

HOW TO PREACH PEACE (Without Being Tuned Out)



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Preaching peace does not seem all that controversial. After all, who is against peace?

But what if a preacher tries to get specific about Jesus' call for us to be not only peace lovers but also peacemakers? What if one's commitment to peace in Christ leads to asking if the "war on terror" is best waged not by military action but by doing justice? What if one's faith leads to the conviction that weapons of mass destruction should be eliminated so that groups and nations might not be able to obtain and use them? What if the nations of the world spending more than \$800 billion a year for military expenditures doesn't seem wise stewardship of earth's resources? How does one preach then?

Conversations with colleagues through the years lead to the conclusion that preachers can preach peace without turning off our hearers. So thanks to those colleagues, who will recognize their contributions on these guidelines on how to preach peace...without being tuned out.

1. Remember that you are an interpreter of God's Word —

not a professor of political science, an arms inspector, or a news anchor. Our roots lie in the Bible. We are shaped by and grounded in Micah's vision of a world in which swords are beaten into plows, Isaiah's warnings concerning futile trust in chariots and alliances, Jesus' way of reconciling love in a land smoldering with violence, that inform our preaching. Our agenda transcends political platforms. If we cannot speak of peacemaking out of the urgent Word, then we do better to keep silent.

2. Preach out of Vision, not demand.

Preaching peace (like all preaching) is not a matter of "ought" and "should" but of inviting people to catch a vision of what God intends the world to be. So don't just "view with alarm" the current drift of things. Preach the great Biblical vision of **shalom** (see Micah 4: 1-4; Isaiah 65: 17-25; Ezekiel 34: 17-31; Matthew 5:2-16, 38-48; Luke 1:67-79; II Corinthians 5:16-21; Ephesians 2:11-22). Let the vision seep into our psyches of a world in which babies no longer die in infancy, people live out a full life span, fields yield their produce to those who work the land, weapons of war are refashioned into agricultural tools, dividing walls are shattered, and all people live in peace and safety with God and each other. In other words, put the bad news in the context of the Good News. The hope of God's coming world will motivate us long after any fear would have burned itself out. We live among people who are starved for vision – it is our task to feed that hunger.

3. Let your manner itself be peaceable.

Our manner should fit our message. It is possible to ascend to the pulpit with a "let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may" attitude that almost invites rejection. Nobody in the pew takes kindly to angry lectures. Strident, accusatory preaching wins few converts. But one can say even hard truths if one speaks them in quiet tones and with obvious respect for those who are listening.

4. Be careful and honest in doing your homework.

Reinhold Niebuhr's dictum applies: "Consecrated ignorance is still ignorance." That does not mean we all have to hold PhDs in international relations or plow through the Pentagon's account books. But we do have to get

basic facts straight – for example, what “full spectrum dominance” is or how many strategic missiles the members of the nuclear club possess – and we do have to name the sources of our information.

It is helpful to be able to use sources who are credible to our hearers. Consider these words about weaponry:

- (a) “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”
- (b) “Our present policies, plans and postures governing nuclear weapons make us prisoner still to an age of intolerable danger. We cannot at once keep sacred the miracle of existence and hold sacrosanct the capacity to destroy it.”

Such words are expected from preachers. But when they come (as those do) from President Eisenhower (a) and General Lee Butler, former commander, Strategic Air Command (b), they have a chance of being heard.

5. Tangibilitate!

Talking about peace often involves numbers that boggle the mind and images that are difficult to grasp. How do we communicate need for peace in ways that our listeners understand? We need to work hard to translate abstractions into forceful images. For example:

- The proposed United States military budget for fiscal year 2004 (\$399 billion) exceeds the amount spent on defense by the next twenty nations combined. (Source: *Defense Monitor*, Volume XXXII, Number 2 • April/May 2003, Center for Defense Information)
- The United States spends \$33 per capita on international aid and \$1,202 per capita on the military. (Source: National Priorities Project, www.natprior.org, June 2003)
- The combined annual cost of meeting major global development needs (such as food aid, health care, clean energy, retiring developing nations’ debt, and assisting democracy building) would come to \$234 billion, roughly 30% of the annual global military budget. (Source: UN Development Program, World Game Institute, www.sustainus.org/factsheet_peace.pdf, June 2003)
- The United States will spend \$10.4 billion for fighter jet programs in fiscal year 2004. The latest estimates by Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS on the cost of effective prevention, treatment, care and support programs for AIDS in low-income and middle-income countries indicate that more than \$10.5 billion will be needed in 2005. (Sources: National Priorities Project, www.natprior.org, June 2003 and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, www.unaids.org, July 2003)

6. Let prophetic preaching be, at the same time, pastoral.

*I try not to think about Chechnya and the Congo and Liberia or other places where there are wars. I try not to think about the weapons that people might have and how they might use them. Let me try to tell you why. Because if I **did** think about it, I wouldn't be able to think about the other things for which I am responsible.*

Such a statement reflects the thoughts and feelings of many. It serves as a reminder that a lot of what passes for apathy and indifference is really a sense of helplessness and hopelessness about the future. We believe that if we start thinking about global threats at all, we will be overwhelmed. Or consider the fear that is so prevalent in today’s world. Acts of terror seek to inspire fear. At the same time, fear often drives our responses.

Notice how this calls for pastoral care. We are used to dealing with denial, depression, and grief in a hospital room. Why are we so slow to recognize the massive denial and unarticulated grief that often keep people from facing the threat of violence, terror, and the terrible weapons we have created? We are used to addressing the fear of illness, the fear of unemployment, and countless other fears. Why are we reluctant to face the fear that fuels violence and war? The theological and pastoral issues of war and peace are the same as that of a cancer: Where does our ultimate security lie? How do we live and hope under the shadow of death?

So: the prophetic sermon is a pastoral sermon. It requires caring and sensitivity.

7. **Speak confessionally.**

Preach out of personal feeling, reflection, journeying. Use “I-messages” rather than “You-messages”. Don’t say, “Your problem, you ignorant, apathetic people...” but rather “Here’s what’s troubling me”.

How have your viewpoints about war and peace changed in the last fifteen years? What does the prospect of the use of weapons of mass destruction do to you? What makes you feel fear...or rage...or despair...or hope? People cannot argue with deep felt concerns; they are more likely to feel permission to express their own. So your own journey is as much grist for the peace-preaching mill as the words of Isaiah, the witness of Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Aung San Suu Kyi, Clare Shore, the people of Le Chambon and other peacemakers, or the status of various wars around the world.

8. **Encourage dialogue.**

A lot of resistance to prophetic preaching is just anger or frustration about its monologic form. The corporate executive, the career army officer, the high school social studies teacher, the peace activist, and the average reader of *Newsweek* – each has opinions, experiences, and faith-perspectives to drop into the mixing-bowl of congregational conversation. To preach about Jesus’ call to peacemaking without allowing others to reflect aloud on what that call means to them is not fair and will not work. So try to make room for shared sermon preparation, talkbacks (and even back-talk!), debates and panels and a deepening sense that “differences of opinion are normal in our church.” Dialogue defuses the frustrations that come from feeling un-consulted and undervalued. It also allows us to explore issues and deepen our own understanding. The resource, *Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement* (available online at: www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/guidelines.pdf) may help shape healthy dialogue around difficult issues.

9. **Suggest something - however modest - that we can do.**

Most of us get frustrated when told what a mess the world is in and how concerned we ought to be, but then are offered no handles on what to do about it. Our job is not to burden already burdened people. We are in the business of liberation – and it is liberating to take one step, however small, in the direction of our Vision.

What will that mean with regard to peacemaking? Perhaps an “offering of letters” written to public officials after worship. Or taking part in a public vigil. Or forming a support group for people who want to pray and study together. Or...

People appreciate an attitude that conveys, “Of course we can’t do everything. But each of us can do something. And here are a few ‘somethings’ for us to consider.”

10. **Beware of the “hit-and-run” sermon!**

The danger: an occasional rip-roaring “social action” sermon before fleeing to safer homiletical ground. The task: to integrate the passion for peace into parish life and worship until it is normal for the “world out there” to be acknowledged in prayer, song, scripture and sermon.

We will not heal the hurts of the world in one sermon (or in a half dozen sermons, either). But we can pray for US troops in Iraq and the people of Iraq as well as the parishioner who just had cancer surgery. We can illustrate the need for reconciliation by the need for peace between India and Pakistan as well as by the need for partners to make up after a spat. We can move the “stewardship” sermon beyond church finances to the Scriptural call to be faithful caretakers of planet earth – property belonging to God.

Every gathering of God’s people, in one way or another, can witness to the heart of the Gospel: forgiveness of enemies, reconciliation, peace with God that issues in peace with neighbors...

11. Expect the Holy Spirit to work a mighty response

Sometimes preachers sound like Jonah – expecting (and maybe even hoping) to be rejected. Sometimes they seem to assume that their hearers will be unresponsive and unmoved.

When we preach peace, we may confidently expect God to touch hearts with hope and commitment. The pews are full of people who think the world's enmities and armaments are wrong, who long for the church to speak a liberating word. Yet church people can be astonishingly open to the most challenging call for an end to militaristic assumptions about security...so long as we are grounded in Scripture, speak peaceably, deal fairly with the facts, show awareness of their hurt, offer a vision, speak confessionally, encourage dialogue, and suggest something that, by God's grace, we might do about it all.

And a "good example"...

A while ago, a young minister preached about peace, using the passage about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:1-5 and Isaiah 2:1-5).

The preacher began something like this: "I'm worried. I'm worried about weapons of mass destruction. I worry about who has them and who does not. I worry about the nuclear weapons still sitting in silos in our country and in Russia. But I also worry about the other nations that have weapons of mass destruction. I worry that Al-Qaida or some other group will obtain such a weapon and use it to make their point. I wonder why we have such weapons in the first place. Their presence does not make us more secure. It makes us less secure. Their very existence is an invitation to use them. Jesus calls us to make peace. Micah speaks of transforming weapons. I believe that means I need to work to eliminate weapons of mass destruction."

Saying, "Let me tell you where I get my information from," the preacher held up a copy of the newsletter of the Center for Defense Information, and read the list of its Board of Directors – including many retired career military officers and other retired government officials, who believe in a strong national defense but oppose excessive expenditures and weapons systems. The preacher further cited the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* and weapons inspectors.

Then the preacher said, "What I've told you is public information. You can study it for yourself. I hope you will. Then, if you believe there is nothing to worry about, come tell me and we'll talk it over. Together we can figure out faithful ways to respond."

Listening, a preacher in the congregation thought, "They may not agree, but no one can possibly ignore this. This is how the preacher feels. The sources of information presented are very credible. The people in the pew have been invited to do their own study and thinking – and then discuss the issues involved. They've got to take this seriously!"

Rejection may come when we are faithful preachers of the gospel of peace. But if it comes, let it be for the right reasons. Because the **Gospel** has been rejected – not because we have been arrogant, self-righteous, insensitive, lazy, or too confident of our own wisdom and virtue.

And now, as the Apostle prayed, "Unto God who is able to do so much more than we can ever ask or hope for, by the power at work within us – to God be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."