

Justice and Peacemaking: The Connection

Dr. Justo L. González

© Justo L. Gonzalez

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

info@aeth.org

Justice and Peacemaking: The Connection

Even a cursory glance at the global scene should suffice to show that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between war and justice, particularly war and hunger and that this relationship works both ways: war produces hunger and hunger produces war. Obviously, this is not to say that all injustice is the result of war, nor that all war is only the result of hunger. But it is to say that there is a clear and observable relationship between issues of peace and issues of justice—particularly those relating to hunger. This can be seen both at the local and at the global level.

In Central America, for instance, war has resulted in the destruction of crops and agricultural facilities, and thousands of people suffer physical need as a result of the ongoing war. But it is also true that the war itself is the outcome of injustice—injustice that has created want and hunger. When cattle barons in El Salvador, just to name one case, claim for themselves and devote to grazing vast areas that previously were used by peasants to grow food, they are creating the conditions for war.

Or take the case of Ethiopia where a years ago hunger and want led to armed revolution and now the continuing strife—joined to other causes—is producing vast masses of landless and hungry refugees.

What is true at the local level is also true in a global perspective. It is estimated that every minute the world spends \$1,400,000 in arms. It is also estimated that during that very minute thirty children die of malnutrition. The increasing famine in Africa must be one of the most pressing concerns of any who believe that all God's children have a right to food and the basic necessities of life. And yet, during the two-year period from 1981 to 1983, while U.S. military aid to Africa increased by 150 percent, food aid to the same continent dropped by more than a third.

When nations and people devote their energies and resources to military preparation they are diverting energies and resources that should be used to feed the world's hungry. In 1980, for instance, the Presidential Commission on World Hunger declared that, both for the sake of the world and for its own long-term interests, the U.S. should "make the elimination of hunger the primary focus of its relations with the developing world." The fact that we have chosen instead to focus our interest on military buildup has spelled not only the loss of a significant opportunity for the U.S. but also the loss of countless lives that could have been saved. For that we shall be accountable just as much as if we had dropped a bomb on them.

Sometimes the connection between food and arms, justice and peace, is so blatant as to cause us to cringe. Such is the case with the manner in which the administration has linked food aid to Africa with aid to the military in El Salvador. The option is clear: either we send food to Africa

and arms to El Salvador, or we do neither; either we kill Africans, or we kill Salvadoreans. And while the debate goes on, people are dying.

In short, as we look at today's world it is apparent that peace and justice are but two sides of the same coin. It is impossible to have one without the other; and the more we have of one the more we shall have of the other.

The same conclusion follows from the study of the biblical tradition. The text most often quoted in the context of discussions on peacemaking is probably "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore," (Micah 4: 3). What we often fail to see is that this grand vision of a time of peace is directly related to the justice that will reign at such a time, for the text continues: "but they shall sit, each under their vine, and each under their fig tree, and none shall make them afraid," (Micah 4:4).

People can beat their swords into plowshares only when there is justice, and that justice is of such nature that there is no fear. If I have a thousand fig trees and my neighbors are hungry, I must make sure that I have enough swords to keep them at bay. Then also those other neighbors with a few fig trees will have to arm themselves, not only against the hungry, but also against me. And my hungry neighbors will plot ways to get into my orchards and those of my

middle-class neighbors. In such a situation we shall all be afraid. We shall beat our plowshares into swords and worry that our houses and our borders are not secure, and bewail the “increasing crime rate.”

On the other hand, the prophet’s vision is quite different. What he sees is a world in peace, not because some great army or police force—or nuclear arsenal—protects it, but rather because there is such justice that there is nothing to fear. If that vision is true, then the road to peace and the road to justice are the same; and this is none other than the road of love

The other oft-quoted text—and one also depicted on Christmas cards and in primitive American art—is Isaiah’s vision of the “peaceable kingdom:” “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them,” (Isaiah 11:6). But here again, what we often miss is that this happens precisely as the result of God’s justice. In verse 4 we are told that “with righteousness God will judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” The new order of peace is not simply the result of changed feelings among us so that we can love those who hate us, it is also the result of a changed order of relationships, the manifestation of God’s justice.

There is another item in Isaiah’s vision that is worthy of note: the vision includes not only human beings, but the whole of creation. Much as we like to think the opposite, the Bible does

not speak as if God were concerned only for human beings and only we were part of God's ultimate purposes. The Bible does say that we have been given dominion over all creation; but that dominion is after the image of God, whose dominion is one of love and self-giving, to the point of the cross. Therefore, peace does not mean only that we shall cease making war upon each other, it also means that we must cease making collective war upon our environment as if the rest of creation were our enemy.

When Christians from different parts of the world gather to discuss contemporary issues, there is often a disagreement as to whether the most urgent issues are those of peace or those of justice. Usually, the majority of those coming from the United States, Western Europe, and the Soviet bloc agree that the main issue of our day is peace—more concretely, arms control. On the other hand, most of those representing Asia, Africa, and Latin America feel that the main issue is justice—more concretely, a new international economic order and the redistribution of land and wealth within their own countries as a means to solve the problem of hunger. As we seek to deal with the question of peacemaking, both at a global and at a local level, it is important for us to understand the truth involved in both of these perspectives, and somehow to reconcile them. Therefore, we must ask ourselves, what are the reasons for such disagreements? Is there a relationship between the context in which each group lives and its position on these issues? Can we state the main arguments for each of the two positions? Only by doing so will it be possible for us to reconcile them.

Discussion period:

Divide in pairs. One of you is a white middle class United Methodist in the US. The other a peasant in Mexico whose land has been taken for growing tomatoes for export. Try to express your perspective to each other . . . time . . . Tell each other how the arguments from the other side sound . . . time . . . What are some of the common themes and feelings expressed by both sides?

True and False Peace:

One of the common themes of the prophets is that there is a false message of peace, and that God abhors those who proclaim such a message. Thus, for instance, in Jeremiah 6:13-14, we read: "From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." And in Ezekiel 13:9-10: "My hand will be against the prophets who see delusive visions and who give lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, . . . because they have misled my people, saying 'Peace,' when there is no peace."

What disturbs Jeremiah about such false preaching is that it ignores the injustice that makes peace—and even national survival—impossible. Commenting on the powerful in his society, the prophet says: "Like a basket full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore, they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of

wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish these things?" (Jeremiah 5:27-29).

Given such circumstances, to preach peace as if God had unconditionally promised national security was to prophesy falsely. "They have healed the wound of my people lightly," is the way Jeremiah puts it. To cure a wound properly it must be opened and cleansed, and that is a painful procedure. Therefore, it is not surprising for a patient to seek not the doctor who treats properly, but the one who does it gently even though improperly. The problem is that such cures do not work, but rather make things worse.

The false prophets about whom Jeremiah is complaining must have been quite popular. Such "prophecy" has always been popular, for it tells people enough about their sin to feel religious and not enough to challenge them to radical obedience.

And the difference between the true and the false prophet, or between the true message of peace and the false one, is justice. The false prophet speaks of a peace guaranteed because Israel is God's chosen people whom God will not abandon. The true prophet warns that God's people are called to be a light unto the nations and that if they forsake that mission God will forsake them. (Years later Jesus would speak of his disciples as salt and warn them too that if they lost their flavor, they would be good for nothing but being cast out and trampled.) The

false prophet speaks of a peace that comes from the power of arms or from astute alliances with more powerful nations. The true prophet speaks of a peace that comes from the force of justice and from an unlikely alliance with the orphaned and the poor—with those whose sole defense is God. For these reasons, it is important that we be clear as to what we mean by "peace."

Discussion:

"Justice is a rather abstract term. It becomes more concrete when we speak of food, land, jobs, etc. What would be some similar themes that would make "peace" a more concrete term?

Which of the following images is closer to what most people in our society understand as the ideal of peace, and why? Which conforms best to the Biblical view of peace?

- a) A vast field with stones in rows and on each stone the words, "rest in peace."
- b) A bird sitting in a nest and singing, although the nest is precariously perched atop a waterfall.
- c) Two boxers hugging each other after a strenuous bout.
- d) A neighborhood gathered for a barn raising.
- e) A man before a TV set watching a game and drinking beer.
- f) A group of marchers with interlocking arms, singing "We shall overcome."

I Have Come to Bring a Sword:

The ambiguous meaning of the word "peace" comes across very clearly in the surprising words of Jesus: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law," (Matthew 10:34-35). These are words we do not often quote, for we would like to delude ourselves into thinking that by being Christians we can avoid all conflicts or at least minimize them. After all, Jesus the "Prince of Peace" should help us live in peace with each other. And there is a certain sense in which this is true. But there is another sense in which our faith in Jesus will cause greater conflict. The reason for this is that the peace Jesus offers, like the peace the prophets proclaimed before him, is grounded on justice. Anything else is a false peace, a surrender to the gods of this world—which are no more than idols justifying our greed and social disorder.

AETH

Jesus was well aware that the preaching of the gospel would arouse enmity. He was aware that it would lead him to the cross. And he told his disciples that they would be reviled and persecuted. Ever since, the faithful preaching and living of the gospel has evoked resentment, opposition, and even persecution.

The reason for this is not simply, as we might think, a conflict of beliefs. It is also a conflict of interests; and if we are to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" we should be aware of

such interests. When Paul healed a slave girl in Philippi who had "a spirit of divination," and who "brought her owners much gain by soothsaying," the owners accused him and Silas of disturbing the peace and had them whipped and thrown in prison (Acts 16: 16-24). In Ephesus, when the preaching of the gospel threatened the business of the silversmiths, they rioted in self-righteous defense of Artemis (Acts 19: 23-41). Since that time, it has been very difficult to preach and live the gospel in its fuller dimensions without provoking opposition. If we seek land for the landless peasants, those who had hoped to make a profit from such lands will oppose us. If we feed the hungry and find them significant employment, those who had formerly hired them for miserable wages will resent our action. If we advocate a halt to the very large companies, and millions of employees, who live by the manufacture of arms will consider us subversive.

This is why Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword. That is also why he did not command us to have no enemies, but only to love them. He knew that it would be impossible to be obedient to him without thereby making enemies. The only way to preach the peace of Jesus without making enemies is to follow the lead of those false prophets of old, proclaiming "peace, peace," when there is no peace, or offering the superficial healing of a supposedly "inner" peace with no outward commitment to justice.

Discussion:

Make a list of needs in your community that should be met. Be as concrete as possible. Then try to decide what would be the Christian way to meet such a need. Finally, ask yourself how would people react were we to do such a thing? If, for instance, you decide that a need in your community is shelter for the homeless, and that the church should offer its buildings for that purpose, what would be the reaction of the congregation? Of the neighbors? What would be the reasons for such reactions?

If you live in an industrial community pose the question, what would be the concrete economic results of a complete halt to the manufacture and sale of arms and military equipment? Have you investigated the degree to which your community is financially dependent on the arms buildup? How does the episode in Acts 19 help us understand the connection between such interests, the arms race, and the preaching of the gospel? What should be our attitude as Christians who live in such a community and love its members?

The Enemies:

We are all aware that Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, and to turn the other cheek to those who smite us. All of this is true and it is important. The cause of peace has never been served by hatred. And, if it is true that justice is nothing but the other side of the coin of peace, it follows that we shall not bring about that sort

of justice on the basis of hatred and vengeance. As Christians, as peacemakers, and as those who "hunger and thirst for justice," we must find another way.

But just as we say this, there is something else we must remember. That is the possibility, not simply that we have enemies, but also that we might be someone else's enemies. As we read the Sermon on the Mount, we normally place ourselves in the shoes of the one who is smitten on the cheek, of the persecuted, of the one whose cloak is taken away. But as we look at the world today and the present economic order, there is a high probability that we stand at the other end of the relationship. Perhaps we are not the smitten, but the smiters; not the persecuted, but the persecutors; not those whose cloak is taken away, but those who take it away. It may be very difficult and shocking for us to think in such terms, for we have grown accustomed to thinking of ourselves as loving persons, people who give aid to the needy. And all this is likely to be true. But it is also true that in a world in which people are hungry and naked, any who take more than they need are enemies of those who do not have what they need. It is as simple as that. It is not necessary to go into complicated and debatable theories regarding the structure of the economy of the world. If I live in a town in which there are fifty people and fifty pairs of shoes and I have two pairs, I am the enemy of the one who must go barefooted.

From all this follow several considerations as we seek to understand and to apply the Sermon on the Mount. The first is that perhaps a hidden reason—hidden even to ourselves—why we

sometimes insist so much on the passages on forgiveness and love is that we suspect that we are the ones who most need to be forgiven. And that may also be the reason why we are quick to quote such passages when peasants rise in revolt, but not when the military budget is before Congress.

The second is that perhaps we should not be as surprised when the hungry and the poor in the world strike back at us, but rather be surprised at their patience and longanimity after having for so long turned the other cheek and lost even the tattered cloak that was all they could afford.

The third is that in such a case the burden of reconciliation lies with us. We are all familiar with Jesus' admonition, early in the Sermon on the Mount, that "if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." And many of us have heard this text applied to the celebration of communion, exhorting us to forgive any against whom we harbored ill feelings, and to do so as we approached the Lord's table. The problem is that, if we look again at the text, it is not speaking of those against whom we have something, but rather of those who have something against us. This makes matters much more difficult, for it is relatively easy to decide to forgive someone as we approach the table; but in order to have them forgive us we have to go, seek them out, and

set aright anything that was amiss. For me to be reconciled with those whom I consider my enemies is relatively simple. For me to be reconciled—in theory at least—with those who have legitimate reason to consider me their enemy is much more difficult, for it requires that I change whatever it is that has made me their enemy.

Returning then to the issue of peace and justice, and their connection in today's world, what all this means is that it may be too easy for us who enjoy the benefits of the world's unjust order to speak of peace, but much more difficult to practice justice. When we speak of peace apart from justice, we are not really speaking of the biblical goal and promise of peace, but rather of the preservation of the status quo, which happens to work in our favor.

A concrete example will illustrate this point. A report which we have recently received from one of our missionaries in Brazil speaks of widespread hunger in several cities and of riots by people looting supermarkets for food. The reaction of many who have felt threatened by such events has been to increase police protection in order to "guarantee peace." Our missionary then comments that the government errs in treating what is a social and economic problem as if it were a police problem. Using the terms that we have been discussing, we could say that what has happened is that those who have more food and other worldly goods than they need, feel threatened by the cry of the needy, and instead of hearing it as a call for justice hear it as a threat to peace.

What is true of Brazil is also true of our cities where plush neighborhoods treat their fear of the poor as if it were they were the ones suffering injustice. Yet, we are the ones sitting in the restaurant and oblivious of those who suffer outside. Many of those who suffer from the injustice of the present world order are Christians, and perhaps they are thinking about us and about God's promise of a new order when they say, "Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies."

Now let 's go back and read once again the text in Matthew 5:23-26: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going together to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison." What would it mean for us today to I "make friends with our accusers, while we are going with them to court"? Isn't this one of the first steps both in peacemaking and in responding to the issues of justice and world hunger? That is the question that I would like to leave with you tonight, for it is the central question in the ministry of peacemaking.