

Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace Meet

The meeting place: “Truth and Mercy have met together
Justice and Peace have kissed.” (Psalm 84)

“In these two short lines there are four important concepts and two powerful paradoxes. The concepts kept running through my mind as I watched the peace process unfold in its fits and starts. I noticed for the first time that the Psalmist seemed to treat the concepts as if they were alive. I could hear their voices in the war in Nicaragua. In fact, I could hear their voices in any conflict. Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace were no longer ideas. They became people. And they could talk.”

John Paul Lederach, a Mennonite Christian, is an influential author and practitioner in the fields of conflict transformation and peace building. The following is a little play - “a liturgy of sorts” as Lederach calls it - written by him, based on his experiences in working with conciliation groups in Nicaragua who often used Psalm 84 for their biblical reflections.

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Greatly distressed in the midst of a nasty conflict, I kept hearing the names of Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace invoked time and again. When the arguments and blows had gone round and round I made a proposal. “What if,” I asked the people in this awful fight, “What if we invited our four friends to join us and asked them to openly discuss their views about conflict?”

Locked in their righteous stances as they were, the people looked at me a bit stunned with such a ludicrous idea, but I proceeded without paying much attention. “I have seen them come and go in other fights. I could ask them to try to clear up a few things.” Nobody objected, so I brought Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace into the room and sat them down in front of the contentious crowd. I addressed the four. “We want to know what concerns you each have in the midst of conflict. Would it be possible to hear your views?”

Truth stood and spoke first. “I am Truth,” she said. “I am like light cast so that all may see. At times of conflict I am concerned with bringing forward, out into the open, what really happened. Not with the watered down version. Not with a partial recounting. My handmaidens are transparency, honesty, and clarity. I am set apart from my three colleagues here,” Truth gestured toward Mercy, Justice and Peace, “because they need me first and foremost. Without me they cannot go forward. When I am found, I set people free.”

“Sister Truth,” I interjected hesitantly, not wanting to question her integrity, “You know I have been around a lot of conflict in my life and there is one thing that I am always curious about. When I talk to one side, like these people over here, they say that you are with them. When I talk to the others, like our friends over there, they claim you are on their side. Yet in the middle of all this pain, you seem to come and go. Is there only one Truth?”

“There is only one Truth, but I can be experienced in many different ways. I reside within each person yet nobody owns me.”

“If discovering you is so crucial,” I asked Sister Truth, “why are you so hard to find?”

She thought for a while, and then said. “I can only appear where the search is genuine and authentic. I come forward only when each person shares with others what they know of me and each respects the other’s voice. Where I am strutted before others, like a hand puppet on a child’s stage, I am abused, shattered and disappear.”

“Of these three friends,” I pointed to the three colleagues seated around her, “Whom do you fear the most?” Without hesitation she pointed to Mercy. “I fear him,” she said quietly. “In his haste to heal he covers my light and clouds my clarity. He forgets,” she concluded, “that forgiveness is our child, not his.”

I then turned to Mercy. “I am sure you have things to say. What concerns you?”

Mercy rose slowly and spoke, “I am Mercy.” He seemed to begin with a plea, as though he knew that he, among them all, was under tight scrutiny. “And I am the new beginning. I am concerned with people and their relationships. Acceptance, compassion and support stand with me. I know the frailty of the human condition. Who among them is perfect?” he turned to Truth and continued with his eyes on her. “She knows that her light can bring clarity but too often it blinds and burns. What freedom is there without life and relationship? Forgiveness is indeed our child, but not when people are arrogantly clubbed to humiliation and agony with their imperfections and weaknesses. Our child was birthed to provide for the healing.”

“But Brother Mercy,” I could not resist the immediacy of the question. “In your rush to accept, support, and move ahead do you not abort the child?” “I do not cover Truth’s light,” he reacted quickly. “You must understand. I am Mercy. I am built of steadfast love that undergirds life itself. It is my purpose in life to bring forward the eternal grace of new beginnings.”

“And whom do you fear most?” I asked. Mercy turned and faced Justice. “My brother Justice,” he said in a clear voice. “In his haste to change and make things right, he forgets that his roots lie in real people and relationships.”

“So Brother Justice,” I said, “what do you have to say?”

“I am Justice,” he said as he rose to his feet. His strong voice accompanied by a deep smile. “And Mercy is correct, I am concerned about making things right. I consider myself a person who looks beyond the surface and the issues about which people seem to fight. What lies at the root of most conflicts are inequality, greed, and wrongdoing. I stand with Truth who sheds her light on the paths of wrongdoing. My task is to make sure that something is done to restore the damage that has been wreaked, particularly on the victims and the downtrodden. We must restore the relationship, but never at the expense of acknowledging and rectifying what broke the relationship in the first place.”

“But Brother Justice,” I just had to find out, “everybody in this room feels they have been wronged. And most are willing to justify their actions, even violent action, on the basis of doing your bidding. Is this not true?”

“It is indeed,” he responded. “And most do not understand.” He paused as he thought for a minute. “You see, I am most concerned about accountability. Too often we think that any and everything is acceptable. True and committed relationships are those characterized by honest accounting and steadfast love. Love without accountability is nothing but words. Love with accountability is changed behavior and action. This is the real meaning of restoration. My purpose is to bring action and accountability to the words.”

“Then whom do you fear?” I inquired.

“My children,” he chuckled with the irony of experienced years. “I fear that my children, Mercy and Peace, see themselves as parents,” his voice carried a hint of gentle provocation, “when, in fact, they are the fruit of my labor.”

Peace burst into an irrepressible smile. Before I could speak she stepped forward. “I am Peace, and I agree with all three,” she began. “I am the child to whom they give birth, the mother who labors to give them life, and the spouse who accompanies them on the way. I hold the community together, with the encouragement of security, respect and well-being.”

Truth and Justice began to protest. “That is precisely the problem,” Truth said in a frustrated voice. “You see yourself as greater and bigger than the rest.”

“It is this arrogance,” Justice’s finger pointed toward Peace. “You do not place yourself where you belong. You follow us. You do not precede us.”

“This is true my dear Brother and Sister,” Peace responded. “I am more fully expressed through and after you both. But it is also true that without me there is no space for Truth to be heard,” she said as she turned toward Justice. “And without me there is no respite from the vicious cycle of accusation, bitterness, and bloodshed. You, yourself Justice cannot be fully embodied without my

presence. I am before and after. There is no way to reach me except that I am the way.”

Silence fell for a moment. “And whom do you fear?”

“Not who, but what and when,” Peace said. “I fear manipulation. I fear the manipulation of people who use Sister Truth for their purposes. Some ignore her, some use her as a whip, and some claim to own her. I fear the times when for the sake of Brother Mercy, Brother Justice is sacrificed. I fear the blind manipulation that for the ideal of Brother Justice some will sacrifice life itself. When manipulation such as these take place, I am violated and rendered a meaningless empty shell.”

I turned my attention and addressed all four. “How would it ever be possible for you to meet together? What would you need from each other?”

Truth looked first at Mercy. “You must slow down. Give me space to emerge. Our child cannot be born without the slow development in the womb of the Mother.”

He nodded, and then added. “Shine bright dear sister, but please take care not to blind and burn. Remember that each person is a child of God, that each is weak and needs support to grow.”

Justice came in straightaway. “I have been partially reassured by the words of sister Peace. I need a clear statement that she gives a place for accountability and action. Remember when Micah spoke of us. Love Mercy and do Justice he wrote. You must give place for me to come forward or truly you will not be fully born.”

Peace responded on the heels of his last words. “Brother Justice, our lips will meet if we recognize that we need one another. Let not your heart of compassion fall into a bitterness that rages without purpose, and I will provide the soil for you to work and bear fruit.”

The four were now huddled in a small circle. “And what,” I asked, “is this place called where you now stand together?”

“This place,” they responded in a single voice, “is reconciliation.”

Then, suddenly without signal, they touched hands and danced. It was as if the dance came only rarely, like the weaving of lines and bodies around a Maypole. You could hardly distinguish one from the other as they swung from the room. No one said a word. No music was in the air, only the images of the interwoven bodies of Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace.