

Preface



The intense concern of this little book is to give an honest and intelligible account of how the hope of the Christian faith engages the reality of the human condition. The point of intersection for this engagement is peace, for peace in its deepest and broadest meaning is both at the heart of human fulfillment and at the heart of God's promise in Christ. Since this discussion is a modest endeavor in constructive theology, I trust that the coherence of the symbols of the Christian faith will be evident. Such an effort at theological responsibility is essential, but not for its own sake. Rather, it is subsidiary to our main purpose of finding the way of peace that the Christ revealed as the way of hope for the world and each of us in it.

To say that both the definition and the experience of peace are elusive is almost a truism. We ardently desire war to end with all its unspeakable brutality, and when it does, we call it peace and rightly so. Yet it is also true to say that peace is more than just the absence of war. We know that the end of fighting does not mean the end of violence. We find other ways to harm one another by other instruments of violence, such as economic, political, or social injustices or behaviors of scorn, rejection, betrayal, mendacity, abuse, and duplicity. To end war is good; to make peace is a much bigger job.

To make peace is to build harmonious communities that are inclusive of all and ready to adjudicate conflicting claims and choices in a spirit of seeking the common good while yet protecting the well-being of each individual. To make such peace, though, we must contend with the realities of our human propensities to seek our own good and the good of our group first, often at the expense of others, and to base community and belonging

on whom it is we exclude. Not all failure of harmonious community is the result of human perversity, of course; the limits of finitude often create disparities. However, the reality of limits is a strong incentive to perversity. Evidence for that reality is there for all to see in the yawning gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” of this world.

Certainly, one meaning of peace must be peace of mind and tranquility of spirit. Yet life’s uncertainties generate so much anxiety. We are stricken with deep and nagging feelings of guilt over our actions or failures to act, some of which force us to make shameful choices that we can neither escape nor mitigate. These are the things that come to haunt us in the waking hours of a dark and restless night. For much of life, peace of mind, if grasped at all, is fleeting—at least, that is so if the depth of our thoughts, feelings, and self-awareness penetrates the surface of life, even a little bit.

To be at peace with those near and dear to us is surely at the heart of what we mean by peace. How beautiful it is when love flows freely and without condition; when hearts are as one and we see each other, even with all our flaws, as a gift of life. Yet too often love is stifled by hurt or neglect, and forgiveness is unbidden and ungiven. What belongs together is torn apart or has simply fallen apart, leaving in its wake broken hearts and tormented consciences. Or perhaps our peace in the joy of loving relationships is simply snatched away by death, leaving a void that refuses to be filled. Whatever the case, in the aftermath of this lost peace, holidays and anniversaries become for so many grieving persons times of pain and regret, even despondency and dangerous depression.

To be at peace, one might well contend, involves being healthy and whole, free of diseases or injuries that are at war with our bodies and minds. Few of us enjoy uninterrupted health during the course of our lives, and millions in the poverty-stricken places of this world hardly know anything but the ravages of disease. Moreover, they are more often than not deprived of the resources that make for healing. Of course, we would be remiss if we failed to note that other realities that steal our peace—war,

alienation, injustices—are implicated in the conditions that undermine the peaceful wholeness of body and spirit that we call good health.

Peace is a hope for the whole of creation. The ecology of our natural world, our planetary habitat, is a vast web of symbiotic interdependencies. The harmonious functioning of all the entities that make up that webbed creation is necessary for the flourishing of all living things. However, the creation itself manifests discord in natural events that are often cruel and destructive. Humanity, as we are all too well aware, is not at peace with its own environment, contributing further to the discord through exploitation and degradation born of a self-centered drive for control and acquisition, the very traits that are inimical to peace in all its forms.

Peace as an idea and a reality is a many-faceted structure, deeply desirable and terribly fragile. Throughout this book I have tried to keep that reality ever before us. Much of life is not the unalloyed enjoyment of peace, but rather the longing and the search for peace. To address the subject at hand with anything less than that sort of realistic appraisal of the human condition would simply not be credible.

At the same time, realism by itself would hardly do justice to the outlook of the Christian faith, any more than the cross would speak the whole truth in the absence of the resurrection. In the end, the goal is to see in our need for peace the promise and hope that are in him who has been called the Prince of Peace. This promise and this hope are able to kindle in us faith that is active in love and love's quest for peace.

Throughout this discourse we will be exploring our concerns for peace in its personal, social, ecclesiastical, and global dimensions as we seek to map the context of our discussion in contemporary culture and human experience. In the process we will encounter and apply insights drawn from the various topics of the Christian faith: forgiveness, anthropology, Christology, the doctrine of the Trinity, eschatology, the sacraments, ecclesiology, atonement, faith, hope, love, and Christian vocation. However, these topics are not presented in the order one customarily

expects in a systematic theology. Rather, they are woven into the multifaceted discussion of peace and correlated with one another as the discussion proceeds.

My goal is to reach the reader in a helpful way, whomever she or he may be. This is the sort of goal that preachers have, but at the same time, they are often preaching to themselves as well. That is no less the case with me in this endeavor. Many of the concerns dealt with have touched my life deeply, as I imagine they will touch the lives of those who read this book. In facing them, one's theology is tested, not simply or even primarily as an intellectual challenge, but as a demand for a faithful and apt witness to the hope that is within.

Accordingly, I have sought to find my own voice in this account, sticking primarily to the resources of the Bible and the Christian tradition. Still, it would be less than honest not to acknowledge my formation in the Lutheran heritage and the important contributions at key points in my development of theologians such as Paul Tillich, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and the doctoral mentor of my youth, Carl Braaten. Finally, after thirty years of teaching at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the incalculable spiritual, intellectual and theological stimulus, and support of cherished colleagues and of the inspiring and long-suffering students I have been privileged to teach.