

Do Unto Others: #2 “Compassion”

Isaiah 11:6-9

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It was suggested to me that since this is “Aloha” Sunday, I might try to make the sermon a bit upbeat. Let me try:

- Do you know what the ocean says to the beaches in Hawaii? Nothing. They just wave.
- What’s the best way to get in touch with fish in Hawaii? Just drop them a line.
- What do you call a Hawaiian fish with no eyes? “Fsh...”
- What did one volcano say to the other? “I lava you...”
- And, finally, why did the pineapple stop in the middle of the road? This is easy: it just ran out of juice.

It may be better if I just stick to the scripture.

Isaiah’s words describe what feels like an impossibility. If you have ever watched as a dog furiously chases a squirrel that had innocently wandered into the dog’s yard, you will have a hard time imagining a wolf rooming with a lamb. Woody Allen once quipped that the wolf may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb is not going to get much sleep. But this is what Isaiah declares: mortal enemies will one day live peaceably side by side.

It’s a scripture packed with images we largely associate with Christmas. It expresses our Advent hopes for peace, but today we hear it in a different context. Is it possible that the images of a shoot emerging from the decaying old stump shall bring us into a time of healing? Is it possible that the Spirit of the Lord shall come to decide with “equity for the meek of the earth?”

Will the wolf one day live with the lamb, and the leopard say “Aloha” to the young kid?

“Aloha,” is a difficult word to translate. It is more than a greeting. Aloha connotes love, affection, peace, compassion, mercy. It can also mean “may the breath of God be upon you.”

Aloha conveys more than merely “hello,” or “goodbye.” It is a warm-hearted blessing, a reminder of compassion, an unconditional acceptance of other persons. The “Aloha Spirit” is such a crucial part of Hawaiian culture that it was actually incorporated into the

state law in 1986. The Aloha Spirit Law is defined in Chapter five of the Hawaii revised statutes as “the coordination of mind and heart within each person. It brings each person to the self. Each person must think and emote good feelings to others.” The law stipulates that

“These are traits of character that express the charm, warmth and sincerity of Hawaii's people. It was the working philosophy of native Hawaiians and was presented as a gift to the people of Hawai‘i. "**Aloha**" is more than a word of greeting or farewell or a salutation. "**Aloha**" means mutual regard and affection and extends warmth in caring with no obligation in return. "**Aloha**" is the essence of relationships in which each person is important to every other person for collective existence. "**Aloha**" means to hear what is not said, to see what cannot be seen and to know the unknowable.”

One writer says, “Aloha is an invitation onto the path we all share.” We could try that here in Missouri, and it might help. Of course, it’s always better if that path has beach access.

Here is the image that is set before us: to discover gift of compassion which Isaiah offers, to journey deeper into that promise that is more than a greeting, a promise that listens to that which is not said.

While we most often hear these words at Christmas, today we hear them in a different context. Today we listen to how they might help us lead us closer to life shaped by the Golden Rule so that God’s yearning for peace might overcome the divisions that are all around us. Today we lean forward to discover the opportunity Isaiah offers us to find compassion that will allow us to be at peace with ourselves, as well as with others.

I’ve come to think that there is a difference between being a “keeper of the peace,” (peacekeeper) and a “maker of peace” (peacemaker.) Here’s how I’ve come to see the difference. My grandmother was the third eldest of 10 siblings. When my great-grandfather died, the family immediately fractured over who was going to inherit his farm. Six siblings on one side versus four. In all of this, my grandmother did more than merely “keep the peace.” She worked hard at maintaining contact with the entire family, including those with whom she was at odds with legally.

On the other hand, consider the experience of a friend of mine. He is serving a large church as interim pastor. For decades, this church has been known for its cantankerous internal splits. The previous pastor believed he had been called to be a “peacemaker,”

but in truth all he did was “keep the peace” by ignoring the issues. Now that he has gone, there is no peace. There is only contempt.

Isaiah invites us to see the possibilities of peacemaking. The images the prophet uses seem so different from what we’re accustomed to seeing. When we think of conflict, we are more accustomed to see images of Ukrainian towns being bombarded, of terrorists striking in the middle east, or tens of thousands being killed in Gaza. We may see a little child leading a group, but as we were reminded this week, frequently that child has her hands in the air, fleeing hallways ripped by bullets.

In contrast, Isaiah offers us an impossible possibility: can we make room for compassion so that future will no longer be marked by devouring the competition? Is it possible for us to learn how to say “aloha” to those with whom we disagree, so that it means more than “bye-bye?”

Isaiah’s words were spoken at a time when calamity had fallen upon Israel. Leadership, especially kings who ruled according to God’s purposes, had evaporated. Enemies were poised to swoop in, to capture and obliterate Israel. These were invaders, aggressive wolves who were not merely chasing the squirrels, but instead determined to devour them. Instead, the enemies were real: they were lions who had no taste for straw.

Yet Isaiah holds forth an invitation to this unimaginable possibility rooted in hope: peace shall come. Not just “peace keeping,” but true “peacemaking,” the coming of a king who will, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, “not only do what the world takes to be *possible*, but also what the world has declared to be *impossible*.”

Children will play in neighborhoods where drive-by shootings occur daily.

Schools will become places of peace and learning.

Nations will no longer fear other nations.

They will not hurt or destroy in all God’s holy mountain.

It is a stunning vision, captured so beautifully by artists and poets. Perhaps the most famous of these portrayals was created by the American artist and minister Edward Hicks.¹ Hicks created more than 60 versions of “The Peaceable Kingdom,”² and art historians suggest he may have painted over 100. He began working as a commercial

¹ See “Edward Hicks,” at the National Gallery of Art website, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1396.html>

² See “The Peaceable Kingdom” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art,” <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/56662#:~:text=Hicks%20developed%20his%20imagery%20from,submit%20to%20the%20Christ%20Spirit.>

painter decorating coaches for wealthy customers. But Hicks' artistic talents were scorned as being too worldly by his Quaker community. Their rebukes led him to become a farmer, an occupation that did not match his calling.

He eventually became a Quaker minister and then returned to painting. This time, he brought what we might say was an "aloha" Spirit to this work—painting images inspired by scripture, often giving them away as gifts. His early visions were filled with optimistic imagery, yet as he grew older, his belief in the ability of humans to bring about peace began to fade. He witnessed dissension in his own faith community—but according to his biographers, that only made him cling closer to his understanding that one day Christ would bring peace.

John Buchanan once wrote that "Peace is startling. You don't see it often, maybe ever." Commenting on Hicks' painting, Buchanan draws our attention to the middle of the painting. "A child, a little girl or boy, with eyes wide open as if startled by this unlikely reality."

John Calvin once remarked that "If this fullness of knowledge takes possession of our minds, it will free us from all malice."

It sounds impossible. It sounds over idealized, unrealistic. But ask yourself: can we afford to continue living with contempt for those who are different from us? Are we willing to pay that price – the steep emotional, physical, and spiritual costs of contempt?

Isaiah reminds us that this vision of "Aloha" begins with compassion for ourselves, and continues as we remain in relationship with those with whom we may disagree. This is not, of course, an invitation to let others violate us. It is not a call to be in relationships that are dangerous. It is, however, a vision of faith that believes our tendencies to demonize others reflects a vision far from the Good News of the Gospel. **Amen.**