True Peace

The Power of Solidarity

Margaret R. Pfeil

The kind of peace that Jesus gives to his disciples flows from God’s love and merciful forgiveness through the Spirit. We are called to risk the radical openness of this love through solidarity with others.

Our clear water
one with the infested water
women walk miles to
each day they live.
One with the rivers tainted with detritus
of our ambitions,
and with the dishonored ocean.
Our unbroken skin
one with the ripped skin of the tortured,
the shot-down, bombed, napalmed,
the burned alive.
One with the sore and filthy skin of the destitute.
We utter the words
we are one
but their truth
is not real to us . . .

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Lift us Spirit, impel
our rising
into that knowledge.
Make truth real to us,
flame on our lips.

—Denise Levertov, “Two Threnodies and a Psalm”!

A threnody, I learned from Denise Levertov, is a “song of lamentation,” and this excerpt from her poem, “Two Threnodies and a Psalm,” provides a fitting touchstone for thinking about the relationship between truth and peacemaking in our times. Prophetically, she evokes multivalent awareness of what makes for peace by naming the truth of its absence, palpably experienced in the suffering of the present moment both in its particularity and in its cosmic implications. The brokenness of life thwarted speaks to the wholeness of creation at peace, the oneness toward from which all creation emerged and to which it will one day, by grace, return, Aquinas’s exitus and reitus.

Following Levertov’s suggestion that the Spirit makes available knowledge of this oneness precisely in the truth of fragmentation, in this essay I will hold some particular experiences of brokenness in conversation with this Spirit-driven understanding, or “pneumatic epistemology,” to explore the meaning of true peace. As seen in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, the Spirit of Wisdom inexorably reveals the radical interdependence of God’s creation, and knowledge of this oneness generates a kind of power that is at once subversive and renewing: Challenging the violent power of dominance, Jesus’ power works on the societal margins to generate shalom, the peace of right relationship, through the love of solidarity.

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Mr. Truman was jubilant. President Truman. True man; what a strange name, come to think of it. . . . He went from table to table on the cruiser, which was bringing him home, from the Big Three conference, telling the great news; ‘jubilant’ the newspapers said. Jubilate Deo. We have killed 318,000 Japanese” (Day, 266).

Dorothy Day’s prophetic threnody in the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki echoed in my ears as we attended to “Tom” one Saturday morning at St. Peter Claver Catholic Worker House in South Bend, Indiana, inhaling the stifling, charred smell emanating from his clothing, his skin, his very being, as he gasped for breath and struggled to talk through swollen vocal chords. The previous night had found him in an abandoned factory with two other men, all inebriated. After an argument, one of them vowed to burn the place down with the other two inside. Considering this an empty threat, Tom and his friend drifted off to sleep,
only to wake a short time later to find the room filled with smoke. His companion escaped, but Tom attempted to put out the fire. Still drunk, he believed that he had succeeded and went back to sleep, but he awoke again to acrid smoke, this time so thick that he could not find the door. Groping his way to a second-floor window, he managed to pry it open just enough to squeeze through and jump out. He regained consciousness as a firefighter administered oxygen to him, saying something about seeking medical attention if he still had trouble breathing in a day or two.

Tom stumbled over to our house and collapsed on the couch. A Vietnam veteran without health insurance and living several hours’ drive from the nearest VA hospital, Tom reluctantly went to the local emergency room the next day. The X-rays revealed huge black patches on his lungs, which the doctor described as “leathery.” The factory apparently contained toxic waste of some kind, and the poisoned smoke permanently damaged Tom’s lungs.

When he hears reports of mounting death tolls and daily bombings in Iraq, Tom suffers from recurring nightmares about Vietnam. Like many veterans, including nearly 20 percent of those returning from combat in Iraq (Hoge; Kang), he struggles with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and has resorted to self-medication methods that make it difficult for him to hold a job, though he is a skilled construction worker. His time on the battlefield now decades past, he has yet to find true peace. Collapsed on the couch that Saturday morning, Tom whispered that one thought sustained him as he frantically felt his way in the dark cloud of toxins: “I can’t die like this, homeless and burned alive in an abandoned building.” He still hadn’t found peace, but he had named a truth: In the predominant moral climate of U.S. American society, which he himself has come to internalize, his life counts as refuse, something expendable, just as surely as that dilapidated, rust-belt factory and the toxins seething within it.

In a nuclear age that began with jubilation over the human capacity to harness atomic energy in order to destroy God’s creation, such wanton disdain for life comes as little surprise. Tom and others on the societal margins are inconvenient witnesses to the truth of systemic moral disorder. The same death-dealing logic that birthed the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has numbed the U.S. American social conscience sufficiently to permit the short-term interests of capitalist materialism, now inextricably wed to “homeland security,” to trump the inestimable value of life in the name of peace.

But, it is a sort of peace predicated on the shock and awe of dominant power to protect some lives, deemed more valuable, at the expense of others. Those who
impose the NIMBY (“Not in my backyard”) principle. People believe it possible to establish a protective perimeter circumscribing their loved ones’ purity and excluding all deemed hazardous (Douglas)—toxic waste, the ravaged remains of inner cities, and expendable human beings. No wonder that eighty percent of toxic waste dumps in the United States are located in poor communities of color. Along with the residents of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the napalmed Vietnamese, and Iraqis living amid the detritus of depleted uranium munitions, these human beings together with their natural surroundings have been sacrificed on the altar of a false peace.

One in Interdependence

If there is a root deception at stake here, it lies in the denial that all of created reality is radically interdependent and loved by God and that this fundamental truth is the essential basis for real peace. Ultimately, the air of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Vietnam, Iraq, and the abandoned toxic waste dump in South Bend is quite literally the same air breathed in the halls of Congress, the White House, and all the gated communities of the world. Systems theorist Joanna Macy refers to this phenomenon as a process of “interbreathing”:

Reflect on the fact that the average breath you breathe contains about ten sextillion atoms. . . . Now reflect on the amazing fact that the Earth’s atmosphere itself is of a size to contain the same number of breaths. This remarkable symmetry, which places you midway between atom and world, also means that with each inhalation you take in an average of one atom from each of the breaths in our world, and with each exhalation send back the same average of an atom to each breath. (Macy 1991, 230)

Situating Tom’s narrative within this cosmic context, two insights emerge. First, the utter integrity of God’s creation, the intricate web of life discernible at the atomic level, provides a trustworthy measure of true peace. And secondly, violation of this radical wholeness inflicts suffering first and foremost upon those on the margins of social power, but in the end, all will bear the consequences of such violence because all parts of creation live and move and have their being only in interrelationship.

Shalom: The Peace of Right Relationship

In their 1983 pastoral letter, “The Challenge of Peace,” the U.S. bishops drew upon Scripture to offer a vision of peace based on right relationship (nos. 27–55). The Old Testament conception of peace unfolds in the context of Israel’s covenant
with God, and therefore it assumes a profoundly relational quality. The people express their fidelity to God by striving toward the realization of the peace of *shalom* together in community (Marshall, 48).

The Hebrew word *shalom*, deriving from the Sumerian root *silim* and the Akkadian *shalâmu*, “to be whole, uninjured” (Gross), connotes threefold right relationship. It refers, first, to adequate satisfaction of one’s material and physical needs and secondly to the embodiment of just personal and social relationships. Lastly, as a prerequisite for entering into rightly ordered relationships, it also involves personal integrity (Yoder, 10–16, and Zehr, 130–132). Ultimately, *shalom* is God’s gift to a people steadfast in righteousness [*tsedaqah*] before God and other humans, particularly the poor, the oppressed, and the outcasts (Marshall, 46–48).

Covenantal justice finds fulfillment in the restoration of *shalom*, and this understanding of the relationship between justice and peace informs New Testament accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The kind of peace that Jesus gives to his disciples flows from God’s love and merciful forgiveness through the Spirit. Leading by his actions, Jesus calls his followers to go and do likewise, rectifying wrongs and healing brokenness in faithful witness to the truth of God’s reign.

Guided by this Christian understanding of peace, John Paul II probed the meaning of “the peace of order” in his 2003 World Day of Peace message. The fortieth anniversary year of *Pacem in Terris* dawned on a world shattered by the multivalent violence of war and poverty, prompting him to ask, “What kind of order can replace this disorder, so that men and women can live in freedom, justice, and security?” (John Paul II 2003, 486). In response, he emphasized the relational character of *tranquillitatis ordinis*. “Gestures of peace are possible when people appreciate fully the community dimension of their lives, so that they grasp the meaning and consequences of events in their own communities and in the world. Gestures of peace create a tradition and a culture of peace” (John Paul II 2003, 487).

But, weaving together the cultural practices that make for peace requires a particular epistemology of justice: One’s interpretive standpoint determines what one is able to see and, therefore, the sort of data that will inform one’s conception of justice and vision of peace. Individuals and nations located at the center of social, economic, political, and cultural power structures will find it difficult to perceive and interpret the lived reality of those on the margins. They suffer from

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their own particular kind of impoverishment, an epistemological disadvantage that vitiates their efforts to discern accurately the sorts of just actions required by the peace of shalom (see Harding, 54).

The effects of this moral blindness born of privilege reverberate across the strands of interrelationship binding creation together. Who defines the claims of justice at stake in a conflict situation and which social agents have the power to arbitrate them? What conception of peace does the operative interpretation of justice reflect? Which account of truth will prevail? Unless these issues receive mindful attention, those who reap measurable (though ephemeral) benefits from socioeconomic and political dominance in interpersonal, ecclesial, societal, and global relations will likely determine what constitutes justice without including the perspectives of other stakeholders in creation. This dynamic may lead to a cessation of open hostility in a given conflict situation, but it cannot bear fruit in the peace of shalom because it does not embody the truth of right relationship.

Instead, the power of possessive domination manifests what John of the Cross identified as misdirected human desire. Nevertheless, the Spirit of Sophia Wisdom seeks unceasingly to draw life even (perhaps especially) in its blind brokenness to herself. As Constance FitzGerald comments on The Ascent of Mount Carmel (1.4.8):

[Divine Sophia] challenges those who are unfree, consumed by the possessive desire for what can never completely satisfy. She calls them 'little ones' because they become as small as that which they crave, while the lasting affection and reassurance they unconsciously search for in their choices are present and available in Sophia. Therefore, Sophia says, “desire me”:

“O people, I cry to you, my voice is directed to all that live. Be attentive, little ones, to cunning and sagacity; and you ignorant, be careful. . . . The fruit you will find in me is better than gold and precious stones . . . [Prov 8:4-6, 18-21].” (FitzGerald, 289)

Jesus’ Truth: The Power of Solidarity

Filled with the Spirit of Wisdom, Jesus nurtured a culture of peace by first exposing the false peace promised by violent power to the light of truth. As Walter Brueggemann observes, the Gospel of John provides an extended exploration of the truth of Jesus, culminating in his encounter with Pilate. “Before the Roman governor, Jesus asserts: For this I was born into the world and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth (John 18:37). And Pilate hauntingly responds: What is truth (v. 38)?” (Brueggemann, 7).

Jesus answered not in words but through the witness of his ministerial life. He consistently exercised power from the periphery, Rosita deAnn Mathews insight-
fully notes. “He limited his involvement in the religious structure of his day and took a peripheral posture to the establishment. He did not sell his soul or give his allegiance to them. He maintained his character and call within a larger framework . . . to bring the freedom and responsibility of the kingdom of God. . . . By remaining on the periphery of the system, he was able to utilize his power to change the system and not perpetuate it” (Mathews, 99). In other words, Jesus spoke truth to power by opting for the poor (see Baum; Romero). Planting his feet on the societal margins, Jesus consciously chose to interpret lived reality from the perspective of the poor and those deemed expendable, the *anawim*.

The vantage point of the periphery, Jesus showed, makes available the blocked energy of an alternative form of power. Instead of the power of domination, he tapped into the power of solidarity, taking advantage of what systems theorists call synergy. This kind of “power-with,” explains Macy, “is not a property one can own, but a process one engages in” (Macy 2000). By contrast to possessive domination, synergy thrives on open channels of communication in which all participants contribute to the health of the whole by allowing creative energy to flow freely through them in service of the common good. Closing off those lines of generative participation comes at a steep price. Even when those wielding dominant power appear to emerge with the material goods that serve as the talismanic symbols of success in Western cultures, in truth all creation suffers. “Take the neuron in the neural net,” Macy suggests. “If it were, hypothetically, to suppose that its powers were a personal property to be preserved and protected from other nerve cells, and isolated itself behind defensive walls, it would atrophy, or die. Its health and its power lie in opening itself to the charge, letting the signals through. Only then can the larger systems of which it is a part learn to respond and think” (Macy 2000).

Synergistic power resides in the dynamic emergence of new creative possibilities that only come to fruition through the cooperation of all the parts of a living system on behalf of the whole. Together they share a vibrant life force that not one of them could access apart from the rest. This form of power resonates with the Spirit-driven variety that Jesus invited his disciples to cultivate, and it seems to be what John Paul II had in mind when he identified solidarity as a virtue in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*: It is “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm

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and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (John Paul II 1987, no. 38). As an antidote to what he deemed the two most prominent signs of moral underdevelopment in the contemporary world—greedy desire for profit and insatiable thirst for power—he proposed solidarity, “a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the gospel sense to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to ‘serve him’ instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage (cf. Matt 10:40-42; 20:25; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27)” (John Paul II 1987, no. 38). Solidarity, this readiness to give not only one’s possessions but even one’s life on behalf of others, springs from God’s gracious and passionate love for God’s creation, especially the most vulnerable, and in turn, it gives rise to shalom, the peace of right relationship.

As I write, Tom has taken up residence once again in what I call the toxic waste dump; he and his friends have euphemistically dubbed it “the fort.” With dark humor, they tell me that the EPA took core samples from the moat around their fort a couple weeks ago. But, neither his fortress mentality nor his efforts to numb a keen mind with alcohol can protect Tom from the truth: At this writing, the number of U.S. military personnel killed in Iraq has exceeded 2,500; Iraqi deaths are thought to be approaching 40,000, though the actual toll on the web of life can never be fully calculated.

From the cosmic perspective of creation, the gated communities and closed socioeconomic systems of the world cannot insulate those blinded by privilege from the truth revealed by Jesus, incarnated in Tom and all the dispossessed inhabiting places of refuse in the world: All living beings are one in the suffering that we humans inflict, and understanding of that oneness is the beginning of true peace. The Spirit of Wisdom urges us to take hope and draw sustaining power from the integrity of peace, surrendering our possessive desires with a resounding affirmation of all life, risking the radical openness of love in solidarity. The energy of that Spirit-driven love, by grace, restores the integrity of God’s creation to right relationship, the wholeness of shalom.
**Note**


**References**


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