

Compassion

“You are shalom.”

Amos 5:23-24

Third in the series: Blown Away (The Holy Spirit and the way things ought to be)

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Shalom-Shaped

Dad and I were just finished with his doctor’s appointment and afterward he wanted for us to go out to lunch. Since we were in Dearborn, we went to one of the best Middle Eastern restaurants around. It was busy – pretty filled – but they took us right to a booth near the heart of the restaurant where it’s a little dark but close to the spot where there a woman sits by a stone and a small oven, kneading dough and baking pita. Dad and I sat down and tried to read our menus while our eyes adjusted to the lesser light.

I listened to voices that filled the room. My eyes adjusted and I glanced in the direction of the voices. Right below us and in the middle of the room was a long table. Around it was a crowd of people. Each of them, I thought, was a descendent of a different race or tribe on earth: English, African, Japanese, Indian, Middle Eastern, Native American.

Breaking bread.

Telling jokes and stories and discussing politics and the economy.

That moment, I saw a glimpse of Heaven. It was the world as God intended it from the beginning: people gathered in a grand mixture of creation in all its diversity, so very different from each other and at the same time so very connected, belonging to each as one

If the Hebrew word *shalom* is a word that means peace and justice, this was a picture of the shalom-shaped world God always had in mind.

Why should a sight like that stand out to me, or anyone? And more than that, why do you think it should matter?

I had a friend who lived in San Francisco during the last big earth quake in 1989. He said he was glad to move away a few years after. He wanted to get out of the social

climate. He said it was taking such a long time to rebuild road systems and other parts of the city's infrastructure because special interest groups and neighborhoods and ethnic groups all refused to listen to the needs of the rest. For a long time no one was being heard. The people were disconnected. And it seemed wrong.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible talks about something that matters at the core of things. God has a plan for community; for people to share the goodness of all creation with each other, to care for each other as precious children of God: brothers and sisters in a divine family.

That's why, when God set Abraham and his family apart from the rest of the world's peoples, it was to change the way things were.

You might say they were blessed to be a blessing. They were for bringing all the warring factions together.

For global community.

This is what the prophets saw when they looked to God's future: nations beating swords into plows and spears into pruning hooks and people caring for each other like they were born for compassion.

Everybody has some fear and distrust over differences. But I bet if you were to get past your uneasiness you'd find something at your core, right in your DNA, yearning for connection. We are programmed for it, like it was the intended from the beginning.

Confrontation

Perhaps that's why prophets like Amos were so harsh when they saw greed and fear getting in the way of it. Think of his dilemma. He didn't even think he was a prophet. He was a shepherd from neighboring Judah feeling compelled to cross the boarder to cry against the awful injustice he saw in Israel. That's like having a Canadian cross the Ambassador Bridge to hold a press conference accusing us of base corruption. He pointed to neglect of the poor, mistreatment of foreigners, obsession with military strength, and pervasive immorality;¹ and announced to the Israelites: "It's gotten so bad that it is too late. You are already lost."²

It was probably a message he hated to bring.

But something drove him to it; he said, “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.” For a long time Bible readers thought that there was something wrong with the way the Israelites were worshiping.³ That wasn’t the point. The problem was with the worshipers, not the worship.

He went on to say, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Hebrew scholars say that the language he used has the force of an impersonal command.⁴ This wasn’t something God asked them to do for a special occasion. It’s what God expects always. Like a river ever-flowing bringing life to its valley, making justice and compassionate connections are supposed to be our constant endeavor.

Shalom-making. Creating heaven on earth with God.

It’s what we do. Or, at least it’s supposed to be.

We often pray the confession in communion services, “We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us...”⁵ Actually, we do these things sometimes. Sometimes we don’t. But any time you see someone who is disregarded you’re seeing evidence of something more than a human relations issue. Every time injustice tears apart shalom it’s indication that there is something wrong in our relationship with God. Something in our DNA has become distorted; it causes disconnection with God and disconnection within our lives.

There are many ways of talking about what happened on the Cross in the death of Jesus, and in his resurrection. Through most of them, Christians say God works salvation. Something happens there in Jesus’ death to overcome our *lostness*. Something happens to restore life-giving love between us and God.⁶

There, you get restored to God. And that restoration is God’s justice.

Putting things right.

Restorative justice: God making you count again, no matter what happened to you before.

Bringing shalom, true peace, to your soul.

Returning you to the work of bringing justice until shalom fills the world, which is what God always wanted and so did you.

This is your reason to care.

When you see injustice and sometimes get really mad, then maybe it's a holy thing. A few weeks after I returned from abroad I saw my doctor for an annual check-up. He came in the examination room and sat down and said, "So, tell me about South Africa." My story led to a discussion about the AIDS pandemic there; and he told me, "You know, every year the medical community has an international symposium on HIV/AIDS. Each year, it's held someplace in Europe or someplace in North America. The major presenters live in one of those continents or the other and that's why; but it's funny we never hold it in Africa, right where the worst of the pandemic is. You kind of wonder why."

Then I asked, "Do you think it might have something to do with racism?" "Oh," he said, "I'm sure it does."

It's enough to get you mad. Maybe. Or perhaps what you really get mad about is the way people die of hunger. Or that people don't get a ride home from bars or parties when they've had too much. Or that a lot of folks have lost their homes while many of our banks haven't done much to help them to avoid foreclosure.

Lot's of injustices out there. One might get *you* more mad than the rest. Maybe there is something of God in that.

If you get mad about these things at all means that your soul wants shalom like God does. Like Amos did. That you get mad in particular might be a calling.

The Shape of Shalom

God loves you so much and wants you to love him and his world back so you can be ever-connected. Restored to the banquet table with all God's children.

Several years ago, an entire church grieved with a young family over the sudden death of husband and dad. We all lost a friend. But I'm sure no one felt it more than his two young sons. You know how it is when you lose someone who is about the most significant person in your life. If you don't know, I bet you can imagine. It's like everything stops around you and becomes strange. You don't even know who you are anymore. It can feel like you don't fit or fit in. You feel different.

People were gathering near the sanctuary for the man's funeral. A crowd had gathered around the widow. But my eyes fell on a scene in the middle of the crowd. It was youngest son Corban with his Little League team all grouped around him. You might think there might be something a little *unholy* about a group of 13 and 14-year-old boys; but not that day. There they were: encouraging him, caring for him, even teasing him to a little laughter, making him know he hadn't lost them...nor had he fallen very far away from life after all. It was a redemptive moment; and I remember thinking when I saw them, "Here, too, is a little glimpse of the Kingdom."⁴

They were connected. Once again, it was a scene of justice: a glimpse of the Great Banquet to come with the Victorious Christ. 'Til then I didn't know that the heavenly banquet might also be found among a bunch of little leaguers at a funeral.

This is what church is about. Breaking down the barriers and sharing God's love so that you are connected to God and connected to a world full of God's people.

May this be your reason to care.

May you do the things that are most important to God.

Shalom to you, my friend. Shalom to the world.

¹ R. Lansing/Walter Brueggemann, "Introduction to Amos", *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press. © 1991. p 1170.

² Donald E. Gowan, "Amos Commentary", *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. VII*. © 1996. p 395

³ *Ibid.*, p 394

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House. © 1989. p 12.

⁶ A wonderful discussion on the role the Cross of Jesus plays in restorative justice is found in John Wesley de Gruchy's book, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. © 2002, particularly in chapter 2.