

The Peace and Justice Mantra.

Part II

Colleagues,

Herewith some stocking-stuffers I received in response to last week's posting [ThTh 339] on the "Peace and Justice Mantra."

1. Several responses were not happy with ThTh 339. Here's one sample: Now let's get this straight, Ed, You seem to be saying in Thursday Theology #399 that any appeal to the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus in the struggle for worldly justice and peace is a waste of time, off base, biblically unacceptable. The End is near ("Apocalypse Now"). "God-relations" is exclusively where it's at for the Church. Forget everything else. Let's pack our bags and get ready to move heavenward. Right? I, too, remember when such concern for such justice and peace appeared rarely if at all in prayers and sermons. Blissfully, there was hardly any intersection at all between what was going on in the Church and the world around us.

Do you really mean that the spheres of the right and the left hands of God aren't connected at all in Luther's metaphor, i.e., are disembodied ... that they don't even come close to bumping into each other, ever? Hmm ... maybe that's what allowed him to stomp so brutally on the peasants and the Jews? But, Luther's theological construct is not infallible (don't get me wrong, it's been an important image for me over the years) and has its limitations especially if interpreted as a rigid system. Or, Jerry Falwell's theology may be more Lutheran than I thought (like the witness of Jesus and, e.g., supporting

Bush and the war in Iraq having absolutely nothing to do with each other)!

I'm hardly naive about the historic realization of worldly peace and justice before and since the Cross – including what's going on now – but to bug out now on the struggle and distance Jesus absolutely from it all is profoundly contradictory to me. No question God's decisive action in Christ is primary and preliminary and, yeah, justice and peace is often a superficial, popular, even meaningless, mantra. But your analysis seems to summarily dismiss the less-than-ultimate evidence of justice and peace that has occurred over the centuries because of the countless faithful who have been compelled/inspired/called by the sphere of the right to participate passionately in that of the left, whether The End is near or far off.

My response was:

Colleague: It seems that we are on different wave lengths, so that my stuff comes to your receiving set as static and when I read your response, I say: What you apparently heard is not the program I transmitted. I don't know where to start with a reply. One thing seems clear to me: e-mail is not the medium to do so. Even so, Peace and Joy!

2. Others thought otherwise about the posting.

A. I appreciated your take on Peace and Justice as the PC version of Christianity. My own, cynical take on how that began and grew to be the chic point of being a Christian is that it's a version of religion people can join in even if they're too embarrassed to have anything to do with Jesus, the cross, and forgiveness—or even God for that matter. All one needs is the conviction that my politics are better than this or that “oppressor's” politics. It's

liberation theology for dummies, or something like that. Everyone is for peace and justice, so long as they're on our terms. Well, all I meant to do was say thanks, but then I went off on a mini-rant.

B. [Obviously from Hawaii] Aloha Ed, I just finished reading posting #339. As we say here, Mahalo nui loa (thank you very much or hugely) for some focus. As I was thinking about John's question for this Sunday's Gospel, "Are you the one or should we look for another?", your thoughts are helpful as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the great forgiveness-bringer. Aloha ke Akua me pili o'e (The Love of God be with you).

C. Thanks for your impeachment of peace and justice. (Typically we get one OR the other: the conquerors THEREAFTER want peace.) Isn't it a new incarnation of 19th century FOGBOM liberalism ("Fatherhood of God, Brotherhood of Man"). Thanks especially for holding up the forgiveness business as primary.

It is true, though, isn't it, that the Gospel does factually increase peace and justice in the world, if only in an ancillary way? Think of master and slave side by side at the Table (Philemon) or husbands loving their wives in a Gospelly way (As Christ loved the church). Of course you are right that this is left-hand stuff, but as your excellent Care and Redemption piece put it, the right hand at least gives strength to the left. Yes?

3. This came from a lay theologian and continuing student in the Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis. Seems to me that his questions are on target. To them I think I can say something. [My brackets inserted into his text pinpoint my responses.] Dear Ed:

I read with much interest your latest ThTh posting on the

'peace and justice' mantra. I too have been puzzled and sometimes troubled by this rather new emphasis in our churches. And my sons both went to Catholic high schools and were exposed to it there as well; it seems to be a very popular notion in current Roman Catholic teaching. [1]

But I have a question. Last Sunday, we forewent the usual third-Sunday-in-Advent chanting of the Magnificat. Instead, we sang the alternative, verses from Psalm 146. We sang the following verses:

*[The LORD] gives justice to those who are oppressed,
and food to those who hunger.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
The LORD opens the eyes of the blind;
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
The LORD loves the righteous; the LORD cares for the
stranger;
He sustains the orphan and widow...*

And of course the Psalms and the prophets both include words similar to these. So does the apostle James (see James 1:27). How does God's apparent concern with justice for the oppressed, as expressed in these and other similar verses, fit in with Jesus' ministry? Or does it? [2] Is this an expression of God's 'left-hand' dealings with His people that is not directly related to His 'right-hand' work of redemption through Christ? [3] Should we as God's people proclaim the validity of this left-hand work? If so, how? [4] And if so, how do we avoid falling into the 'ministry of peace and justice' trap that you discussed? [5] Just curious.

My response:

[1] That's no surprise. The fundamental axiom of classic RC theology makes this a natural. "Grace does not diminish nature, but brings it to perfection." Any good action people do that improves creation's welfare, is grace (God's grace) in action. Jesus is the grand finale of God's history of gracious action. God's supernova of God's long history, even from before creation, of gracious goodness. But – and here's the kicker–what God is doing in Christ is not qualitatively different from all God's other good and gracious actions. Christ is on the same grace-wavelength of all that God has been doing since the beginning. So "peace and justice" work for the wellness of creation comes from the same divine chemistry as Christ's own work does.

Here's where the Augsburg Reformers said: Not so. First of all the Bible says: Not so. What God was doing in Christ is NOT part and parcel of what God's been doing all along—even God's unceasing good things. [And, of course, it surely is radically different from the critical stuff God does with sinners when he pays them their "wages." God's pay-off death-sentence for sinners could never really fit within the RC axiom. With that axiom God is—by definition—always gracious to sinners (and not just in Christ). So the tough stuff about God's law always accusing us has to get "re-interpreted" in classic RC theology.].

The reformers read the NT saying that God's grace in Christ was something BRAND NEW. In Matthew's language God's forgiving sinners by the sacrifice of his own son. NEVER happened before. In Luke's language God's seeking and saving the lost. NEVER happened before. In John's language, God's offering the "bread of life" that even Moses (God's previous superstar) didn't offer, couldn't

offer. NEVER happened before. In Paul's prose God's reconciling sinners to himself and not "counting trespasses," as God always otherwise does, even with all the grace-goodies God has been showering on the planet since time immemorial. NEVER happened before.

That's why Luther in his preface to the Letter to the Romans says: To understand Romans you must see that Paul distinguishes between God's grace and God's gifts. God showers gifts all over the place. Call them God's peace and justice stocking stuffers. Metaphorically speaking, from his left hand. Only in Christ, ONLY in Christ, is God gracious to sinners so that death does not have the last word for them. God's right-hand work is qualitatively different from that of his left, although that in no way pooh-poohs the left stuff or the left-hand human agents through whom God does it. It simply says: Curing leprosy is one thing; undoing a sinner's death-sentence is something else. Jesus majors in the latter, at best he minors in the former.

Every NT writer hypes Jesus' major. They all agree with Jesus' last words in John's passion narrative about that work: "It IS finished." None of them ever say anything like that about the left-hand stuff Jesus did. No NT writer ever says that with Jesus' departure at Ascension, the world's "peace and justice" situation was palpably improved. Why don't they? Seems to me that the NT's answer is that the Kingdom of God which came with Jesus was healing the sinner's God-problem. God uses other agents for the left-hand stuff. Jesus has left-hand skills too. But that is not why the Father sent him.

To put Christ on the same production line with all of God's left-hand gifts -"it's all the same grace"- can only

diminish Christ—and lead to the saddest line in Paul’s Galatians epistle (possibly all of his letters): “Christ died in vain.”

[2] Psalm 146 for all the good stuff it ascribes to God does not describe the unique Good Stuff that came with Christ. So by definition it’s all left-hand. But remember, it’s GOD’S left hand. And not to be pooh-poohed. Peace and Justice is God’s agenda. It preserves the endangered world. But does anyone get their sins forgiven from the benefits cited in the Psalm? Does any God-distruster become a God-truster? Does anyone, did anyone, “repent and believe God’s Good News,” upon receiving those good-gifts? That’s the redemption question.

I’ve been reading Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel these days for Advent meditation. These three regularly talk like that Psalm does, and then always add on: And still you deserted me for other gods! If the goodies cited in Psalm 146 could have done the job, then Christ would have been unnecessary. But patently they did not. “It was NOT finished.” Christ did not die in vain.

Sample. From the lectionary in the Year of Luke just ended: 10 guys got their leprosy-problem cured (God’s left hand therapy). Only one of the ten got his God-problem healed (right hand therapy). The end situation of all ten was NOT the same. The end product for the 9 and of the one were radically different. Ten got God’s “care” ministry. Only one wound up with “redemption.”

[3] Jesus doing left-hand stuff. In last Sunday’s Gospel (Matt. 11) Jesus gives John’s disciples a laundry list of the signals that the Messiah has arrived—and who the one doing that stuff is.

[John the evangelist's gospel will later have to explain what the synoptics did not always clarify, to wit, what the "sign" quality of these acts of left-hand goodness are—and what they are not. Once again, John 6 is the paradigm for clarifying what "eating bread in the wilderness" (a left-hand blessing)—whether from Jesus or from Moses—does and doesn't do. If you miss the "sign" quality of such feeding, Jesus says, you wind up no better than you were before. Sure, you have a full tummy for a while. Which is not at all bad when you have an empty tummy. Good stuff, gift from God. But for those who don't follow through on the "sign" in the lunch-box-bread to ingest THE bread of life (the right-hand offer), nothing in their God-box has changed. Wherever "nothing in the God-box changes," the Kingdom has not yet come to such folks.]

It may appear at first reading of last Sunday's Gospel that the "preaching of the Good News" is just another in the laundry list and that all of the items mentioned are of the same ilk. But all of those listed goodies, even that right-hand "goodie" offer of Good News, fail to be Kingdom-productive if they do not elicit the right-hand blessedness signalled in v. 6. Namely, not being offended by Jesus, but trusting him and following. Call it "faith." Wherever faith hasn't happened, Jesus' messianic mission hasn't yet arrived. His kingdom—God's kingdom—has NOT (yet) come. That's the dipstick for checking whether someone got in under God's mercy management Kingdom or not: do they call Jesus Lord and follow him, or don't they? If yes, then they're in. If not, then not yet. [When Luther says that about "thy Kingdom come" in his two catechisms, he's just reporting (so he claims) what the NT says. If he's mistaken, then he'll have to be refuted by

scripture. Which he also often said.]

[4] Not just preach it, but do it. And when preaching it (you're a Lutheran—you guessed it) make the proper distinctions. As in the offertory collect often pray on Sundays: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made." Care and redemption are not identical. One preserves creation, the other brings it back home to its God and father. Tell folks that both are godly works, both assigned to God's human workers. Folks not trusting Christ are nevertheless created by God to be able to do p&j stuff and have the "law within their heart" to activate them to do so. Folks who trust Christ have the other agenda added on to their first left-hand assignment from God. Their freedom in Christ frees them up to be even more dedicated—and risk-taking—in the vast work of caring and preserving the world.

[5] No "law" will guarantee that we won't fall into such traps. "The mind of Christ" is one NT anchor for not getting trapped. A ThTh colleague recently told me that he now translates that as "the evangelical imagination." Sounds good to me—imaging everything from the Gospel. Another one of Luther's suggestions is: "the conversation and consolation of Christian folks talking with each other." Sounds like a good venue for shop-talking that evangelical imagination.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder