

STRIVING NATIONS
Randall Tremba
July 13, 2014
15th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

* * *

Genesis 25:19-34

Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife Rebekeh because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"

And the LORD said, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents.

Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of hunting; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

[In other words, mom and dad each had a favorite. It shouldn't ever be that way but it sometimes is. Which is to say, the seeds of conflict had been planted in that family. Keep in mind, this may be a story about one family but it's actually a parable about the nations of the world. "Two nations are in your womb."]

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Jesus said: "Listen! A sower went out to sow seeds. Some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Some fell on rocky ground, some among thistles and thorns; and some fell on good soil and produced a great harvest.

Reading

If there is to be peace in the world,
There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
There must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
There must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
There must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
There must be peace in the heart.

Lao Tzu

Chinese philosopher, 500 BCE

* * *

This morning I have the world on my mind in part because over the past four weeks I—along with half the world—have been watching the world cup. And we say to ourselves: *what a beautiful game!*

You can't win that game without a harmonious collective effort by the whole team. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Egos get in the way. Which makes soccer a great metaphor for personal and national life.

Over that past four weeks we've seen 32 nations striving, striving with all their heart, mind, soul and strength to win. This afternoon Germany and Argentina compete for the ultimate prize. If you're betting, keep in mind: emeritus Pope Benedict is from Germany but the actual pope, Pope Francis, is from Argentina. (I'm just sayin').

Anyway, you can bet on this: *the game will be fiercely fought.*

And we say to ourselves: *if only nations would strive that hard for world peace.* If only the only fighting between nations in the future were on a soccer field. If only all the nations could take this prayer to heart and make it happen.

*May truth and freedom come to every nation;
may peace abound where strife has raged so long;
that each may seek to love and build together,
a world united, righting every wrong;
a world united in its love for freedom,
proclaiming peace together in one song.*

Those are the words of Lloyd Stone. He wrote that prayer in 1934, shortly after WWI and just before the start of WWII. It's a prayer for world peace. It's a longing in our hearts that we must never lose.

This morning I have the world on mind, in part because of the world cup but also because of World War I. One hundred years ago this month WWI began. At the time it was called "The Great War." The precipitating factor was the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Yugoslav nationalist in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. It was a shot heard round the world. The Great War officially began one month later on July 28.

Over the next four years 70 million troops were mobilized from dozens of nations divided into "Allies" led by Russia and England and "Central Powers" led by Germany and Austria. 10 million combatants were killed along with seven million civilians. "The Great War" was a great catastrophe!

WWI officially ended with the signing of an armistice at 11:00 on the morning of Nov. 11, 1918. Nations had striven against nations and the world had lost. The ultimate prize was a cup full of ashes.

*May truth and freedom come to every nation;
may peace abound where strife has raged so long.*

Everywhere you look these days, nations and peoples are raging in turmoil if not downright bloody conflict—striving to get something they don't now have, be it territory, resources, freedom, or independence. The list of nations and peoples is long. Here are some: Russia. Ukraine. Syria. Somalia. Iraq. Sunnis. Shiites. Kurds. Afghanistan. Israel. Palestinians. South Sudan. Central Africa Republic. Nigeria. Honduras. El Salvador. Guatemala. Not to mention continuing, sporadic racial and ethnic clashes in our own country.

Why can't we all just get along? Why can't we treat each other as brothers and sisters and simply look out for each other's wellbeing?

Maybe we can but we aren't. Why not?

Our Great Ancestors asked that question, too. They began to notice something—something in every human heart. And they put their discoveries and insights into mythic folktales. (See Genesis 2-11).

According to one folktale (Gen. 4), the first human children, were Cain and Abel. Remember: this isn't science; it's a mythic folktale, which is to say, *it never was but always*

is. Cain was the firstborn but he thought Abel had unfairly and unjustly received more respect than he. Cain was angry and killed his brother in cold blood.

Yes, it's a folktale but it's true every day—brothers killing brothers. Just look at the headlines. Can you tell the difference between Hutus and Tutsis; Kurds and Arabs; Israelis and Palestinians? Aren't we all more or less brothers and sisters or at least distant cousins in one large family? So what's eating at us?

Our Great Ancestors saw that real or perceived injustice provokes much if not most human violence. They could see that anger, resentment and greed lurk with the human heart. And unless the heart is transformed by grace into contentment, trust and forgiveness, it will explode in violence against others.

Here, then, is a diagnosis of the universal human condition from our tradition: We are afraid we don't have enough. And we are afraid we aren't good enough, respected enough. And such fears deform our hearts.

Why don't the nations get along?

If there's to be peace in the world, peace must come to the nations, to neighborhoods, to homes, and ultimately to our own hearts first. And that takes great inner work. It takes great humility, great faith, great hope and great love.

Isaac and Rebekah were children of an ancient promise held in the heart of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12), a promise that someday a way would be found to bless all peoples, nations and tribes of the whole earth—a way to bring peace to the world. But that way, as it turns out, is fraught with difficulties as our biblical tradition clearly shows. Rebekah herself can birth to two hostile nations.

And thus we must practice hopeful realism. Not optimism. Nor pessimism. But realism with hopefulness.

Rebekah gave birth to twins who you'd think would love each other. But no they would not. Anything but.

Those twins in the lesson before us this morning stand as metaphors for the nations of the world. The first twin inherited more than the other, privileges the second did not get. It was the law of the land at that time. It was custom. It was the way it was.

And so the resentful second one went to war against the first one. It got ugly and nasty.

It would take a long time and long journey—outward and inward—for the second, the grasping one, named Jacob, to discover that grace, generosity, trust and reconciliation is a better way. A hard way, yes. But also a better way.

And that is the seed of hope that Jesus invites us to scatter near and far. For you never know when a heart (or nation) is ready like good soil to receive, embrace and cultivate that seed of hope until it produces a great harvest of peace.

I'm guessing there are a few such hearts here this morning.

* * *

HYMN

This Is My Song by Lloyd Stone, 1934
(Tune: Finlandia)

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;

Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;
But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
O hear my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.

May truth and freedom come to every nation;
may peace abound where strife has raged so long;
that each may seek to love and build together,
a world united, righting every wrong;
a world united in its love for freedom,
proclaiming peace together in one song.