

The Future of Equality, Peace, and Neighborliness

^{NRS} **Mark 9:33** Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mar 9:33 NRS)

^{NRS} **Acts 1:27-28, 34-35** ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; ²⁸ and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

^{NRS} **Gal 3:26-28** ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

^{NRS} **Col 3:9-11** ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

^{NRS} **Luke 18:10-14** ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

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Dr. Ramsey told me that he was inviting guest ministers to come preach during February and that this was related to Black History month. I thought that would be interesting. Then he asked me to be one of the preachers and told me that the theme of this series was *The Future of Equality, Peace, and Neighborliness*. Because Dr. Ramsey is my friend, I said "yes" – and I kept my qualms to myself.

My first reservation was that I noticed that I'm not African-American. Of course, in today's highly diverse American culture, it's difficult to be completely sure of the ethnicity of all of your contributing ancestors. Some Germans who share my last name are Jewish, but I have no idea if I'm kin to them. I am, like our president, a mutt, and I'm comfortable with that. Never-the-less, I wasn't raised in the African-American culture. Perhaps it's helpful that some of my heroes are Black.

My other reservation was the theme for this series. My crystal ball hasn't been delivered yet, so I'm fairly fuzzy on predicting the future, especially on such broad subjects as equality, peace, and neighborliness. It might be easier to predict the name of the fiancé that my granddaughter hasn't met yet. There are some things I'm pretty sure about, however.

I have three patents and I think that indicates a bit of creativity and hard work. But one of my heroes received 72 patents during his lifetime. He found ways to lubricate locomotive engines while they were moving. Because of their massive weight and tremendous power, steam engines are especially hard to lubricate. But Elijah McCoy solved the problems involved. Other people imitated McCoy's designs. However, his lubricators were far superior to the imitations and many purchasing agents insisted on "the real McCoy" when they ordered equipment. This is all pretty inspiring when you know that Elijah McCoy was the son of a slave couple who escaped to Canada in the 1830s. Elijah went to Scotland when he was sixteen and studied mechanical engineering. After the Civil War, he moved to the United States. Despite his minority status and being an immigrant, he achieved great things.

In the decades since Elijah McCoy died in 1929, I have seen black and white water fountains and separate restrooms disappear. Schools, housing, churches, and businesses have become more diverse. Today we find African-Americans succeeding in sports, beloved as actors and members of the entertainment industry, respected as newscasters and military leaders, and seated in the oval office of the White House. Changes such as this give me hope for the future of racial equality.

But we aren't there yet. The Aryan Nation still attracts followers. Jews are still maligned. There is great mistrust of people of Hispanic or Middle Eastern origin. When my daughter married a Latino, some people thought it was an issue and asked me how I felt about it. On top of ethnic inequality, economic inequality is increasing. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, and that will have consequences if it isn't changed. History is filled with examples of how the poor eventually reach a point of desperation and revolt. Economic repression was one of the core causes of the American Revolution, the French revolution, the Bolshevik revolution, the struggle for independence in India, and the rebellion in Egypt.

The truth is, it's very hard to separate racial prejudice, religious bias, class distinctions, and economic inequity. Racial prejudice, religious bias, and class distinctions invariably provide the rationale and the means for economic inequity. People do not like to be looked down on, they hate to have their faith demeaned, and they intensely dislike being treated like they're worth less than other people, but they erupt and rebel when they become desperately poor.

It seems like people have always wanted to feel that they were better than someone else. Jesus told a story that began, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.' I'm so glad that I'm better than him! It seems like we don't want equality - if we think we can be better than someone else. While there have been encouraging changes in some areas, it also appears that we keep finding ways to be unequal.

Then there's the subject of peace. For the moment, let's limit the topic of peace to the realm of war and the absence of war. All through history we haven't had a very good record on peace. One war follows another. Jesus said that we would, ^{NRS} **Mark 13:7** "... hear of wars and rumors of wars." Unconsciously, we think of war as not only inevitable, but also the natural way things are. In my lifetime, in this country alone, we've been in World War II, the Korean War, Viet Nam, conflict in Granada, the Balkan conflicts, the Gulf war, Afghanistan and Iraq. That's a little more than one conflict every ten years. Everyone says they want peace, even politicians and military leaders. Benjamin Franklin said, "There never was a good war or a bad peace." A famous Israeli general, Moshe Dayan, said, "If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies." Nonetheless, war is so frequent that it's commonplace.

There are occasional glimmers of hope. For two-and-a-half weeks we watched a rebellion in Egypt. After thirty years of living under a dictator, of forceful suppression under "emergency law," of torture and the ignoring of civil rights, the people of Egypt flooded the streets with mass demonstrations. The demonstrations were almost entirely peaceful except for violence inflicted on the demonstrators. Much was made of the power of Facebook and twitter. The news reported less about the posters that spread through email, posters with the picture and words of one man, a man who said, "In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence." The words came from half a world away and three decades in the past, and from the lips of a Christian minister, but spread these past few weeks in a predominantly Muslim nation. In a long chain of influence, an Egyptian uprising was influenced by an American minister who was influenced by the Indian Gandhi who found wisdom and inspiration in the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus Christ.

The third topic is neighborliness. I get pretty discouraged about this. Houses are no longer built with front porches where you can sit with a glass of sweet tea and speak to your neighbors as they walk by. Of course, those neighbors don't walk by much anymore. They're either in their car, driving by with the windows up and the air conditioning going, or they're jogging by and can't break their exercise

routine. It seems like the very act of sitting and visiting is about to become a lost art. Our lives are so busy with hectic schedules that there doesn't seem to be enough time to get everything done, much less sit and just pass the time together. It's easy to blame a lot of this on our addiction to television, video games, and the internet. We complain that we don't even know who our neighbors are next door, much less have any experience of knowing their history, their family, their joys or their pain.

Here again, one of my heroes offers a positive example and a bit of hope. Oseola McCarty dropped out of school to help in the family laundry business. We aren't talking about a commercial laundry and cleaners. No, the family business was "taking in laundry." Over the decades of hard work and reading her Bible until it was falling apart, Oseola McCarty became a wise woman. She said, "Building community is not that hard. It just takes ordinary friendliness. The woman who took me to the doctor when my arthritis got bad is a checkout person at my grocery store. When she helped me with my groceries all those years, we spoke. I didn't stand there looking at the floor or the ceiling. We became acquainted."¹

Miss McCarty knew a thing or two about neighborliness. She lived simply, worked long, hard hours six days a week, and cared for a disabled aunt for many years until her aunt died. When Oseola McCarty was forced to retire because of bad arthritis, she wanted to do something for others. She knew that Jesus taught that even strangers are our neighbors, so this humble and wise wash woman gave \$ 150,000 to set up a scholarship fund at a local college. She gave away most of her life savings so that strangers could get an education.

The past and the present condition of equality, peace, and neighborliness is a mixed bag – sometimes discouraging and fearful, sometimes offering bright shafts of God's light into our lives. The raw, ugly truth is this. We have a terrible record on equality, peace, and neighborliness. We find one reason after another to discriminate and declare that we aren't equal. We use race and have coined highly negative nicknames for Africans, Asians, Arabs, Mexicans, Frenchmen, Italians, and Germans. We use geography and talk of red necks in the South, nuts and flakes in California, damn Yankees in the North. All through history we've tried to achieve peace by killing people, burning crops and businesses, and creating orphans. We have sacrificed neighborliness on the altar of efficiency and winning. Those who disagree with us are characterized as stupid at best, but more likely as demented and demonic. We've substituted email and a 144 character twitter message for a hug and a sympathetic ear.

So what is the future of equality, peace, and neighborliness? Dr. King was a good theologian. He knew about the providence of God, that is, he knew that ultimately, eventually, God's will would be fully realized and the kingdom of God would be complete, on earth as it is in heaven. He said, "I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! (April 3, 1968, "I've Been to the Mountaintop")

I said that Oseola McCarty was wise. Hear something else she said. "Some people make a lot of noise about what's wrong with the world, and they are usually blaming somebody else. I think people who don't like the way things are, need to look at themselves first. They need to get right with God and change their own ways. That way, they will know that they are making a difference in at least one life. If everybody did that, we'd be all right."²

Get right with God, she said. Amen to that! What is the future of equality, peace, and neighborliness? In the near future, the future that we will experience, equality, peace, and neighborliness depend on our getting right with God. Peter had to be hit over the head with a vision from God to learn that God showed and expected impartiality. Acts 1:27-28, 34-35 We need to remember and work on that. Paul wrote that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female," Galatians 3:28 If we are going to get right with God, we must stop sorting people into categories of more and less important. Paul tells us that different nationalities are no longer to divide us. Economic status must not separate or define us. Even male and female are equal before God. God shows no partiality. Brothers and sisters, we have a lot to work on!

Jesus commanded us, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt 5:44 NRS) It seems risky and impractical, but when it has been tried, we begin to really

understand what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27 NRS)

One of the foundations of peace is equality. And one of the foundations of equality is neighborliness. Jesus said, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matt 22:37-40 NRS) It's all so simple. If we love our neighbors, we will treat them with respect. We will treat them as we would like to be treated. We will treat them as equals. We will treat them non-violently. It's that easy – and it's that hard. We cannot make the world perfect, but we can make it better. We can't stop all of the pain in the world, but we can bind up the wounds around us. To that extent, the future of equality, peace, and neighborliness is in our hands and is our responsibility. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. (Gal 5:22-26 NRS)

"We must build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear... That old law about "an eye for an eye" leaves everybody blind... The time is always right to do the right thing... Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal. (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

"nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid." I still believe that *We Shall* overcome! The beauty of genuine brotherhood and peace is more precious than diamonds or silver or gold. (from the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Dec 10, 1964)

"The relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men -- for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them?"

^{NRS} **Philippians 4:7** And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phi 4:7 NRS)

¹ Oseola McCarty, *Simple Wisdom for Rich Living* (Atlanta, Longstreet Press, 1996) p 57

² Oseola McCarty, *Simple Wisdom for Rich Living* (Atlanta, Longstreet Press, 1996) p 70