

Righteousness and Peacemaking Go Hand in Hand

Thoughts for a National Day of Prayer

by Paula Erhart-Clouse



Editor's note: Paula Clouse was asked to speak at a gathering for the U.S. National Day of Prayer on May 1, and she did so—but she didn't say what a lot of folks expected her to say. On the day of the speech, having asked for prayer from friends who were peacemakers, she took a deep breath, and said to the crowd what she knew would not be popular.

On December 11, 1995, a fire destroyed the Malden Mills Textile Factory in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The mill, which had been in operation for more than 90 years and employed more than 400 people, was reduced to a pile of charred rubble. The employees knew that rebuilding and updating the mill would be extremely expensive, so they feared the only course of action their leader could take would be to collect the insurance money and close the mill. Contrary to their fears, and much to their surprise, the owner—Aaron Feurestein—made the decision not to close the factory, but to rebuild. Even more staggering was his decision to continue paying his employees their salary and benefits until the mill reopened (a sum of about \$1.5 million per week)

This decision caught the attention of the news media and caused President Clinton to invite him to be his personal guest. As he was lauded for his actions, Feurestein responded by saying, “What? For doing the decent thing?” Because of his personal values, he made the only decision that he could make. He was brought up to believe that a leader has a moral obligation to provide for others in good times as well as bad times. In explaining his actions he quoted the Jewish Rabbi Hillel who said, “In a place where there's moral depravity and no feeling of moral responsibility, do your best to be a man.”

The lesson? Righteous leadership produces decisions that are sometimes costly.

Today is the National Day of Prayer...and what cost are we as a nation willing to pay to do the decent thing? Perhaps for our government it will mean listening to the Peace Committee at the U.N. rather than the generals of war. Perhaps for our nation it will mean losing our reputation as a “strong arm” that oppresses and, instead, becoming sly as foxes but gentle as doves. Perhaps for each of us individually it will mean taking an unpopular stand in the midst of turmoil. Perhaps it will mean extending an olive branch to our enemies.

And, perhaps it will mean doing as Jesus has commanded us—loving our enemies.

I'm sure you've all seen the big black and white billboards that display what are supposed to be messages from God. One example was: “That love your neighbor thing? I meant that.” And it was signed “God.” I would propose to you that we need a billboard that reads like this, “That ‘blessed are the peacemakers’ stuff? I meant that.” And it would be signed

Jesus says in that, in his kingdom, the way up is down. The first will be last and the last will be first. A servant is most treasured. Not military might. Not amassing weapons and building bombs. Serving. Tell me again where the “serving” part came in with the “Shock and Awe” campaign.

“Jesus.” Isn't it funny how we rationalize and justify to make that statement fit into our worldview, instead of adapting our worldview into Jesus' paradigm?

Why is the story of Aaron Feurestein unusual? Why do we stand shocked at the behavior of this CEO? Do you remember the old movie, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*? A New York reporter is addressing the U.S. Congress and says of the country hick (played by Gary Cooper), “He's got goodness. Do you know what that means? No, of course you don't, we've forgotten.” Quite an indictment, don't you think? We've forgotten. We've forgotten about goodness. We've forgotten about righteousness.

Matthew 6:33 says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.” I've discovered I'm usually far more interested in my own kingdom and my own brand of righteousness. During my preparation for this day of prayer, God began speaking to my heart. I found out I didn't want God's kingdom at all. I wanted mine—and I wanted it NOW. I realized that there was a vast difference between my righteousness and God's.

As a so-called Christian nation, the U.S. falls deplorably short of righteousness. We do not need another law or bill in Congress. We do not need another government program or platform. We do not need another rally or another cause upon which to hang our hats. We do not need another faith-based initiative. Righteousness cannot be legislated. We need to repent. We need to seek God's righteousness.

And don't righteousness and peace intersect at some point? Can we have one without the other? Jesus says in that, in his kingdom, the way up is down. The first will be last, and the last will be first. A servant is the most treasured one. Not military might. Not amassing weapons and building bombs. Serving. Tell me again where the “serving” part came in with the “Shock and Awe” campaign.

In closing, I'd like to suggest that we do as the prophet Hosea, speaking for God, suggests:

Plant the good seeds of righteousness, and you will harvest a crop of my love. Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and shower righteousness upon you.

Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus said. May we all go about planting the good seeds of righteousness and peace.

Most High, Glorious God, enlighten the darkness of our minds. Give us a right faith, a firm hope and a bumper crop of perfect love, so that we may always and in all things act according to Your Holy Will. Amen.

—Paula Paula Erhart-Clouse, a member of First Community Church in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, is a Masters student in counseling and divinity with a Spiritual Direction specialty. She is also in community with the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans.

New Resource on Iraq

The BPFNA has agreed to distribute a seven-minute video produced by Ken Sehested, using extraordinary photos from Baghdad, taken by a professional photojournalist on the Iraq Peace Team. The photos are accompanied by a hauntingly beautiful Darrell Adams rendition of Bob Dylan's “Lay Down Your Weary Tune.” Most of the photos are of ordinary Iraqi citizens. “I've used it dozens of times since returning from Baghdad,” Sehested said. “It helps put a ‘human’ face on the ‘enemy.’” The video is available for US\$15 (postpaid) from BPFNA, 4800 Wedgewood Dr., Charlotte, NC 28210.