

Title: *Joining in God's Project*

Jeremiah 29:4-14

⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Marry and have sons and daughters; find spouses for your children, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷**But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.** ⁸For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

¹⁰For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Ephesians 2:13-22

³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴**For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.** ¹⁵**Jesus has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,** ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So Jesus came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to God. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

For Reflection:

We've been so dehumanized by this world's system that we think it's natural to live for ourselves alone. But it's not. God wants to restore us to the authentic relationships we were made for. That's what reconciliation is all about.

-John Perkins in *Welcoming Justice*

The central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature.

-Walter Brueggemann in *Living Toward a Vision*.

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The central vision of world history in the Bible, says Walter Brueggemann, is that all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature.¹ In the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, this vision is expressed in the affirmation that Abraham and Sarah are the parents of all of Israel and that every person is their child. Israel had a vision of all people drawn into community around the will of its God (Is 2:2-4). In the New Testament, the church has a parallel vision of all persons being drawn under the Lordship of Jesus and therefore into a single community.

And if these are not sweeping enough visions, we have a dominant metaphor in the writings of the apostle Paul that all persons are children of a single family, members of a single tribe, heirs of a single hope, and bearers of a single destiny, which is the care and management of all of God's creation.

The word that most summarizes this controlling vision is *shalom*. This Hebrew concept seeks to hold the weight and depth of a dream of God that resists all our tendencies to division, hostility, fear, blame, and misery. This concept, *shalom* is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation. Of all being as it should be, of things being in right relationship – the flourishing of all.

¹ Walter Brueggemann formulates this idea in his book *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*.

Some theologians, in speaking about the broad work of God throughout history speak of, *God's Project of Reconciliation* – that this is the work of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – bringing all things together in right relationship. Or, one that I like even better, *God's Cosmic Shalom Project* – that God was, is, and will continue to be about the business of bringing all things into right relationship – not just one person, or nation, or even planet – but the whole Cosmos into right relationship. We can see how in American Christianity where we have mostly emphasized individual sin, shame, and forgiveness – we have neglected much of what God is doing. God is not just seeking to restore individuals to God through the sin, shame, and forgiveness cycle – this is just one piece of the God who seeks to reconcile all things. Our God is in the big picture business, putting all things into right relationship.

The origin and the destiny of God's people then, our destiny, is to be on the road of shalom – on the road to reconciliation – on the road to justice and peace. To be partners with God – in our own spheres of influence, in our very tiny slivers of the cosmos – to be partners in this work of reconciliation. Or, as the song we sang earlier puts it, “chosen as partners, midwives of justice, birthing new systems” (from *God of the Bible*). To seek the *shalom* of the city, for in its *shalom* we will find our *shalom*.

Shalom, or the work of reconciliation, it has numerous components. It is a concept of depth which holds the wholeness of this vision: wholeness with self, with God, with others, and with all of creation. The work of reconciliation, it is first personal:

Last week I shared a few stories about my mother, and in one of those I said that she had a difficult relationship with her father. While the relationship was never great, the major point of crisis came when my mom was sixteen and her mother died of breast cancer. It was after this that her relationship with her father became extremely strained, and eventually she spent more and more time with her aunt and uncle. When she would come home from college, she would stay with her aunt and uncle. The people that I call “Grandma and Grandpa” are actually my “Great aunt and uncle.”

All that to say, that my biological Grandfather always blamed his brother and sister-in-law for stealing his daughter – instead of being grateful that there was someone there to love and support her when he could not, he believed that if they had not be around, all would have been okay. He spent the last forty years of his life angry with his brother and sister-in-law. They went to the same church for those forty years and never talked about it – he just carried around that anger and resentment.

And at the end of his life in those last few days in the hospital, my Grandparents – his brother and sister-in-law whom he never forgave, kept coming to his hospital room. And with no one else around, it was my Grandma who was holding his hand when he breathed his last breath in this life. She was not about to let a little thing like his 40 years of resentment toward her keep him from having someone to hold his hand in his last moments. Nor did that resentment cause him to refuse her company in those final days. An example of seeking to bring things into right relationship, of not holding a personal grudge even if someone remains angry with you.

¹⁴For Christ is our peace; in his body he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

The work of reconciliation, it does not stay only in the personal realm, it moves outward, seeing that all of humanity was created in the image of God with limitless potential. It knows that the welfare of one is tied to the welfare of all.

Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to this as *The Beloved Community*, what some still think of as the unfinished business of the civil rights movement – beyond the changing of laws into the creation of the Beloved Community, where all are seen as sisters and brothers with an equal share. The Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

After the desegregation of the seats of the Montgomery bus system, King did not just stand-up there and declare victory for one side, rather he continued to see that there was an even bigger picture “the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends.” King did not just want to end segregation, he did not just want civil rights for Black

Americans – he wanted a new community – he wanted the oppressor and the oppressed to be redeemed – he wanted the reconciliation of all things. This, he called the Beloved Community.

Professor and Biblical Scholar Perry Yoder says that the fulfillment of *shalom*, as embodied by Jesus, is seen in the love of our enemy – that the ultimate full picture of reconciliation comes in seeing the humanity of our enemy, of seeking their welfare as well as our own.

For more than 30 years, Marian Franze advocated for peace and justice in our nation’s capital, working in the Washington, D.C. office of Mennonite Central Committee – seeking to be a voice of reconciliation. In reflecting on her more than three decades of advocacy for justice and peace, she said, “I have conducted literally hundreds of Congressional visits, but have never met ‘The Congress’, never dialogued with ‘The State’ or conversed with a policy. What I have met are people, just plain people.”²

“I have found it easy to make scapegoats of the military and proponents of the military” she continues. “Blaming, however, closes listening ears and triggers the need to strike back. If I take an exalted, self-righteous stance and point an accusing finger, I mimic the blame game played out by warring countries. Each justifies their side by decrying the parallel sins of the other side. Only those without sin are allowed to cast stones.

Because peace advocates and military generals live in separate worlds, the peace movement sees the military establishment as a collection of misguided people, protected by bureaucratic formality from all contact with reality. The military establishment perceives the

² Marian Franz shares these reflections in the book *Godward: Personal Stories of Grace*.

peace movement as a collection of naïve people, meddling in a business they do not understand. Each group considers itself right. Each considers itself morally superior. The two sides remain polarized because each usually preaches only to its own.

As Marian reflects on the nexus of the old Quaker phrase of “speaking truth to power”, and the Mennonite ideal of “always speaking truth in love”, she concludes that, “Members of congress need us to continually raise issues, and at the same time, they need us to respect them as precious, unique, and worth our continued support and attention no matter what their decisions.” I have come to see that the same love which binds me to the victims of war and oppression binds me also to the powerful.

One member of Congress reflected on how their position was actually changed with regard to military spending. “My mind was changed on military arms funding,” they said, “by persons who did not polarize the debate into ‘us’ and ‘them.’ These people helped transform my attitude because they helped me see the facts and decide for myself without making me their enemy.”

¹⁴For Chris is our shalom; in his body he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

Finally, this work of reconciliation thinks cyclically, it considers the whole – the right-relationship of the entire cosmos. Shalom thinks of the cycles of our actions, the ways they work over time.

When shalom/reconciliation comes, it does not come from business as usual, so we need not look for it there. When shalom/reconciliation comes, it does not come from the sources from which we might expect – when it comes, whenever it comes, requires odd action from unexpected sources. Without odd action from unexpected sources, the world will continue to go its uneasy, self-destructive way. The fullness of reconciliation depends on human agents who break vicious cycles and create space in which peace becomes a possibility.

There are cycles of death: Our greed guarantees hostility and our selfishness creates fear. Our lust for surplus ruins forests, which evokes droughts. Our chemicals upset the thermal patterns of the world. The Biblical writers may have been pre-scientific, but they knew about patterns: patterns that brought life, and those that brought death and destruction. These prescientific writers know that one act of hate contributes to a hate-filled creation, and one bit of fear builds large reservoirs of resentment...and conversely, one neighborly act will also cause a ripple upon creation. One less gesture of greed will let one tree live, and one live tree begins the healing of creation. Human stuff matters to the whole of the cosmos.³

In our creation care small group, we talked about this as life-giving cycle, as a sign we are in the work of reconciliation – what is bringing life and life and life. Riding bike versus driving a car...With the example of riding a bike and driving a gasoline car (Reed calls, “a pollute mobile.”). In riding a bike to transport I am not enclosed and cut-off from my surroundings and so I am more aware of the world around me, I am more likely to stop and talk to neighbors that I pass by; not only do I not put pollution into the air, but I am getting exercise; I am reducing the demand for fossil fuels whose production not only destroys the earth but whose extraction leads

³ Walter Brueggemann expresses this idea in his sermon, “The Peace Dividend” in his book, *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*, vol. 2.

to exploitation of the people who live where those resources are found, a process of taking resources which often leads to violence. And so one small sign that we are participating in the shalom of our city, is whether the patterns of our living and working are part of life-giving cycles? Cycles that bring joy to us and our community.

And so, this is our work, the work of joining with the *God of Cosmic Reconciliation* – the work of seeking that all things be in right relationship. To be on the road of shalom – on the road to reconciliation – on the road to justice and peace. To be partners with God – in our sphere of influence, in our very tiny slivers of the cosmos – to be partners in this work of reconciliation. To seek the shalom of the city, for in its shalom we will find our shalom. Amen and amen.