

Why Our Peace Church Statement Is Important

Ken Sehested

Genesis 6:11; Matthew 5:43-44; Romans 12:21

October 16, 2011

After a six-week delay, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial statue was officially unveiled today. The ceremony was originally scheduled for August 28th, on the anniversary of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream Speech" during the 1963 March on Washington. A hurricane and an earthquake got in the way. But by now, civil rights activists have learned much about perseverance.

That granite sculpture provides an important piece of remembering in our nation's history. Unfortunately, the statue also encourages an important piece of forgetting.

There are 14 quotes from Dr. King on the statue. Is it significant that not one of those quotes mentions the word "nonviolence"? Or that none of the quotes came from his "Beyond Vietnam" sermon at Riverside Church, exactly one year to the day before his assassination, when he said, "The greatest purveyor of violence in the world today [is] my own government"? Or: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

With the outpouring of public affirmation for the memorial, we are also likely to forget that the major media roundly condemned Dr. King's Riverside Church sermon, in which he spoke of an expanded vision and upset many of his closest supporters in the civil rights movement. We forget that *Time* magazine called the sermon "a demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi."

The *Washington Post* said, "Many who have listened to [King] with respect will never again accord him with the same confidence. He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country and his people." The *New York Times* ran an editorial titled "Dr. King's Error," chiding him for linking foreign policy with domestic policy: "This is a fusion of two public programs that are distinct and separate. By drawing them together, Dr. King has done a disservice to both."

It's certainly immodest for me to connect our congregation's Peace Church Statement to Dr. King's vision for a "profound revolution in values." But I think the Gospel encourages this kind of immodesty. It's not a question of who's more valuable. It's not a contest over who's accomplished the most. This has nothing to do with national monuments, or Pulitzer Prizes, or who generates the most "hits" from a Google search.

In other words, what our Peace Church Statement does *not* do is make us feel more righteous than anybody else. ("*Naa-nana-na-na. God loves us more than you 'cause we've got a Peace Church Statement!!*")

The only thing this statement should do is push us to ask ourselves, over and over again: Is the profound gratitude we feel being expressed in the best way possible, to seduce the world into seeing that we are all—*every one of us*—deeply beloved of God? That we lack for nothing? That there is no scarcity, so that we need not compete with each other? That there is enough—more than enough—if we are willing to share and share alike?

Last year I edited an article written by our friend Francisco "Paco" Rodés in Cuba. Two writers in Canada are assembling a book on the influence of Dr. King around the world, and Paco was asked to write the chapter on King's influence in Cuba.

In the process of editing, I realized Paco had made a mistake in translating Dr. King's desire to be known in the future as "a drum major for justice." Paco thought it meant a "bass drummer." He marveled at the humility of Dr. King wanting to be known as a player of one of the less prestigious musical instruments.

Paco's impulse was correct. There is a great deal of modesty in King's desire to be remembered simply as a drum major, even though the meaning of that statement didn't quite get translated. So, with Paco's permission, I rewrote that section describing what a drum major does.

A drum major doesn't play any instrument. Drum majors don't create a single note, whether melody or harmony, whether brass or reed, not even the drum beat that keeps the musical pulse

alive. A drum major orchestrates the contributions of all these various offerings, keeping the rhythm going, helping the band stay on the same page, the same score, the same chord, creating a coherent sound rather than random, chaotic noises.

That's one of the reasons I think our Peace Church Statement is important: It gives us a framework to work in concert with one another. Let me briefly mention a few more reasons why I think it's important for us not only to have this statement, but to return to it, again and again, to ask ourselves if we're being faithful to its convictions. Let me begin two with key affirmations.

First, I believe at the heart of all Scripture is the insight from our first text for tonight: "Now the earth was corrupt, and the earth was filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11). Corruption, a spiritual reality, is mirrored in violence, a physical reality. It's like that old aphorism: "When you see smoke, look for the fire."

Second, the life and teachings of Jesus are at the heart of our vocation as Christians. And at the heart of Jesus' message is the notion that learning to love enemies and learning to love God are bound up together. The failure to love enemies is to hedge on Jesus.

Unfortunately, the dominant message we hear from churches is like that line from the Dar Williams song: "Oh Lord, I've made you a place in my heart; and I hope now you'll leave it alone." Generally speaking, our spirituality has degenerated in ways that reflect the statement in 2 Timothy, when it complains about those who "hold the form of religion but deny the power thereof."

So why do we need a Peace Church Statement? Here are a few reasons:

1. It begins with the background to the English word *peace*. In Hebrew, it's the word *shalom*.
2. Peace is more than an ideological position or a political strategy. It must be rooted in a spiritual vision. In the words of Charles Peguy: "Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics." The work of disarming the heart and disarming the nations are integrally related. The Spirit's work of redemption—in us—is intimately tied up with our work of redemption in the world.
3. It's not enough to be *for peace*. Everyone wants peace. The problem is that we also want what we cannot get without war. Being *for peace* is so much more than being *against war*. As the bumper sticker puts it: "If you want peace, work for justice. Any fool can honk."
4. As Baptist theologian Harvey Cox says it, "A church that is not able to take a firm stand against war is not a church which deserves to be believed." I believe one of our urgent tasks in this day and age is to take a firm stand against war. For our country's "war on terrorism" is in fact the call to unending and everlasting war.
5. You'll notice that our Peace Church Statement does not use the word *pacifism*.
6. Our Peace Church Statement commits us to a permanent learning curve when it comes to loving enemies. As New York marathon world-record holder Juma Ikangaa says it, "The will to win is not nearly as important as the will to prepare."
7. Our Peace Church Statement isn't a creedal statement but a suggestive guide to countless ways we can invest ourselves in the world's salvation and liberation. The British theologian Colin Morris wrote, "When confronted with an overwhelming problem, the best we can do is find the near edge and act at some sacrifice to ourselves."
8. Recently a Circle of Mercy member asked, "Does our Peace Church Statement describe who we are, or does it ask us to be something different?" My answer is yes. Both of these things.

Finally: Not long ago Mahan Siler offered a great analogy for what our Peace Church Statement does for us. He said, "It's like an anchor that we throw way out ahead of ourselves. And then we slowly, with great effort, pull ourselves toward it."

Our statement does not bind us like a creed. It doesn't tell us what to do. In fact it allows us, over time, to continually refine our methods and strategies and goals.

Most people don't know that when the Montgomery Improvement Association began its resistance to segregated buses, the original bargaining position had little to do with integration. The original demand assumed that segregation would continue—blacks would continue going to the back of the bus, whites at the front. All they wanted from the bus company was the assurance that black folk would not have to give up their seat to a white person, if all the seats were taken.

Needless to say, in the course of that struggle, the civil rights movement refined its demands and strategies and tactics. And so will we.

Listen again to the final of our three readings for today: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Our Peace Church Statement helps us to understand that sometimes our enemies are in our own home, our own neighborhoods, maybe even here in this Circle. And there are things we can do—practices we can cultivate, habits that we can learn, strategies that we can employ—in learning how to love enemies, in learning how to overcome evil—not human beings, but evil—with the goodness of the Gospel. And in so doing, learning to be friends with God as well. Amen

Quotes:

Everyone wants peace. The problem is that we also want what we cannot get without war.

The failure to love enemies is to hedge on Jesus. Our Peace Church Statement commits us to a permanent learning curve when it comes to loving enemies.