

“The Conflicted Path Toward Peace”

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Joel 3:9-11; Luke 12:49-53

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A couple of weeks ago our family was on vacation in northern Wisconsin. It was beautiful and relaxing. We enjoyed the sun, went boating on the lake, roasted marshmallows, and enjoyed the pleasures of summer in North America. One evening, I sat out on a dock with my legs dangling over Lake Superior, and as I gazed at the expansive sky covering our earth, I became aware of a certain irony that I imagine many of us are feeling this summer. For as much as I appreciated the peaceful setting I found myself in, I was also aware that I was on an island—literally—in the midst of tremendous conflict in our world right now.

We have conflict everywhere—inside of ourselves, in our relationships, in our places of work. And in this presidential election season, our country is experiencing a heated political conflict. And then, too, there is more ominous conflict. We live with the continual threat of further terrorist attacks in our country. The war in Iraq continues on, bringing anguish and fear and uncertainty to all sides. Many of us are feeling anxiety and fear, and along with these feelings tends to come a perception that the world is spiraling downward into ever more destructive states.

Against this background comes our scripture reading for today! You might think that we would turn to Jesus in times of war and conflict for words of assurance and peace. But in this passage we find the exact opposite! “I have come to bring fire to the earth?” “I have not come to bring peace, but division?” Family members will be divided one against another? Is this the Jesus we know? What on earth could this passage mean?

First, let’s situate this passage in its context in the Gospel of Luke, and then let’s see what Swedenborg can tell us about it. Jesus’ words about division come during a speech to a crowd of thousands in which he delivers several warnings. These warnings are given against the backdrop of the common world view of the time, and that was that a savior would come who would bring about the end of the present world and usher in a new one. The early Christians believed that Jesus *was* this long-awaited savior, and that the end of the world was imminent. Jesus’ words in his long series of warnings carry a particular urgency because they were thought to apply to the last remaining days of the current world. When Jesus speaks of the division about to come, he is talking about the division between believers and non-believers that would be evident at the *eschatos*, or end of time. This end was coming so quickly, in fact, that there would be no time for painstaking reconciliation and consensus-building. He brings division because he brings assurance of a new spiritual reality founded on love and compassion—a vision that some were ripe to accept, and others rejected. Family members would come to be divided one against another as some adopted the new faith professed by Jesus, and others did not.

So on this level of meaning, Jesus seems to be saying that the time has come to make a decision about believing in God. A Swedenborgian reading can illuminate yet another layer of meaning.

Our conventional understanding of fire is sometimes associated with destruction, but in this instance, the “fire” that Jesus brings to the earth is associated with the warmth and light which corresponds to divine love and wisdom. So when Jesus says he has come to bring fire to the earth, we can see that the Lord came into the world to bring divine love. What at first glance appears to be a destructive image is actually a redemptive one.

Jesus doesn’t bring peace because, in a Swedenborgian understanding, true peace cannot be delivered. God has given us free will, and that freedom requires that we struggle through conflict on our own in order to learn and grow into higher spiritual awareness.

The division that Jesus brings is spiritual combat, and it is the only means to arrive at peace. The division is the awareness between self-centeredness and self-giving love; between seeing the way things are and knowing how they ought to be. This combat occurs on an internal level within each person, and on an external level in our world, and it is a necessary part of growth. We all must go through it in order to reach toward peace. If peace were simply delivered to us on a platter, we would not understand it. Swedenborg said that after humanity goes through spiritual combat, internal spiritual truths are opened to us. In this way, the conflict is actually a vehicle for greater understanding—a vehicle for enlightenment.

I’d like to propose that the struggle and pain our world now finds itself in is an opportunity for growth. I know this may be an idea that is hard to swallow given the enormous tragedy of September 11th, all the misleading events that led up to the war in Iraq, and the number of human casualties there since the war began. It’s hard to believe that the flooding in Bangladesh or the civil war in the Sudan or the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians could be signs of progress. But I believe that time and again, human consciousness has evolved as a result of great conflict.

A survey of the last several hundred years of human history could show us many examples where humanitarian efforts were strengthened after learning from tragic circumstances. Some examples are: the abolition of slavery; improved access around the world to clean drinking water and food supplies; the general improvement of the status of women in most of the world’s countries; our raised consciousness about our effect on the environment, along with our efforts to mitigate those effects. Another clear example is the United Nations, which was formed in 1948 as a direct consequence of World War II. The UN represents what at one time was only a philosopher’s dream: that countries would set aside their own self-interests in order to form an international council whose purpose was to keep the peace, for the greater good of planet earth. Today the UN has 191 member countries and operates throughout the world with the purpose of promoting respect for human rights, facilitating non-violent conflict resolution, protecting the environment, fighting disease, reducing poverty, defining standards for safe air travel, improving telecommunications, fighting drug trafficking, combating terrorism, assisting refugees, setting up programs to clear landmines, helping to expand food production and fighting the AIDS epidemic—to name just a few. All of these remarkable programs were set in motion because human beings went through terrible conflict—and through it, they understood the imperative to change the world.

The place where the divine is present in conflict is in the power to transform. Some who experience great pain are able to turn it into goodness and unleash it into the world in a way that helps create a brand new reality.

John Titus is a member of our denomination who lives in Dexter, Michigan. His daughter Alicia died on September 11, 2001. She was a flight attendant on one of the planes that flew into the World Trade Center. In the aftermath of such a monumental loss, one might understand if John had become filled with rage and a desire for vengeance. But his response was the opposite. He knew immediately that he never wanted anyone else to go through what he had. His experience taught him, in fact, that peace was even more important than he had ever known. He committed himself to ending the cycle of hatred and violence that only brings more destruction. Through an organization called Peaceful Tomorrows, he has worked with thousands of others seeking peaceful resolution to the war in Iraq and many other world conflicts as well.

John has immensely moved me over these past three years because he has been an agent of transformation. With an open, anguishing heart, he has let the grief tear through him, and at the same time he has turned that energy into goodness for the world.

John has written an essay of some of his reflections. Here are his words: “Somehow, through it all, I have been given many gifts, including the gift of heartfelt compassion and the blessing of forgiveness. I realized immediately after Alicia’s death that I must learn to forgive those responsible or the anger would consume me like a cancer. Forgiveness is a gift that one gives himself and in no way implies sanction of the others action. Forgiveness is a letting go of those feelings that long to consume you with a twisted grief filled with hate and revenge. I could not allow that to happen! That is not who I am and it would not bring my Alicia back. It would only destroy me in the end.

“Throughout my journey of grief, true compassion has come into my heart with a longing for expression. Through compassion I have a renewed sense of purpose toward peace; a peace that recognizes the oneness of life and is beyond the false sense of peace attained by the mere absence of war. Working for peace and justice in a world that seems so inept in both has given new meaning to my life. For this is what my dear sweet Alicia was all about. And, this is what the Divine would have for us.”

Would we say that John has arrived at that desirable state of being we call peace? Not the kind that is calm and happy. But amazingly, he seems to have found a kind of peace from working to make the world a better place. It is an active peace, wizened and scarred and probably screaming. It is the divine at work. John’s actions, and the thousands of others like his, act as a witness to the hand of God which is bringing about divine providence. We are meant to live in peace. Even if the path leading to it is full of struggle. Even if peace and conflict go hand in hand each step of the way.

It’s hard to discern what good has come into the world since September 11th. We don’t know yet how our common history will be written and how these present events will influence our future. And yet I am convinced that the present circumstances of our world offer us many opportunities to contribute to a growth in human consciousness.

Swedenborg believed that humanity was evolving into ever more enlightened states of being. He believed that our world was in the long and painstaking process of removing all of those things which separate us from God—a world gradually turning into one that reflects the goodness and truth from which it is made. It’s a process that naturally involves conflict. The Bahai religion shares this view of our future. They suggest that the issue is how much pain can be experienced by humanity “before we wholeheartedly accept the spiritual nature that makes us a single people, and gather the

courage to plan our future in the light of what has been so painfully learned. Whether in the life of the individual or that of society, profound change occurs more often than not in response to intense suffering and to unendurable difficulties that can be overcome in no other way. Just so great a testing experience [...] is needed to weld the earth's diverse peoples into a single people."

So after thinking about all of this, perhaps we are not so surprised after all by Jesus' statement that he brings fire and division to the earth. Perhaps we can see that when we talk about peace, the issue is really not so much how to eradicate conflict, but how to welcome it in wise and loving ways, and how to learn from it as part of our evolution as the human race. For this is what faith comes down to, after all: the belief that we are on the path of divine providence. My hope is that we will not be discouraged by the darkness that surrounds us, but that we will remember to take the long view, to have hope in our evolving spiritual destiny, and to remember our own roles in its unfolding. Amen.