Is Peace on Your List?

GAL. 5:22-23 (NRSVUE) ***…the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.***

MATT. 5:9 (NRSVUE) ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."***

In speaking of peace, most likely we imply the ending or absence of war or other violence: visions of Douglas MacArthur aboard the USS Missouri, accepting the surrender of Japan, ending WWII; Robert E. Lee surrendering to General Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Courthouse, ending the American Civil War…

With news of Ukrainian forces driving the Russian army from the Donbas region, a cease-fire seems closer at hand. We yearn for peace—no more war.

It's ironic, and somewhat discouraging, when we realize that since, 1776, US armed forces have been engaged at some level of armed conflict in all but 20 of those 246 years. I'm reminded of the passage in the Hebrew Scriptures—the book of **JEREMIAH (8:11-12 NRSVUE):** ***They have treated the wound of the daughter of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace."***

Jeremiah probably was the last Hebrew prophet before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The last chapter of that book may be an eye-witness account of that final day when the city wall was breached, and Babylonian forces destroyed the city—including Solomon's magnificent temple. The language of that chapter, even in English, is so graphic you can almost hear the screams of the dying, almost smell the smoke and feel the grit in your teeth.

Jeremiah is known as the "Weeping Prophet," because every time he spoke it was of doom and gloom, and he hated it. He shook his fist in God's face and called him a bully! He said (and I'm reading from The Message paraphrase, 10:7ff),

You pushed me into this, God, and I let you do it.
You were too much for me.
And now I'm a public joke.
They all poke fun at me.
Every time I open my mouth
I'm shouting, "Murder!" or "Rape!"
And all I get for my God-warnings
are insults and contempt.
But if I say, "Forget it!
No more God-Messages from me!"
The words are fire in my belly,
a burning in my bones.
I'm worn out trying to hold it in.
I can't do it any longer!

The leadership was corrupt—from the king's court to the Temple priesthood. The people were materialistic and maintained a social caste system that kept the poor in their place. Foreigners were not welcome. Israel had become everything

God created humanity NOT to be.

But they thought they were super holy. After all, they attended the festivals and holy days, they brought their offerings and sacrifices and, to top it all off, they had Solomon's Temple.

When you read the Hebrew prophets, you get the distinct impression that Israel was living under an illusion that, since they were God's chosen people, nothing could happen to them—they were immune to tragedy. So they paid lip service to their religious rituals and went about their business. Jeremiah had other ideas.

In chapter 7 we read his famous "Temple sermon." Again, reading from MSG:

'Listen, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship GOD. GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, Israel's God, has this to say to you:

3-7 *"'Clean up your act—the way you live, the things you do—so I can make my home with you in this place. Don't for a minute believe the lies being spoken here—"This is GOD's Temple, GOD's Temple, GOD's Temple!" Total nonsense! Only if you clean up your act (the way you live, the things you do), only if you do a total spring cleaning on the way you live and treat your neighbors, only if you quit exploiting the street people and orphans and widows, no longer taking advantage of innocent people on this very site and no longer destroying your souls by using this Temple as a front for other gods—only then will I move into your neighborhood. Only then will this country I gave your ancestors be my permanent home, my Temple.*

8-11 *"'Get smart! Your leaders are handing you a pack of lies, and you're swallowing them! Use your heads! Do you think you can rob and murder, have casual sex with the neighborhood wives, tell lies nonstop, worship the local gods, and buy every novel religious commodity on the market—and then march into this Temple, set apart for my worship, and say, "We're safe!" thinking that the place itself gives you a license to go on with all this outrageous sacrilege? A cave full of criminals! Do you think you can turn this Temple, set apart for my worship, into something like that?*

The KJV puts it: "Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" You may recall that Jesus quoted from that sermon when he drove the money changers out of the temple. [I like the cliché: "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going into a garage makes you a car."] And it all sounds strangely familiar; if we dissect it line-by-line it could have been written today. And it goes on and on until we come to that injunction regarding the leaders of Judah: **JEREMIAH (8:11-12 NRSVUE):** ***They have treated the wound of the daughter of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace."*** [The Message paraphrase says, "My dear Daughter—my people—broken, shattered, and yet they put on Band-Aids, Saying, "It's not so bad. You'll be just fine."]

650 years later, Jesus said to his disciples, **JOHN 14:25-27 (NRSVUE)** ***"I have said these things to you while I am still with you.*** ***26****But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the*

Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives."

The peace Christ leaves is distinctive. All those "peaceful" scenes thrust upon us by the greeting card industry, enticing as they may be, turn out to be mirages, false promises that mock us even as we seek, but don't find, the reality they represent. The peace Christ leaves is none other than the ongoing presence of all that God is. Indeed, John's Gospel, one of the latest writings in the New Testament canon, reinterprets the "second coming of Jesus."

John's gospel is responding to the death of the first generation of Christians, who died without seeing the immediate return they expected. Their hope was, "the end is coming soon." Gene Boring notes that John affirms that hope by redefining "the end." The end in fact already has come, as Jesus promised, with the coming of the Spirit—the Advocate—and the beginning of the church.

The most distinctive aspect of John's reinterpretation of the end is the understanding that the imagery of the coming of Christ or Messiah tends to be replaced by the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the result is the peace Christ gives.

There isn't an English word that communicates the biblical notion of "Peace". In English, "peace" is a negative concept: the absence of war or conflict or stress or confusion. The Hebrew word, šālôm, rendered in the Greek NT, "ειρηνη," has a wide semantic range including positive notions of totality or completeness, success, fulfillment, wholeness or health, harmony, order, security and well-being. Isn't that what we yearn for? Not just the absence of division and conflict?

In John's Gospel, this sense is found only in connection with Jesus and with the Advocate—the Holy Spirit—who God sent in Jesus' name. And it is in the realization of that hope—the experience of that presence—that the "peace" Jesus offers is found, still today: in the manifestation of the gifts and the fruit of the Spirit. Remember those lists: the Beatitudes, the gifts of the Spirit, the fruits…

For us, it's a matter of opening our lives to the presence through the Spiritual Disciplines of which I speak so often. Quaker scholar, Richard Foster writes, "Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant gratification is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.

"The classical Disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths. …They urge us to be the answer to a hollow world."

It's that word, "discipline," that intimidates so many people seeking deep spirituality. As Foster suggests, we live in a culture of instant, and even constant, gratification, and I would extend that culture to much of what today is called "being spiritual." But discipline is slow. It places demands upon us.

The Epistle of James scolds, ***"You do not have because you do not ask"*** **(4:2)**

The promise of Jesus is affirming: ***"…Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you"*** **(LUKE 11:9).**

Is "Peace" on your list of spiritual goals?