



“Peace is Possible”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

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Isaiah 11: 1-10 (NRSV)***

Over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, Stephanie and I were fortunate to reconnect with Laura Lutz King and her daughters. The Kings drove down to the East Bay from Novato for the day. We met over brunch. Unfortunately, we missed seeing Mike this round, as he had just headed to Singapore on a business trip the day before.

Those of you who were part of Eden Church five years ago or more may remember the King family. Laura was the moderator of the church then and a member of the choir, and Laura and Eliza, the King’s oldest daughter, were active in many of our church programs.

About five years ago, the Kings moved to Southern California where Mike and Laura accepted new jobs, and welcomed another child into their family—Penelope—or “Penny” for short.

Stephanie and I had a nice time reconnecting with Laura and the girls a couple of weeks ago. We marveled at Eliza’s growth and enjoyed getting to know Penny. She is an absolute pip. Penny’s three and one-half years old, small for her age, light as a feather, and imbued with a big personality. (Think “Mighty Mouse!”)

Paul Prosseda was also part of our gathering. Eliza and Penny refer to him as “Uncle Paul,” because he is a close family friend.

Over brunch, Paul asked Penny to tell him about her new friends in Novato. Penny was full of stories and quick to oblige.

Meanwhile, I got caught up in a conversation with Laura and tuned out of Penny and Paul’s dialogue for a few minutes. Everyone at the table was drawn back into Penny and Paul’s conversation after Penny began describing a recent incident at the playground that she frequents.

Laura explained to me later that there is a child at Penny's favorite playground who sometimes uses bad words, like "ugly" and "stupid," and who tries to pick fights with other children.

Paul asked Penny what she says when this child misbehaves.

Penny was quick to demonstrate. She sat her silverware down beside her plate, held out her hands, and with all the authority of a crossing guard shouted, "Stop!!! Stop using bad words! That's not nice! You have to stop using bad words right now, or I'm going to go play with someone else!"

II

The Old Testament reading for today is from Isaiah 11:1-10. This passage is one of the best loved selections among the Advent lections and the book of Isaiah. It is often referred to as "The peaceable kingdom." The most familiar lines are these:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom is both beautiful and idyllic. On our best days, we may imagine that peace is possible because Isaiah said it was. But on our worst days, we may hear Isaiah's prophecy and say, as Scrooge did in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, "Bah humbug!"

The truth is that for peace to be possible in our world, we cannot afford to wait for Santa Claus to bring it, or to sit on the sidelines of life booing those who we think should bring it, but who do not.

For peace to be possible, we must become harbingers of peace. We must become like little children. We must become like Penny. We must intervene at the micro-level of our lives and say with all the authority of a three-year old, "Stop! That's not nice!"

III

While the Prince of Peace came into this world knowing that peace was possible and knowing how to do the things that made for peace, I do not believe that most children are born knowing how to handle difficult situations that have the potential to escalate into violence on a playground, street corner, freeway, or military battlefield.

I believe that true peace is a product of the absence of violence and the prevalence of justice, and that peace is a learned behavior. Peace must be taught, and it must be learned in order for peace to be possible.

Carolyn Davis, a career preschool director, and former colleague of mine in Boston, once explained her pedagogical approach to preschool to me in the following manner. She said:

At The Old South Preschool, we emphasize the development of social skills necessary for success in school and life above academic skills—even though we know that some families will choose other preschools over ours that teach reading, foreign languages, and the classical arts.

The programs that emphasize academics at the ages of three and four are designed to put children on a fast-track to the Ivy League colleges, and they may be effective at doing that. But at Old South we focus on social skills, because numerous studies have found that by the third grade most children learn to read, but far too few learn to share.

If the world is going to be a better place, we need to value and teach sharing at least as much as we value and teach academics.

In the spirit of the prophet Isaiah, I invite us to consider the question, “What are we doing, even today, to teach the things that make for peace?”

What are we doing to teach peace on the playgrounds where our children play?

What are we doing to reduce bullying in the schools where our youth attend classes?

What are we doing to make peace with our next door neighbor? with the idiot on the freeway? or the jerk at the office?

What are we doing to make peace possible on the micro-level of our lives?

For peace to be possible—and it is possible—God said so through the prophet Isaiah, then we must make peace our daily practice, and practice peace where we live and work and eat and pray; and we must teach our children and our children’s children the things that make for peace, even today. Amen.