

and don't even know where to start with all of this, we can always, in the words of Shane Claiborne, "Find out what God is already doing and join in." The Spirit-empowered witnesses of the early Church shared life together and reached out to those around them. Disciples are *engaged*.

### **What It Means to be a Neighbor Right Now**

Neighborliness is directly linked with peacemaking because it is one of the major vehicles for demonstrating, living, and releasing peace in our society. Walter Brueggemann recognized this when he wrote,

*"The role of the church is to change the conversation away from greed, fear and violence; instead we proclaim their opposites: generosity, trust and peacemaking...That's the only conversation worth having."<sup>1</sup>*

Followers of the Jesus Way walk a radically different path from the world, choosing to participate in His commitment to peacemaking through living generous and inclusive lives. Brueggemann has said that if our Gospel faith is authentic, it must include extending ourselves for the sake of the neighborhood.

Disciples of Jesus live with a commitment to His prophetic picture in Luke 4, both declaring and demonstrating the reality of heaven invading their societies. They see this reality according to what Jesus taught; that is why it is so important for disciples then and now to immerse themselves in the Sermon on the Mount. They bring this reality into every sphere of the community, believing in the power of peacemaking to bring restoration to all of life. This is not a liberal, progressive, or conservative issue. Peacemakers transcend politics; rather, they are change agents, demonstrating a new and often counter-cultural way to live and

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interact with their neighbors.

The age-old question, “Who is my neighbor?” is central to being a peacemaker because authentic, Spirit-empowered peacemaking is not possible without a wide view of neighborliness. Recently, I had two people send me a link to a video with the Black pastor, T.D. Jakes. Interestingly, one person was very conservative, while the other was more progressive. Jakes pointed out that Jesus answered the question asked by someone trying to escape responsibility with one of His most famous stories, the Good Samaritan. Jesus’ story was greatly impactful because Samaritans were not Jews, in fact, they were despised by the Jews. I am indebted to T.D. Jakes for his insights, two of which I will develop. When faced with the suffering of the beaten man on the side of the road, religion was silent, choosing instead to ignore him and walk by. Why does western Christianity remain largely silent in the face of the injustice being exposed in these days? Is it embarrassment? Is it an unwillingness to upset other believers, to be seen as those who rock the boat? Is it because we don’t know what to say, so we say nothing? Is it that pastors fear raising the issue for fear of losing church members and therefore finances? The passage from Isaiah 58 that was cited above begins with, “*Cry out loudly, do not hold back!*” (Is. 58:1) If we truly give ourselves to following Jesus, in His Way, then we must not hold back or remain silent at this crucial time. What the Father anointed the Son to do, He has now given to us (Jn. 20:21); we are the Spirit-empowered ones who are called to declare justice to the nations. This is not by our own zeal, but because the Spirit has anointed us to proclaim the Good News. Right now. In his famous, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King wrote,

*“It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.”<sup>2</sup>*

A second point in this parable is that the Good Samaritan, as a non-Jew, was not in his home environment. While he had certainly not left home expecting to see a battered man on the side of the Jericho Road, his neighborliness only happened because he was willing to leave the familiar and the comfortable. (The Jericho Road was notoriously dangerous.) If we will embrace the neighborliness of the Jesus Way, we will need to go out beyond our familiar borders. This does not happen naturally; it is the result of a deliberate choice, one that is likely to be intimidating — like when I decided to march with the Black Lives Matter movement, like the first time I took a team into the largest garbage dump in Asia where 200,000 people fight and scramble to eke out an existence, like the first time I went into a foreign maximum security prison (or a prison in Mississippi) — in every case I had to fight my own intense discomfort, not knowing what to say or how to behave.

But how can I really do what Jesus told me in the Good Samaritan story unless I am willing to disrupt my usual patterns of whom I spend time with and where I go? Neighborliness, then, demands that I embrace a shift in my life. I will not accidentally find myself interacting with people from a different socio-economic, cultural or racial background from my own; I must go to them, reaching out to learn and listen, which are vital qualities of a peacemaker. Gustavo Gutierrez, a theologian and priest, wrote:

*“The neighbor was the Samaritan who approached the wounded man and made him his neighbor. The neighbor*

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*is not the one I find in my path, but rather he in whose path I place myself; he whom I approach and actively seek.”<sup>3</sup>*

Apart from direct, often sustained contact, authentic peacemaking remains simply a good idea, yet another theoretical expression of non-transformative religious practice. Extending ourselves beyond our comfort zone in order to be neighbors to our wider community is not easy, nor comfortable, nor natural. If it were, we would already be doing it.

Pope Francis has some great wisdom on this issue.

*“Indifference to our neighbor and to God represent a real temptation for us Christians... We need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience... Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of His love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.”<sup>4</sup>*

### **Recognizing the Nature of the Battle**

As we seek to learn peacemaking in the midst of this season of crisis, we must remember that we are not dealing only with current events. Four hundred years of racial oppression has deeply affected all of our world views. Studies in racial bias consistently show that we *all* carry racial bias that affects our language, our perceptions, and assumptions about other races. Even the expression *racial* bias is illuminating. Latasha Morrison, in her excellent book, *Be the Bridge*, points out a striking truth:

*“Despite the Bible’s recognition of differing ethnic groups, there is no indication of race. Race, as we know*

*it, is a political and social construct created by man for the purpose of asserting power and maintaining hierarchy. When we believe the lies embedded with racial hierarchies, reconciliation becomes impossible.”<sup>5</sup>*

Not only are we facing centuries of mistrust, animosity, and deep misunderstanding, when we choose to become peacemakers, we are entering into a powerful spiritual battle.

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*“For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

*(Eph 6:12 NRSV)*

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The forces that we are up against are both physical and spiritual, not just one or the other. To only battle against the forces that we see, is to feed into the intentions of spiritual darkness. Likewise, to focus completely upon “spiritual warfare” prayer without taking concrete steps, is to avoid real systemic change. To be effective peacemakers, we need to keep our eyes on both the natural and the spiritual. Years ago, I read *The Powers That Be* by Walter Wink. It has greatly impacted my understanding of what we fight against when we see injustice. As Wink points out, the spiritual powers are indeed dark and malevolent, but they are not “out there or up there.” They infiltrate our social and power structures: politics, business, medicine, education and more. The powers do this because they have been invited in. How? When an organization turns away from its God-given and God-created vocation, choosing instead to pursue its own purpose (selfishness), it opens the door to idolatry.

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