shoulder. He recalls that he turned to see the oldest lady in all of LA. He could not make out what she was saying as she unloaded vegetables, he had no idea even existed onto the conveyer belt. And so, as you do, he just assumed she was a crazy person. Brian noticed a businessman behind her and he tried to connect with him to be like "this lady right?" but he just gave him the ol' barista treatment. And so he decided. You know what I have wanted engagement all day and beggars can't be choosers, so he says, "excuse me ma'am?" and what he found out she was saying was, "how do you cook the dinosaurs?" Only she had a thick accent, so it was cook. "How do you cook the dinosaurs? If my grandchildren do not want I do not want to waste." And from her cart she pulled out a small plush stegosaurus and small plush trex and said "so..how do you cook?" And he realized in that moment that she wasn't crazy. In fact, she was the most adorable

woman in all of LA. So he said, “you know what ma’am normally I broil my brontosaurus.” And the woman he said let out the best laugh he ever heard it sounded like clucking. And that was when it happened.

The big haired woman leaned in and said, “Last week velociraptor was on special. It was delicious.” And the businessman got in on it and said, “you know I fry my dinosaur even though I know it isn’t good for me.” And the four of them are just in this moment of pure joy laughing and its lovely. And then the cashier cleared his throat and the big haired lady had to pay so they all snapped to attention. Their fun was over – but then the cashier leaned in and said, “You know, Albertson’s has the tastiest brand of dinosaur, because the Albertson’s brand of dinosaur comes with its own stuffing.” So everyone is smiling and laughing as everyone checks out and as he left Braian looked to the old woman and he said, “Ma’am I hope you enjoy your dinosaur even if your grandchildren don’t.” And he left the store feeling lighter and feeling a part of something larger. And so, Brain went home and he took a shower and afterwards, he had a glass of chocolate milk and he signed his lease. Because the human connection is everything. It’s all around us, and its in these small moments and its in the overcrowded grocery store, and if there had been imagination and presence on the part of the barista, it had the power and capacity to exist in the coffee shop too. And that connection friends, that connection is what I believe leads all of us to the ways of peace and justice.

I hope you don’t hear this as me taking the safe way to talk about peace and justice in Rev. Becker’s absence this week. Oh that’s fun, Anna told a cute little story about cooking dinosaurs. I hope you have heard some of my other sermons and know that there is a prophetic word that needs to be heard and that I have preached about marches and change, and grass root movements, and fighting the uphill fights that exists in our nation and world when we try make the world a more just place for all. I know we are called to that work. But I also know you, and I know so many of us are already in the trenches doing that work. Don’t get it twisted, creating peace and justice in the world is the work I believe we are called to. It is the heavy lifting that creates the kindom of God in the here and now in sweeping ways that enact change and transforms multiple lives. But there is also this, our human connection is how we build the bridges it takes to do that heavy lifting.

What Jesus is doing in Matthew chapter 5 is the work of engaging imaginations and hearts to see their world in a new way. And sometimes, before we can do the work to create that new world, we need these moments of connection to believe in the world and in each other in the first place. Human connection is the beginning to peace because through connection we hear stories of experiences that are different from our own. It was on a trip to the border that I understood why we needed immigration reform as I met migrant after migrant who had the same story of leaving their homes for something safer or something more promising.

Human connection is why my 16 year old barely Christian or catholic niece as her parents might have hoped, knows about the Muslim faith tradition of Ramadan. She has a friend named Maha who is Muslim and so to be a good friend she knows when to invite her to lunch and when an offer to chick fil a is unkind. Beyond that, she

knows just when they break fast because that's when her and her friends try to go to dinner together or get up before sun up to enjoy breakfast with her on a school day.

Human connection is why Rev. Becker has a heart for the unhoused. Because she took the time to hangout at a camp in Illinois and made friends with the people who lived there.

Human connection is how our hearts have been changed on so many issues. Because we have heard the stories of women, and sick friends, and neighbors suffering from food insecurity, and neighbors who can't afford health care, and our black brothers and sisters, and queer family members, and the list goes on and on. Our hearts aren't changed for the work of peace because I quoted Matthew 5 and the vision Jesus casts. Our hearts are changed because of the people we have known and loved and who need a world that looks different than the one we live in now. These words from Matthew they bolster the stories and the people we know by helping us to continue to imagine that the world our neighbors and friends need IS possible. Mother Teresa once said, **"if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other..."** Our human connection and story sharing enable us to remember that we belong to one another.

You see, the world might have been telling Brian that LA was cold and rigid and lonely..and that little old lady said..."but I say to you." Our connections is how we are able to see the ways Jesus might be saying, "I say to you." in the places that justice and righteousness are hard to find.

When the world says women don't have power or voice, much less belong in a pulpit..., "but I say to you."

When the church has abandoned people based on their marital status, they love, their income, or their perceived sinfulness.."but I say to you"

When an entire nation continues to be fine or ignore that there is a school to prison pipeline, "but I say to you."

When the world says that violence is the way to peace, "but I say to you".

When we can't seem to get a solution to schoolchildren having access to guns, "but I say to you"

When some of us still think we must all have faith that looks the same to achieve peace, "but I say to you"

When our neighbors continue to struggle with food insecurity and the world continues to operate from a scarcity model rather than an abundance model, "but I say to you"

When we want to take our toys and go home, "but I say to you"

When we have decided that those on the other side of whatever side it is we are on have no worth or value anymore – "but I say to you"

When the world says that individualism and everyone out for their own is the way forward, "but I say to you."

You see, this response, "But I say to you" casts the net of God's love wider than we would typically. "But I say to you" presses us to extend the arc of righteousness beyond the reasonable. If we want to end this war torn violent madness in which we live, we can't do it by working for ourselves. We can't just fortify our own house. If we

want to know peace, we won't find it without working for it for other people too. *There is no private shalom.*

Well, I don't know about you, but it is all too easy for me to decide I don't belong to SOME people. If I am honest, there are more people than I would like to admit that I would rather not belong to. But that isn't how it works. So, maybe the first steps of peace might be figuring out in what ways I belong to the people I would rather not. Maybe it means hearing the stories of the people I would rather not belong to. It might mean finding where those people and myself might have points of connection.

Like I said at the beginning, the enormity of world peace can feel overwhelming. The Talmud states, Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

Every step we take toward peace builds on all the other steps others have taken before us. Every time we open ourselves up to hear another person's truth and be changed by it we are inviting peace into our hearts and into the world. "But I say to you" names the truths of the injustices all around us and invites us to hope nonetheless. If we are going to be people who seek peace and justice we have to have the hope it takes to do that. And we must be able to reimagine anew the bridges it will take to get us there. So let's build the kingdom of God by bridging the gaps between us. Let's focus on the micro scale, with relationship building and community building. It is from there the larger things we do are born.

Dear ones, let's not lose our imaginations for the potential that exists in the world and in each other for peace and justice. Let's be on the lookout for the ways peace is already being planted and sown. Let's pay attention to the places that peace is already budding and blooming. And let's work to build a more just and more loving world TOGETHER through finding connection with one another. May it be so. Amen.

Amen.