The Things Which Makes for Peace

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: The brief homily which follows was prepared as the core of a closing worship service which concluded a conference attended by US and Soviet religious leaders. The conference, entitled "The Challenges of Peace and Justice: Responses from the Religious Communities of the US and USSR," was sponsored by US-USSR Bridges for Peace of Norwich, Vermont. It was held at the Arch Street Friends Meeting, and was organized in cooperation with the American Friends Service Committee and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends.

The Soviet participants at the conference, 14 in number, were delegates sent by the Russian Orthodox Church at the request of Bridges for Peace. They included clergy and lay members of Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic churches in the USSR; and a member of the Soviet Jewish community.

This delegation was in the US from April 3-17, 1986. The conference took place on April 15, near the end of their journey. A meeting held the day before the conference with the Philadelphia Council on Soviet Jewry, to discuss issues around official Soviet emigration policy as it pertained to Jewish persons in the USSR, provided part of the inspiration for the remarks in the homily.

"And when (Jesus) drew near and saw (Jerusalem) he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes.'" - Luke 19:41-42 (RSV)

"Would that you knew the things which make for peace," Jesus said, as he wept over Jerusalem 2000 years ago. In our world now, there are many things over which we, too, can weep, saying in sorrow, "If only we knew the things which make for peace!"

We need not look far for such occurrences, as again yesterday a great nation has taken up the sword in frustration, rage, and self-righteous conviction of its own rectitude in so doing. (NOTE: The US air-strike against Libya took place the preceding day.) Yet history is full of examples of another Biblical maxim, that those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. We hold our breaths, in a sense, not yet sure how deep and tragic will be the ramifications of this most recent international violence. We share, I believe, the conviction that repaying violence with violence is not one of the things which makes for peace.

What, then, does make for peace? If Jesus Christ is, for Christian persons, our peace, we look to him for the way to an answer. What do we find in his teaching? Among other things, perhaps paramount, these two points: an emphasis on telling the truth; and an emphasis on the will to love - even the
Let us consider "truth" for a moment. Yesterday, many of us were present at a meeting between our delegation of religious leaders from the USSR, and the Philadelphia Council on Soviet Jewry. Many truths were told - about the past, and about the present. I was struck by the number of members of both the Council and the USSR delegation who had known tragic personal loss and suffering from the same cause - fascism, and the destruction it wreaked on Europe and the world just a generation ago. Impelled by this experience, the Soviet people most earnestly desire peace, and in general seem to concur with the initiatives of their government towards a more peaceful world. Impelled by this same experience, Jewish people throughout the world have a fervent concern for their brothers and sisters in all lands. Yesterday, we witnessed a struggle of sorts between two fervent desires with a common root - but now quite different priorities and perspectives.

To take an example - policies of the Soviet state which restrict emigration, causing suffering to Jews in the USSR who do wish to emigrate, call forth vocal criticism from the Council on Soviet Jewry. Because, in part, of this issue, on the quite specific matter of whether Philadelphia and Leningrad should become sister-cities, forming a bond which might help reduce US-Soviet tension - the Council says "No!" while others say "Yes!" The uncertainty is whether or not tension really could or should be reduced between the US and USSR without first, or simultaneously, trying to assure that emigration from the USSR becomes less restrictive.

A dilemma! What, in this specific case, is "the thing which makes for peace?" What would Jesus say to us, faced with this puzzle? We strain to imagine. An answer is not clear. Not that I or others do not have our answers. We do choose. But I do not think we can, any of us, claim God's own certain blessing upon our choice. This is the human condition; to have partial
truths, and try patiently to piece them together. To make choices in honesty and sincerity, and then strive to incarnate our choices in the world. And again and again, to stumble over others trying to do the same thing. With partial truths, and a will to peace, what do we do? What would God have us do?

One thing at least, I believe, is that God would have us listen to one another. In patience and humility, ever mindful that our truths are partial, and may need to be completed through the truth spoken by another - even if that truth is, like ours, partial and hard to hear.

This, I believe, is one way to express the love to which Jesus calls us. Holding by faith that it is possible to be sustained by that "perfect love which casts out fear," we can relinquish our fear of being confronted by what is different, and challenging. Then we will not simply endure the voice that challenges us, but welcome it as a call to clarify, deepen, and broaden our own understanding; and to better inform our faith. God's call is to life - whose essence is growth and change. We heed that call in telling the truth we know in love; and in lovingly attending to the truth spoken by others. May it be so for us!