

## PEACE: WHAT IS IT? HOW DOES IT DEVELOP?

Peace is something that many of us say that we want. We may differ, however, over just what it is. Some of us, thinking on a global scale, imagine peace as the natural result of stopping all wars. Indeed, that would be a huge step towards a healing process. But peace is more than just not killing people whether in foreign countries or on the streets of our own cities. It is far more than an armistice (think November 11, 1918) or other cessations of hostilities (think of the end of our Civil War and of the end of the fighting in Northern Ireland). Was peace the outcome of either of these and many other cessations of fighting?

Sometimes we settle for much less than peace when we stop fighting. We leave issues unresolved hoping with time that somehow whatever drove us to fight will go away or be ignored or suppressed. Whether it's a war fought abroad or a struggle within a family, we need to do much more than cease the hostile attacks although that is usually the first or second step. We need an inner healing that enables us to either begin or return to the path to inner peace—that is, peace that we first experience within ourselves as spiritual people and then share.

Peace begins when we take time to contemplate what is broken or dysfunctional within us. We may discover that we need to heal from whatever isn't at peace within us before we can have the energy to develop our own inner peace. Counseling, pastoral care, the encouragement of friends and others who understand our suffering can be invaluable.

As we grow in inner peace, people may notice a difference in how we react to negative experiences. They may even ask what has happened to us. As we feel God's grace reinforcing our inner peace we can share our story with those who ask. Each such opportunity offers the listener, whether religious, spiritual or unsure of even the existence of any Higher Power, to experience God working through us without imposing any of our beliefs upon them.



Somewhat paradoxically, peace is also built on the experience of being accepted “just as we are.” Obviously, that does not happen for everyone. It doesn't even happen for everyone in churches! When we begin to define people by whether she or he is part of the group known as “Us” or the group known as “Them,” we have crossed an invisible but real line. It is a line which, once crossed, can rapidly destroy whatever compassion and love we've shared with the people we decide are “Them.” Accepting any division that results in an “Us” vs. “Them” split is simply not Peace!

Nor is it spiritually healthy. The desire to be at peace is very much a spiritual experience. It requires that we accept each other as equal members of God's family. It also requires each

of us to come to terms with our limitations. As one member of a 12-Step Group (AA) told another member who was incredibly self-centered, "There is a Higher Power, and you're not It!" Sometimes that simple awareness of needing and not being the Higher Power leads to faith or at least a willingness to be open to God's presence with us as well as with all people.

So, it's fair to ask me, "What is peace to you as a retired pastor and chaplain?" A second part of the question might be, "How do you create peace within yourself?"

The second question is easier to answer. I don't just "create a peace within myself." I need God's help to do so. I try to enter into whatever space God has led me to so that I can serve God. To follow God is to become continually more aware of God's loving presence with and within me. Only then can I pray for healing of the broken or distorted parts of who I am. In turn I am better able to pray for other people. As part of my healing and becoming more at peace, I ask God to change me from being self-centered, anxious, resentful, angry or controlling to all the opposites: centered in God, secure, appreciative, calm and willing to use my influence only for God's purposes. In Galatians 5:22 St. Paul lists the "Fruits of the Spirit." They include, "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

There is much more to be said about how fruits of God's Holy Spirit empower us to becoming more peaceful. For now, I will say just this. For me to grow in inner and outward peace, I need to be quiet. I prefer a quiet space in our home, but a quiet space outside in Nature will often provide the setting for me to open myself to a deeper awareness of God's presence. Churches, Christian retreat houses, spaces set aside for meditation and walking along the rocky shoreline of many towns in Maine have provided that quiet space.

At the beginning stages on my journey, and at several key points along the way, I have needed help to return to the search for the peace I sought. I had to rely on the faith and later the experiences of others who were further along the road to spiritual health than I was. Spiritual guides, often but not always clergy, help us to avoid some of the more common missteps as we travel with God. Most of us need someone who can point out to us how we are distracted by our fears, our desires and our need to be in charge of our lives. Peace eludes us when we let ourselves focus less on God and more on having life on our terms. Inner peace requires enough humility to recognize that we are not in control of much. While humility is vital, we also need to give God thanks that God has made it possible for us to serve God here as a prelude to eternal life with God.

I will return to this topic as God leads me.

Rev. Larry LaPierre