



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 3rd March, 2024

"The table of harmony-making and peace"

A reflection for the Third Sunday of Lent.

"Living in Harmony" is this year's Lenten theme.

Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Gospel Reading: John 14:25-29 [From Jesus' long 'farewell' teaching in John's Gospel story of the 'Last Supper'. It follows the discussion around the table of Jesus' coming departure from among the disciples, and how his ministry will soon be theirs...]

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 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. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may believe."

Contemporary Reading *"Let Us Learn Peace"* L Annie Foerster

Peace is more than the absence of worry.
It is the creation of safe havens for all;
It is the building of security for everyone;
It is the forgiveness of self, as well as one who would harm you.
Let us seek contentment; let us learn peace.
Peace is more than the absence of discordance.

It is the intent listening to diverse points of view;
It is the intentional speaking of all voices, one at a time;
It is the tension within silence that welcomes all thoughts.
Let us seek harmony; let us learn peace.
Peace is more than the absence of tension.

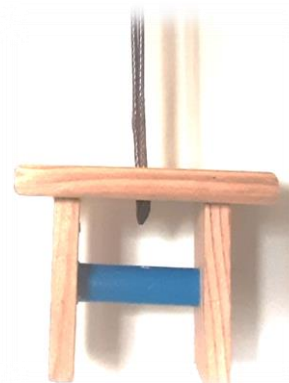
It is studying the hard lesson of letting go;
It is breathing through pain into tranquility;
It is forming friendship out of enmity.
Let us seek serenity; let us learn peace.
Peace is much more than the absence of war.

It is observing the promised truce when anger would say, "no";
It is finding the just compromise when the ego would say, "my way";
It is striving for reconciliation when the heart would say, "revenge."
Let us seek friendship for all the earth; let us learn peace.

I've spoken before of my belief that '*the table*' is a very important Christian symbol. When I wear one in church in place of a cross, it's not disrespectful or a gimmick, or ignoring the importance of the cross as a symbol - it's a deeply held statement of faith on my part, expressed like this:

The cross was the way Jesus died, the table was the way Jesus lived.

He gathered people in mutual hospitality, in exchanging stories, in teaching, in caring and healing – all in the name of the GOD whose story they ALL shared. There wasn't a physical table present in all of the life-changing, faith-affirming and hope-filled stories of the gospels, but I think it stands as a pretty good symbol.



And when we go back into the history of Jesus' people with GOD, we find the same thing – a history of feasts and events that told and re-told the people who they were: a people of GOD

But today, I don't only wear my table as a nod to history. I wear it as a prayer: a prayer for harmony-making in our present world.

I've been talking during lent about 'harmony-making' as a spiritual discipline, a practice rather than just a nice idea. Last week my witness was on 'harmony-making and hope'; this week my thoughts have turned to 'harmony-making and peace', and you'll probably have seen where I'm going with the table symbol.

We hear it all the time on the news, when parties or groups are trying to work through disputes: "*We want them to come to the table and negotiate, so we can reach a good solution*".

Industrial dispute over wages and condition, government negotiations with business over an airport rail link, calls for Israel and Hamas to 'come to the table': we've heard all of these this week – and others besides!

'The table' stands as a symbol for negotiation, for harmony-making, for peace-making that can – just maybe – work towards genuine peace! And 'my' table is a prayer for that.

I was struck by something, though, as I watched the meeting this week of Prime Minister Albanese and President Marcos Jnr of the Phillipines, in his State visit.

They were sitting in Parliament House with their entourages, at a circle of tables, rather than at a single table. It was a nice setting, to be sure, but I couldn't help noticing how much physical distance was between the leaders – I hoped that both have good hearing!

Perhaps I was sensitized to this because of my thoughts about tables, but I found myself wishing that they were sitting at a single table, instead of being kind of lined up opposite one another.

(I also found myself thinking about my table, and wondering if I should find a round one as my symbol, rather than one with 'sides'!)

All this led me back to the table of Holy Communion at which we meet today. With its symbols which speak to us of ordinary people caught up in grace WAY beyond ordinary, and its story of people finding sacred wholeness meeting their brokenness.

We have this story today because generations of Jesus' followers took it to heart, and found such holiness in it that they couldn't help but tell and re-tell it when they met around their tables.

We cherish it today because it tells us something of who we are as a people. In a world which seems broken, I believe the table speaks to us of hope, and calls us to harmony-making and peace – real peace – where and how we are.

In the holy Name of the ONE in whom we live, and move, and have our being, AMEN