

Songs of Peace
Philippians 4:4-9
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First Central Congregational Church
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This semester I once again taught the introductory philosophy class at Creighton University. The final book we read is Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her exploration of the evil of Adolf Eichmann who was the Nazi responsible for assuring that the trains ran efficiently to the concentration camps.

What Arendt discovered surprised her—Eichmann was not a larger-than-life monster. Instead, he was a boring, thoughtless, joiner. Someone fixated on his own self and incapable of feeling or thinking from another person's perspective. She concluded that evil had become banal—something boring, ordinary people were capable of.

But for Arendt, this was good news, because it meant evil wasn't some great metaphysical problem that threatened the rationality and the goodness of the universe. Evil was something easily overcome, because the opposite of thoughtlessness is to think and to think well. And for Arendt thinking originates not as some abstract enterprise, but out of our sense of wonder and gratitude at the world.

The last class period before we begin discussing Hannah Arendt's book, we wrap up the series of lectures by William James entitled *Pragmatism*, and this sets up the Arendt discussion. In the final lecture James explores what he considers "the final question of philosophy"—will the world be saved?

James explores three attitudes to this question: the Optimist believes that inevitably all will work out for the best, the Pessimist is certain that there is no meaning or purpose to life, but there is the middle ground of the Meliorist who believes that the final outcome is neither inevitable nor impossible, but fully up to us. The world is the "workshop of being" and our existence is "a real adventure, with real danger, yet [we] may win through."

What is Peace?

We have this negative idea of peace as the absence of violence or war between people or states. But this is a rather limited notion. Does peace have any positive qualities?

When we pray to receive God's peace, what are we longing for? Is peace a state of our own character? Some quality we can achieve.

The philosopher I specialized in during graduate school was Alfred North Whitehead, who was an English mathematician and logician who taught at Harvard and developed a grand metaphysics. And Peace was a key virtue in Whitehead's thought. He called it the "Harmony of Harmonies" and described it as the state of character that is sensitive to the tragedy of life and yet enjoys beauty.

The human condition is vulnerable. We have tendencies to do some bad things. We often succumb to temptation. We can fall into vices.

But all of existence is vulnerable as well. We live in a world of violence, where natural disasters and human catastrophes can rob us of our well-being.

On an even more fundamental level, the very passage of time involves perishing. Even the greatest moments of our lives—those where we are overwhelmed with joy, love, adventure, or beauty—are temporal and therefore fleeting. Change and loss are built into the very fabric of the cosmos.

How do we respond to these realities?

One human tendency is to ignore them and wish that they go away. This is to live an apathetic, passive sort of life, what my graduate school colleague Kevin Durand called “the Tranquilized Soul.” The Tranquilized Soul is “unmotivated to adventure, novelty, or exploration” and doesn’t let the external world “intrude at all on its self-contemplative tranquility.”

Another human tendency, and one we see a lot of these days it seems, is what theologian Elizabeth O’Donnell Gandolfo calls “ruthless egotism.” This person tries to control every situation in order to minimize the effects upon him or her.

Both of these responses try to be invulnerable to reality and tragedy. Gandolfo writes, “But refusing to be vulnerable to pain carries with it the price of closing oneself off to Beauty.”

There is another way, a way that embraces our vulnerability, and that is what Whitehead and those influenced by him call “Peace.” Gandolfo writes, “Peace entails an understanding and an acceptance of the tragic structure of existence, and thus frees us to appreciate the Beauty that continually and infinitely emerges from” life.

So the God who created the cosmos incarnates in a peasant child, born among the animals and laid in a manger—an explicit sign of embracing our vulnerability. If we are to “follow the way of the Incarnation,” as Gandolfo describes it, then we must “embody vulnerability differently.” We have to quit mismanagement by egoistically ignoring or trying to exert total control over it. Instead, we must accept the reality of the human condition as one of weakness and vulnerability and pain, yet productive of great beauty, love, and joy.

This is what it means to be a Peaceful Soul.

She writes, “The point of the Incarnation, then, is not to see the awesome power of divinity and bow down to worship it. The point is to recognize and realize ourselves in it and it in ourselves.”

To follow Jesus, is to become human in a new way.

The Peaceful Soul is able to embrace vulnerability and still enjoy life. She transcends the narrow focus on the self and is attentive to all others. She not only understands that others have value, she marvels at them and enjoys them. The Peaceful Soul participates in the creative advance and develops character, as my friend Kevin Durand describes it. “Peace is the control of self-interest that moves the soul toward harmony with the self and greater harmony in participation in the world.” The Peaceful Soul experiences wonder and gratitude at the world.

This, I believe is what Paul is describing in his joyful letter to the Philippians. A peace of God that will be with us, that is one of the excellent things, that surpasses all our understanding.

The day of Christ's birth is drawing near. We will be born anew this year. Jesus opens up the possibility for us to become Peaceful Souls.

So, beloved, keep on doing what is true and honorable and just, and the God of peace will be with you.