

The notes of Agnes

Saturday, April 11, 1981 – meeting at Yale University,
talk by Henri Nouwen

I hope I can respond to the request to set the tone. I will read Luke and take that for a reflection on peacemaking.

“Stay Awake, praying at all times. Stand with confidence before the Son of Man.”

It is this course of the Lord that I will use to explore what it means to be peacemakers today. Just as we can only really be servants of people when we are aware of our own individual deaths, so, too, can we really be peacemakers when we are willing to face the death of history. Sometimes, our activities are ways to avoid facing our own immortality. Real service is only possible when you and I know we will die. A way to celebrate life in the face of death and just as important is that we also dare to face the end of history, because that is written in the book of God. Just as creation has a beginning, it will have an end. The Lord will appear. To witness for the God of Light while facing the reality that indeed history has an end. Peacemaking is peacemaking that is based on the knowledge that history will have an end but there is hope for history, just as there is hope for life in the area of our own immortality. For the first time in history we are able to destroy. It has become possible for us to destroy our own planet and to end the world in which we live; to become the instrument of total destruction. Our sinfulness and the evil in the world can bring about that end for which we have to be prepared. The question the Lord raises to us is “Are we going to survive the end of all things?” So that we can stand erect with confidence for the Son of Man when he appears. Peacemaking, to call our fellow human beings to that alertness, that being awake and praying always so that the day of the Lord will not catch us unaware, but will lead us to freedom and a life in Him who overcame all death and evil.

Three complete words that may summarize peacemaking:

1. Prayer
2. Resistance

3. Community

Prayer: If you understand what prayer is, you will see how it stands in the center of peacemaking. A lot of people are confusing praying and prayer as an escape, a substitute for action. When I speak about prayer, I speak about one of the mental ways of living that is essential for peacemaking. I am not speaking about praying for peace. Prayer has a way of being in the world in which we breathe the spirit of God, as the spirit that makes us live and survive. It means to breathe the spirit. Breathing with God's spirit and letting that breath be the basis of your living. Prayer is one of the most radical acts you can think of.

We live in a world in which we are made to believe that we are what we own, that we are what other people say about us, that we are the praise we receive or the friends we make and once we are made to believe that our identity is really given to us by the world in which we live, from that moment we are selling out to the world and on the road to violence and war. When we think that survival means to hold on to enough food or friends or to enough knowledge, from that moment we are people who cling to what we have – love, knowledge, friends, property, sex, religion – and going to defend it at all times.

I am this, I am that. If I lose it I will die and I will defend it at all cost. People want to have some of it, my knowledge, my wealth, and those are my enemy. The enemy is the one who wants to have what we do not want to give up. We will hoard what we have and defend it and not let it go. It is right there where we become jealous, suspicious, violent – armies and bombs. In order for this country to survive we will kill 40 million people. I must survive. If it means the death of millions, that is too bad. This concern of survival is the road to death. This leads to a destructive end. Nation against nation. Prayer means to let go from that illusion, to let go of all things that falsely identify us. I am not what I own or can accomplish. My true being is rooted not in the world and its compulsions but in God. My true identity is given to me by God himself. It allows me to see that I am the one who is loved by God. The one who has given me His spirit. The spirit of the Christ who has overcome the world, evil and death. When my sense of self is really rooted in the Christ, then I am free to speak in the midst of this world and not swept away by the compulsion of the world. "I have the sense that I have to be totally poor because everything I own is somewhere killing someone." (Thomas Merton). Only when I am stripped from possessions,

from clinging, I can live free in the world because I know that my being is not anchored there but in Him who has overcome the world. Prayer – a radical form of resistance. You are resisting the illusion of the world. You are willing to stand naked in the presence of God and say, “Lord, you are giving me out of the abundance of your love. I am who you give me to be.” The spirit that bound the Father and Son together. I am lifted up in that triune love relationship. “You do not belong to the world.” Prayer – not belonging to the world but belonging to God – is a basic act of resistance against war, evil. If you pray to resist the power of evil, you are a peacemaker right there. If you stand useless in the presence of God, this protests a world in which everyone is made to believe that usefulness is what makes us worthwhile. When you enter the silence of your prayer life, with your family and friends, you are a peacemaker right there. You do something that the world does not want you to do. The more I try to feel secure, I realize how insecure I am.

Resistance: Resistance is a second element of peacemaking. It means to protest against the society in which seeking power is the main concern. Separation of race, sex, religion, is a way of keeping control. A resistance against the need to be relevant, powerful and finally, it is a resistance against the idolatry of power, a resistance against Satan, who seduces us to be accomplices in this work of destruction. It is a resistance against those powers that create poverty and misery. Resistance is saying “No” to the powers of evil and asks us to speak loud and clear. No against the Trident, No against oppression in El Salvador, No against poverty, No against torture. What is the way you and I can say “No”? It is different for every person. It also says “Yes” to those moments where we see the love of God appearing in very small ways. Saying “Yes” to the small boy, saying “Yes” to the poor person who is walking the streets and “Yes” to the people who are not loved. Yes – it is always compassionate. You are a peacemaker every time you do something illogical. You make peace when you work with retarded children and see their beauty. You work in a street in New York where no-one bothers with them. You are peacemaking when you stay with dying people and hold their hands. You break away from the world who says those people are not useful anymore. It is more powerful. Resisting the powers and evoking the small event. Resistance understood this way is prayer, for just as prayer is resistance, in this way is proclaiming in the face of the destructive powers that God is a God of the living. Resistance is a way in which we proclaim that God has overcome the world and the evil one and that it has already taken place and I, by saying No and Yes, I say the God of

the living is stronger and greater than death. This resistance is not dependent on the results of it. You cannot say, "I did it by resistance." That is the way of the world. Resistance is the work of the people of God. It always has two elements. The first element it always includes is repentance on our side. We human beings must repent in the face of this evil. That I have to repent. I must prevent the world from changing me. I want the world to keep a distance. I must be authentic to whom I was made to be. I am part of the problem. I, myself, am a sinner, who is greedy, who is jealous. I am, indeed, the same person as the person I protest against and I can only do it repentedly. The same flesh and blood that I have in me. The second element is the affirmation of the God of Life. We proclaim that the evil one has been overcome and we want to make that visible in the world today. God destroyed the power of death and we are witnesses to that event. I am not in the world. I have already died and therefore am free. We can allow the power of evil to be around because we have already entered into the death of Christ and life within. Resistance is a liturgy: repentance and affirmation.

As prayer and resistance are two elements of peacemaking and as prayer is resistance and resistance is prayer, how can I fulfill that vocation myself? Here, you immediately recognize the answer – you cannot. I cannot and you cannot, but we can. Prayer and resistance as elements of peacemaking are always elements of a peacemaking community. It is not a question of individual healing because that is the way of the world. Every time we pray and resist it leads us to community because we pray and resist in the name of Christ. And where is Christ? Where we come together in community. We see that the Lord calls us to be His body together, our common vocation, by coming together in community. We must realize that here is the living Christ, where we come together and witness to one another of the one who is life. Wherever peacemaking is going on, community must be taking place. People take bread and take the cup. This is the body and blood of Christ. And through this we are set free from our own activities. We do it in the name of Christ. That gives us a whole new dimension. Where peacemakers are people coming together to take the bread and wine and recognize that where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in their midst. All around our country, you see people coming together; new life in community is taking place. I had this vision that maybe we are coming on the brink of a new movement of peacemaking in which Christians form all over the country and the world, forming a network of peacemaking.

Benedict

Francis
Ignatius

Every time there was a crisis, maybe the crisis we are facing which is that of the possibility of total destruction of our own planet, this crisis might create a movement as strong and powerful as the ones in the past. People stripping themselves from the ways of the world and walking in this world with the Lord. Maybe, in the midst of this we will see the rebirth of a new order; maybe, there will be unity and community between all people.

We are to work for the salvation of the Lord, even when we get stung, because it belongs to our nature to do it, to proclaim peace, to pray at all times, to resist evil, to call forth god, to come together in community and affirm the living God.