

The Table of Peace

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 23, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 5:1-12](#) and [Romans 14:14-19](#)

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When I think about peace, I end up thinking about war. I know that peace, real peace, positive peace, is about much more than the absence of war. Still, when I start to think about peace, I end up thinking about war.

Weeks ago, as we were planning for this worship series and we knew that today's focus would be the Table of Peace, I ended up thinking about war. I thought about the table around which the armistice that halted the Korean War was negotiated. I thought about the signing of the Good Friday Agreement that brought an end to the violence known as "The Troubles" in Great Britain. When I went to find a photo of the signing online, I was saddened to see that it wasn't signed at one table. If you look closely, you'll see that it was signed at two tables set next to each other.

And I thought about how impossible it seems to get people to sit at a table to negotiate peace in the Middle East. Yesterday's news made the possibility of peace in the Middle East seem even further away. One headline (from the BBC) reads, "Unable to back down, Israel and Hezbollah move closer to all-out war."¹ A *Washington Post* headline reads "Israeli airstrikes kill dozens in Gaza City, authorities say."² And yesterday I read an article from a few days earlier in *The Guardian* that says, "The Israeli military has quietly handed over significant legal powers in the occupied West Bank to pro-settler civil servants working for the far-right minister Bezalel Smotrich."³ A senior analyst on Israel-Palestine at Crisis Group, said: "The big story is that this is no longer 'creeping annexation' or 'de facto annexation', it is actual annexation."⁴ I read these reports and come to the conclusion that Israel (or at least the current Israeli government) has no interest in establishing peace through a "two state solution."

Preparing for today's service, Sandy, Joy, and I wanted the communion table to evoke the idea of a conference table, one around which negotiators might gather to come to a peace agreement. So, we decided to put challah, a bread associated with the Jewish Sabbath, and taboon, a Palestinian flatbread, on the table of peace today. As I've reflected on this decision this week, there's a part of me that's become a bit uncomfortable with this choice. I don't want this to look like we're suggesting that Israelis who are not Christians and Palestinians who are not Christian need to become Christian in order of find peace in their land. Far from it.

¹ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4nn145p20qo> (posted and accessed 22 June 2024).

² See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/22/israel-hamas-war-news-gaza-palestine/> (posted and accessed 22 June 2024).

³ Peter Beaumont, "IDF transfers powers in occupation of West Bank to pro-settler civil servants," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/20/idf-transfers-powers-in-occupied-west-bank-to-pro-settler-civil-servants> (posted 20 June 2024; accessed 22 June 2024).

⁴ Mairav Zonszein, quoted in *ibid.*

I have found peace at this table. I have found peace in communion. And I know full well that people of other faiths find peace in other ways and at other places. What I do want to evoke is the idea that Jesus calls us who are his followers to be peacemakers. What I do want to say is that Paul urges people who are part of the Jesus movement to pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

And this desire left me wondering how on earth I would talk about how to actually pursue what makes for peace. I was stymied – until I listened to an interview Diana Butler Bass did with Tim Shriver on Thursday.

If you don't know who Tim Shriver is immediately, there's still a good chance his name rings a bell. Tim is one of the brothers of Maria Shriver, former first lady of California. Tim is currently Chairman of the Board of the Special Olympic, an organization his mother started. A few years ago, he stepped down from being CEO of the Special Olympics to launch UNITE, a national initiative to bring Americans together in common purpose to address universal challenges.

One of the things UNITE create is The Dignity Index, which was the subject of the interview. The Dignity Index is a tool that can “help us discern how we engage with others. It is an eight level scale that scores our attitudes and speech on a continuum from contempt to dignity.”⁵ I think utilizing the Dignity Index is one way we can pursue the things that make for peace.

Shriver explains: “We have normalized a culture of contempt. In a culture of contempt, when you use contempt, you get rewarded. In a culture of contempt, when you use contempt, you get more fame, more power, and more wealth. In a culture of dignity (which is its opposite), when you use contempt, you get less and less of those things [and] when you use more dignity, you get rewarded with attention, with support, with reinforcement.... We concluded that we've got a culture that's normalized and reinforcing treating each other with contempt, and we concluded that unless we address that problem,... unless we address the core issue of contempt, we would never be able to solve the other problems [we face].”⁶

The Dignity Index is a tool we can use to score our own language, on a scale of 1 to 8, on how much it treats others with contempt or with dignity. Shriver describes language that scores a 1: “That's the language of war. ‘I'm going to kill you; you don't deserve to live.’ When it's applied to a group, it's genocidal language.”

At the other end of the scale, a score of 8 means, “I can see myself in every human being, I refuse to hate anyone, and I offer dignity to everyone.” The subtext here is that “each one of us is born with inherent worth, so we treat everyone with dignity – no matter what.”

⁵ Diana Butler Bass, “Tim Shriver on the Dignity Index,” *The Cottage*, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/tim-shriver-on-the-dignity-index> (posted 21 June 2024; accessed 22 June 2024).

⁶ This quote, and (unless otherwise noted) the quotes that follow are from Tim Shriver, *ibid*, transcribed by me as faithfully and accurately as I could.

Shriver says, “When I ask people to grade themselves ... when they talk about the other political party, ... many people grade themselves a 2.” Level 2 accuses the other side not only of doing bad or being bad. Level 2 accuses the other side of promoting evil. “Those people are evil and they’re going to ruin our country if we let them. It’s us or them.”

“One of the things we discovered,” Shriver says, “at least in our view ... is that contempt operates by disguise and the disguise is usually self-righteousness.” What Shriver means when he says this is that we unconsciously justify our contemptuousness toward that person because we think ‘I’m right.’ Thus, “the contempt slips under the radar and the self-righteousness hides it.”

One of the things the Dignity Index does is it reveals the contempt because to use the Index, we have to evaluate what we’ve been saying and doing.

“The Index in a way unmasks our own participation in the cycle of destruction.” “Dignity,” Shriver explains, “has two qualities: it’s universal and it’s inviolable.” It is not earned. You don’t get it when you get to a certain age. You don’t get it when you achieve a certain educational level. You don’t get it when you achieve a certain job or credential. You’re born with it. And, this is also important, “You don’t lose it when you make mistakes. You never lose it. And you don’t have it and some other people don’t have it; everybody has it.”

Coming from a place of dignity means having “the capacity to see in another yourself. I and you are equal. There’s a radical equality in [dignity]. It doesn’t mean you can’t have a boundary for someone who’s a criminal. You can treat people on death row with dignity.” You can treat your political opponent with dignity. You can treat your spouse with dignity – even when it’s hard.

“The option is not to compromise your principles or standards. Don’t change your beliefs. Add one: treat people with dignity.”

Shriver has noticed that faith-based organizations are “riven with contempt” – at least most are. And it’s not just contempt for the people in other faith communities. The contempt is within the organization, and it’s often the same contempt we see writ large in the wider society: contempt across the political divide. Few faith communities “try to establish a common commitment to treat each other with dignity,” even though for most faith traditions (and maybe all faith traditions) the dignity of everyone is a basic premise. We might want to look into that.

When Shriver has presented this Index to Democratic audiences, the response has been, “This is what we believe, but the Republicans aren’t going to buy into it because they’re full of contempt.” And when he’s presented this Index to Republican audiences, the response has been, “This is what we believe, but the Democrats aren’t going to buy into it because they’re full of contempt.”

But Shriver believes we can turn off the contempt. In the online interview that introduced me to Dignity Index, he said, “If everyone on this screen turned off contempt when they saw it on television, didn’t give to causes that use contempt to appeal for money, and didn’t click on [news] stories that raised their temperature [when they read the headline],... the people writing them won’t get paid ... and they’ll start to see [that] ...

nobody wants to read that [contempt-infused] stuff anymore. They used to; they don't anymore."

He calls this "a dignity *movement*" and he encourages people to look at the Index, to play with it, and to look at their own behavior. Shriver said he plans to record himself as he watches the presidential debate on Thursday. Then, he's going to go back and score his reactions. He invited the rest of us to do it, too. "Now, of course, just by doing that it will lead you to change" your reactions, he said. I'm intrigued by the challenge.

I don't know how to bring peace to the Middle East. Even though I don't know how, I do believe that Jesus wants us followers to be peacemakers. I believe we are called to pursue the things that make for peace. And maybe engaging in a discipline of dignity is one of the ways we can do just that.

In a blog post last month, Tim Shriver wrote about an experience he had visiting an elementary school in Illinois. "One student, Patrick, shared his experience. 'There's one word that makes me mad,' he said. 'I can't think of it,' he paused, and then he blurted out, 'It's autism. Autism makes me mad and it makes me sad too. Mad and sad at the same time.' The whole room paused as Patrick looked at the adults. 'But it's okay to be mad and sad. It's okay to have those feelings. You just can't throw a chair or hurt anyone else when you're mad or sad. What I like to do is hug. That's what makes me feel better. A hug.'"⁷

In the interview this week, Shriver referred to this experience and said, "It's okay to be mad about the country. It's okay to be sad about the country. But it's not okay to throw a chair."

Then he summarized the wisdom of this child. "[What Patrick said] was social, emotional, spiritual genius. He identified a source of pain in his life, he identified the complex feelings surrounding it, he identified the impulse he has to act violently when he feels that way, he identified the need to control that that impulse, and he identified an alternative path for healing."⁸

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Amen.

⁷ Tim Shriver, "Protest with dignity, and respond with dignity, too," *The Dignity Index*, <https://www.dignityindex.us/news/protest-with-dignity-and-respond-with-dignity-too> (posted 13 May 2024; accessed 22 June 2024).

⁸ Tim Shriver, "Tim Shriver on the Dignity Index," *The Cottage*, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/tim-shriver-on-the-dignity-index> (posted 21 June 2024; accessed 22 June 2024).