

What Are We Learning?

a sermon

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Isaiah 2:1-5

Like many of you, I've had teachers and I've taken classes. I have had to learn things, and on occasion I actually have. Amazing.

Sometimes it's been easy. Sometimes it's been hard. Learning at times feels so natural, like a baby acquiring language; and other times learning feels so completely unnatural, like shy middle-schoolers at their first dance.

I've also been a teacher. I've have had to teach things to others. I've had students to teach and lessons to give and papers to grade. And on occasion, it seems like I actually have taught something, and others have really learned. From me. Amazing.

Sometimes it's been easy. Sometimes it's been hard. Teaching at times feels so natural, like a conversation between good friends; and other times teaching feels so completely unnatural, like talking backwards.

What I've found in all this is that sometimes before a student can *learn* something, she or he needs to *unlearn* something else. I believe that this is so common in education. The concepts students have picked up along the way, whether they be about history or science or grammar, whether they be from parents or friends or the media, often are at best irrelevant and at worst in error, and they give the students who hold them no help in learning what they really need to know.

Yet it's not easy to do that unlearning. Sometimes, it feels impossible. Because we can be so committed to our "facts" that are really falsehoods, to our comfortable ways of doing things that are slowly causing us great harm, to our supposedly natural methods that are really just bad habits. Stepping away from them by unlearning them so we can learn what is true is really difficult. So familiar are they to us, we have made peace with them, and we feel at peace with them.



Peace. That is the theme of the Old Testament passage I just read. Peace is what Isaiah son of Amoz spoke to his people. But this peace was not its present reality but instead its promise, a peace yet to come.

You see, at the time there was not a whole lot of peace. In those days, the peace enjoyed by Isaiah's people was very fragile. And everybody knew it. Everybody saw it. Everybody felt it. It's as if you could hear the borders creaking, the economy groaning, the crops sighing. Alliances with this foreign power or that one seemed only to put them into deeper peril and deeper into others' debt.

Yes, the peace *was* fragile. And things were about to get worse. Isaiah knew this. God had told him. And Isaiah let them know. Violence and war were coming, and their country would soon be taken from them.

Why? Well, that is much of what Isaiah had to say through a good many of the chapters in the book bearing his name. Yes, Isaiah said, peace was coming to the people of Judah. But first what little peace the people had would be stripped away from them. Because

they had abandoned God;
they had walked away from God;
they had rejected God's ways;
they had shrugged off God's instruction.

Those whom God had rescued and established as a mighty country — to be holy, to be a light to the nations — they had thrown it all away, turning their backs on their loving and holy God.

So, Isaiah told them, before they would see the peace they desired, first they would know the suffering they had earned.

But in the time to come, said Isaiah, there *will* be peace, *God's* peace.

*In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills.*

With such poetic and fantastic imagery, Isaiah says that this will be no mere human peace-making. This will not be simply the result of people of good will coming together to build a peace. No, instead this would be

an act of God,
a divine gift,
a miracle,
a world-remaking and possibility-creating intervention by God.

“The mountain of the Lord's house,” the city of Jerusalem, will be made into “the highest of the mountains,” lifted miraculously higher than anything else. Because when it comes, God's peace will exceed all that kings and armies could ever accomplish. This is *God's* peace, which *God* will bring about.

And once God has brought this peace, to this peace the people will respond. They will know the peace. They will embrace it. Having received God's peace, they will become peaceful.

Because they will learn this peace. They will be taught it by God.

*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths....
O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!*

God teaches, and those who are taught will learn. And, having learned, they will *walk*, in God's paths and in God's light.

What God will teach is not mere information or dry facts. What God will teach are God's will and God's ways. What God will teach are justice and wholeness and peace.

This is teaching that makes a difference. It changes lives. It reaches into the whole person. It forms and molds and guides.

But for the people to be taught God's ways so they can walk in God's paths, they have to *stop learning* and even *unlearn* some things.

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

They will not learn war *any more*. They will *stop learning* war. Which means that they *had* been learning war. They had been learning the facts and data of war, studying the techniques and strategies for effective warfare, pondering how and when and why and against whom to wage war.

And isn't this so true? The violent learn both the instruments and the targets of violence. They study these, and become more adept in the ways of violent conflict. And they learn from those who have taught them, in wicked word and deed, whom to target and how. Children learn whom they're supposed to hate from adults — whether they be parents or neighbors or caretakers — who shower these young ones from burgeoning reservoirs of anger, fear, suspicion, resentment, and prejudice. And as such children grow older, they learn the tools for carrying out hate with weapons of increasing degrees of sophistication and effectiveness.

But if these can be taught, could something else be taught, and learned?

You bet.

In God's promised day of peace, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks...." The instruments of the battlefield, used for conquering and defending, will be re-purposed into tools of the crop-field, used for tending and harvesting.

What was used to hurt will be used to help.
What was used to take life will be used to enhance life.
What was used to harm will be used to feed,

All this, because they will have been taught by God, learning lessons of holiness and love and peace, and unlearning lessons of sin and hate and war.



This is the peace Isaiah said was coming. And, sure, it was partially fulfilled when, some years later, after the war and destruction and exile, the people returned to their land and the temple was rebuilt.

But only partially did the peace come, in part, only in part, left incomplete with the return from exile. How could it not be? For Isaiah's prophecy describes a peace that is so extensive,

so lofty, so God-established and God-centered, that it points *beyond* the historic events of the re-establishment of Jerusalem. It's a peace that looks for fulfillment, yearns for it, *in the Messiah*.

Yes, this is a messianic peace. It is peace promised in the Christ, and found in the Christ. And so it is a peace promised likewise to us. It's a peace given to those who follow and cleave to and adore Messiah Jesus.

And so it is a peace both known and expected, both given and anticipated, both already and not yet.

Because in Christ, we *have* peace. We've been given peace and are at peace. He has welcomed us, and blessed us, and made us right. Yes, in Christ, we *have* peace.

And yet we also *await* peace, the peace of Jesus. For, clearly, peace is not complete. Within us and outside of us it is incomplete. We are both the victims and the perpetrators of the scarcity of peace. We are both the students and the teachers of the opposition to peace. And having taught and learned to hate and fight and wound and kill, we have hollowed ourselves out on the inside, and carved out unrelenting contradictions within ourselves.

We are driven and exhausted.

We are slothful and restless.

We are hungry and bloated.

We are materially wealthy and spiritually impoverished.

What a mess we are.

We have given our minds and our souls and our bodies

to consumerism, replete with Fridays black and Mondays cyber;

to lusts and addictions, aided by the means to feed them;

to mistrust and cynicism, sharpened by cable news;

to thoughts of revenge, encouraged by violent movies.

We have been poor students of Christ's peace.

And yet, we yearn for his peace. We crave for it to come in fullness. And so, perhaps we yearn also, more and more, to be taught by Christ and learn from him:

learn the ways of peace,
and unlearn the ways of war;

learn who are to receive our peace;
and unlearn our records and lists of enemies.

learn the instruments of peace and how to use them,
unlearn the tools and techniques of violence.

And then, my friends, I believe the peace of Christ we are learning will be *seen*

in our walking,
in our welcoming,
in our working,
in our striving.

The peace of Christ we are learning will be *heard*

as we forgive,
as we bless,
as we pray,
as we guide.

The peace of Christ we are learning will be *felt*

as we seek the best in others.
as we yearn for their thriving;
as we celebrate their accomplishing;
as we hold not against them their stumbling.

My friends, let us seek to learn, more truly and deeply, the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
who with the Father and the Spirit is worthy of all praise.