

Blessed are the
Peacemakers



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In the words *peacemaking* or *reconciliation* we hear the beautiful sounds of approach, listening, forgiveness, embrace and healing. These two words, however, are also extremely difficult, impossible and even dangerous. Reconciliation begins at the restored “peace between us and God” (Romans 5:1). Through the blood of his Son, God reconciled us with Himself (Colossians 2:20) and entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). This peace must be ministered, in marriages, families, amongst congregations, between groups of people, people of different race and class... and between churches.

Peacemakers – a difficult calling

When Jesus stated in his Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9), He knew exactly how difficult making peace really is.

He knew about the Roman authority that dominated and oppressed the Jews – the harshness of their yoke. He knew that there were people in his own circle of disciples who wanted to revolt against the Roman oppressors in a violent way. When Jesus talked about making peace, He knew exactly about the political and social unrest of his day, the immorality and corruption which thrived in Palestine – also amongst his own compatriots, for example the High Priests’ exploitation at the temple and the Jewish king Herod, who arranged to cut off the head of Jesus’ friend John during an orgy. Jesus knew about the exploitation of his people, the toll-collectors and the toll-gates, the poverty, the social injustice against women, children, the sick and the vulnerable. He definitely knew about the cultural and racial conflict, the conflict between groups of people like the Jews, Romans, Samaritans, strangers, heathens, the Pharisee and Sadducee, the rich and poor and slaves.

But Jesus also knew about the tension in houses, the abuse of women and divorce. He knew about the tension within his own circle of disciples, in the church, the feud between brothers, believers who take one another to court, who condemn one another, curse one another... If one pages through the book of Matthew, it is all written there – exactly like the world we live in today.

Against this background, Jesus' words "Blessed are the peacemakers", get a deeper meaning – even a dangerous meaning. Because to be peacemakers in such a world is not child's play. It means that you have to make great sacrifices; that you will be prosecuted and suffer injustices. Peacemaking means that you turn the other cheek; you walk the second mile; you also give the undergarments; you forgive, seventy times seven; you disregard reward; you leave the lawsuit and become reconciled in front of the altar; you don't judge anymore; you tear up the divorce letter; you cross borders and eat with the poor, the sinners and heathens and you give your possessions away. It means that you pay taxes to the hated emperor; you put your sword back in its scabbard; you embrace your enemies, you love them, you pray for them. To be a peacemaker goes against the grain, against the natural human behaviour... Therefore "Blessed are the peacemakers" are some of the most loaded and dangerous words in the Bible. It asks nothing less than total self-sacrifice!

How does one make peace?

Peacemaking is not a passive word, doing nothing in order to keep the peace. There is something active in the word, a deliberate making of peace. Peacemakers are different from peace-loving people, who would rather stay uninvolved and do nothing out of fear of conflict. Or who shouts peace-peace, even if there is no peace – and thus proclaims false peace. Peacemaking, real reconciliation, is hard work. It normally requires a huge price. It requires courage; it requires self-denial; sacrifice; disclosure of the truth; exposure of oneself. It requires confession and forgiveness – to give and receive forgiveness. It creates room for healing and sets up signs of the kingdom. It shows: this is how it looks where the Lord Jesus is King. Therefore it is also blessed to be peacemakers.

The theologian, Miroslav Volf, vividly described peacemaking in terms of what he calls the drama or **dance of embrace**. In such an embrace, for example where Jacob and Esau became reconciled and embraced one another in tears (Genesis 33:4), or Joseph and his brother Benjamin (Genesis 45: 14-15) or the waiting father and his lost son (Luke 15: 11-32), four movements occur.

The **first movement** is the longing for reconciliation, the knowledge that exclusion is robbing me and the other person of so much in life. It is the realisation that animosity and estrangement steal the humanity and joy of living out of both of us. It is the painful experience of loneliness and brokenness, which can only be healed by the return to and acceptance of the other. This first movement is the realisation of pain and longing and brokenness, which makes me turn my face to the other, makes me move... with the longing for reconciliation.

The **second movement** in the drama of embrace is the opening of the arms, waiting. It is the hospitable invitation to the other, come closer... There is something fragile and risky to open your arms in such a way – it disarms you, exposes you, let the truth come to light. The invitation can be rejected, the exposure of the truth and the openness can be used against you. Therefore the opening of the arms precisely does not mean that I grab the other one and force him or her to forgive me or to accept my invitation... I wait, I invite, I listen and I understand. I respect the other's feelings, I create space for the other, so that it can become a reciprocal movement towards one another.

The **third movement** is the embrace itself, when two people put their arms around one another and hold one another. This is where one discards oneself, sacrificially. In this moment forgiveness is given and received, there is acceptance of one another. This is when both parties admit, we need one another, we are co-destined – we share in one another’s guilt and pain. In this moment the relationship is mended, the healing begins. The one who gives forgiveness and the one who receives forgiveness become whole, richer persons. In the embrace there is also something of a self-embrace – you learn to also forgive and accept yourself.

And then we have the **fourth movement**, where we open the arms again and let one another go. Reconciliation does not mean an overpowering embrace of the other, not being self-absorbed in one another, not becoming one, but instead creates space for one another, space for our differences, space for our human weakness, a space for healing, the reparation of injustice, the creation of new possibilities. This is also just as difficult a movement as all the others in this drama. But it is necessary to create space again for one another, or to put it differently, to have respect for one another’s space.

This is the paradox. Peacemaking is the loss of oneself, the sacrifice of oneself, just to receive back a richer, fuller self. Therefore the Lord Jesus calls peacemakers blessed, children of God.

It is possible, because reconciliation is a gift

If peacemaking goes against the grain of human nature, how do we achieve it? The answer lies in God’s trinity and what God does. The answer lies with God’s reconciliation work – in the drama of God’s embrace of the world: in the way that God turns to us; opens his arms and invites us to an embrace; the embrace of grace and forgiveness, living-space, joy and peace. The old church father Irenaeus already talked about God the Father’s embrace of the world, with the two arms of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

One of the places where this embrace is best described, is John 20: 19-22. After the dramatic crucifixion events of the Sunday night, Jesus appears before his disciples. They sat behind closed doors, scared about everything that happened. In the streets of Jerusalem there were unrest and violence, the crowd called out for blood; they brutally crucified Jesus, killed and buried him. Now they are looking for his followers. Against this unrest in the world, the doors are locked.

Then Jesus suddenly appears. He lives. He rose. He is here. And he holds out his arms and hands – waiting, inviting. “Peace be with you”, He says. Twice. Here is the peace that I gained through my death and resurrection. Here is the reconciliation. It is for you, He says with outstretched arms, so that they can see the nail marks in his hands, the spear wound in his side. The peace which He offers here came at a huge price. As proof of that there are the marks, the wounds. Here, it’s for you. Here, it’s for you, He says to his disciples. Receive it as a gift. Accept it. Believe it. Accept God’s embrace. Embrace it.

But then He also says: go and spread it in the streets of Jerusalem. Go out behind the closed doors and into the world. Go and preach the reconciliation. Go and live it. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,” says Jesus. Then He blows over them and says “Receive the Holy Spirit.” With that He promises: when you go out to minister my peace, and that takes self-sacrifice, I will be with you in Spirit, every day, everywhere. You will experience peace. You will live through the reconciliation.

Everyone who accepts the invitation of being embraced by the Triune God, who experiences the forgiveness and who, with a sense of wonder, experience the forgiveness and wholeness of God’s embrace, cannot do it differently... cannot help but to embrace others within the embrace of God. This is what it means to be blessed, what it means to be a child of God.

Some guide-lines

- The work of peacemaking means that I will be reconciled with others. It can mean that I forgive or am forgiven. Or it can mean that I help others to meet and reconcile with one another.
- Reconciliation is only possible if people start talking to one another, sincerely listening to one another, trying to stand in one another's shoes... It requires openness for the other.
- True reconciliation is only possible if the truth comes out, even if it hurts. For that reason we must help one another and create safe spaces for the truth to be revealed.
- Reconciliation is also only possible if justice is done. However, it does not mean retaliation, a tooth for a tooth. A total reparation of the injustice done is often not possible. Reconciliation requires a willingness, a gesture of care, an attempt to fix and make whole. True remorse is often enough...
- Reconciliation obviously entails forgiveness. To forgive others and yourself. Forgiveness does not mean to forget – that is not possible. It means that you do not remember with bitterness, that you are no longer the victim of your memories, that your way of remembering becomes healed.
- Reconciliation is at the centre of the church's ministry. Every believer received the call to a ministry of reconciliation. Therefore it must stay part of every congregation's message and ministry. We need to keep on praying for reconciliation in this country of ours.

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