

*Based on Psalm 85. A Vision of Peace Sustains the Psalmist.*

In 1976, the beloved Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh joined others in the Buddhist peace movement in a great humanitarian effort to save the lives of refugees escaping Vietnam by sea.

*During those days, Thich Nhat Hanh says, we practiced sitting meditation and walking meditation and ate our meals in silence and concentration. We knew, he continues, that, without that kind of discipline, our work would fail. The lives of many people depended on our practice of mindfulness.*

Then he got caught.

In the middle of the night, the Singapore police confiscated his travel documents and ordered him to leave the country within twenty-four hours, leaving hundreds of refugees stranded on the high winds and rough waves of the South China Sea.

The practice of mindfulness continued through the crisis into the first glimpse of morning.

*I will never forget every second of sitting meditation, says Thich Nhat Hanh, every breath, and every step I took in mindfulness through that night.*

Hours later, an insight emerged. An appeal to the French ambassador to intervene on their behalf was made. A ten day reprieve from the Singapore Office of Immigration was granted. Just enough time to get sufficient help to the boats on the water that would save the lives of hundreds of refugees.

*If we hadn't had the practice of meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh says, we would easily have been overwhelmed ... and unable to keep going. Instead, with determined perseverance, they put their preaching into practice, in the moment of greatest anxiety, and learned all over again what they had been proclaiming all along:*

*If you want peace, you have peace right away.*

It is a lesson the Psalmist learns, as well, in the communal prayer for deliverance that is our Lesson this morning.

In the verses just before the ones we read aloud, the Psalmist recounts, as a mantra, the ways in which God has already rescued the people: in the gift of land; in the healing of wrongdoing; in the restoration of a nation.

It is the Psalmist's version of mindfulness meditation through the long dark night. Every breath, every lyric, every melody played with practiced perseverance, in the hope of reclaiming the peace that passes understanding.

*Restore us again*, the Psalmist sings. *Revive us again*, the Psalmist prays. *Speak peace to your people again*, the Psalmist insists.

And, as happens with Thich Nhat Hanh through his hours of meditation, the insight emerges for the Psalmist: the vision of a mystical union. Steadfast love married to faithfulness; righteousness embracing peace; wisdom embedded in truth; mercy mixed with compassion.

Peace. Right there for the taking, if you want it. Even - and perhaps especially - through a long, dark night with seemingly no peace to be found.

But it is not for ourselves alone, this peace that passes understanding, this peace that, if we really want it, we have right away.

The peace is for the *land*, the psalmist insists, that it will *yield its increase*. The peace is for the *people* of the land, Thich Nhat Hanh insists, especially those who find themselves floating far from shore.

The saving grace of God, the deliverance from the long dark night is for *us* as a *collective*, not just for me, or you, or Thich Nhat Hanh, or the Psalmist, even though it is emphatically *also* for me and you and Thich Nhat Hanh and the Psalmist.

The peace that perseveres through thick and thin, the *hesed* love of God that just will not ever quit, is for *community*, bound together in a vision of hope that keeps us grounded in this good earth while at the same time soaring toward celestial greatness.

Which brings me to the General Assembly of our denomination and all that transpired as we who were commissioners sought the peace that passes understanding in deliberating the work of the church many hours into the night.

In many ways, this Assembly intentionally practiced peace-filled perseverance, much of which can be attributed to the careful, deliberate, faithful groundwork put in place by outgoing co-moderators Gregory Bentley and Elona Street-Stewart. The worship planning team they appointed powerfully and prophetically centered the voices and stories of Black, Indigenous, People of Color Presbyterians throughout the worship experiences of our gathered community. Special offerings were collected to support an economic equity initiative that restores wealth to Afro-American and Indigenous Peoples from whom it has been taken and denied. Equity Primes in our decision-making called us to focus our attention on those most impacted by our decisions and to make special effort to consider those voices that are most marginal. The entire Committee that deliberated Race and Gender Justice Issues read together one of the books we have read here at SPC: *Dear White Christians*. The author, Jennifer Harvey, was a resource person for that committee.

Hands down, the most powerful experience for me at this Assembly came through our action to apologize to African Americans for the Sin of Slavery and Its Legacy.

Even across Zoom, a Spirit of abject humility permeated White bodied commissioners reciting A Litany of Repentance, as we confessed our collective *failure to recognize and take responsibility for the legacy of slavery* and committed ourselves *to walking with people of African descent toward the goal of healing, reconciliation, and eliminating racism as we seek to dismantle white privilege*. This Litany of Repentance will be available to us at SPC as we continue our own work of recovering our congregation's racial history.

The one place in this Assembly that did not go as far as I - and many of you - would have liked is in the area of divestment from fossil fuels. Our Session endorsed an overture that would have led to categorical divestment from the entire fossil fuel industry. Instead, we only divested from five corporations: Chevron, ExxonMobil, Marathon Petroleum, Phillips 66, and Valero Energy.

This action was taken in compliance with our denomination's regular process of corporate engagement, in accordance with a policy on Divestment Strategy that was adopted in 1984. Yours truly offered an amendment that called for updating that 1984 policy in light of the urgent demands of climate change. The amendment failed by three votes. It was the closest vote at the Assembly.

This was a gut punch, no doubt about it. The earth is literally burning, and we could not conjure up a couple more votes to just think about updating a decades old policy on divestment! My immediate response, which I sent in an email to our own Mary Jane Hitt, was, *Maybe we don't deserve to survive climate change*.

Harsh, I know.

Then I went for a walk. It was not, I dare confess, a walking *meditation*, in the spirit of Thich Nhat Hanh. It was more of a dazed and confused *what now, now that this has failed?* Which was interrupted a few minutes later by, *hey lady, can you spare some change?*

I stopped dead in my tracks as I finally noticed the woman with three grocery carts's worth of belongings sitting on the brick wall along the sidewalk. I will confess my first thought was, *I have to get back to the Assembly, what in the world was I thinking coming out this far, how can I get out of this conversation, can I get away with pretending I did not hear her?* Thank goodness my second thought, which I said out loud, was *would you like to have dinner together?* And the answer was *yes!* So we crossed the street to Wendy's, where, over Frosties and french fries, Karen and I shared a truly holy communion.

An email awaited me in my inbox when I returned to the Assembly, thanking me for the effort on divestment policy and promising to carry the torch through the next assembly. I had offered a new strategy, and they liked it, and they thought with a little bit more time to do a little bit more education and gather a little bit more support the concept would very likely pass next time.

And so it continues ...

It turns out Thich Nhat Hanh, even with his ten day reprieve from the Office of Immigration in Singapore, never did save every single refugee from Vietnam escaping by sea. Neither will one small, Protestant denomination in the United States divesting from five fossil fuel corporations - or even categorically divesting from the entire fossil fuel industry - save the entire planet from the throes of climate change. Neither will one 13 verse song from one book in the Bible, as beautifully harmonized as it is, suddenly bring about peace on earth.

But that has never really been the point, in the end. The point has been the miracles that arise from the practice of perseverance.

*When nothing seems to help*, says Jacob Riis, *I go and look at a stonecutter practicing the perseverance of hammering away at his rock*. When nothing seems to help, says Thich Nhat Hanh, *I sit and I walk and I meditate*. When nothing seems to help, says the Psalmist, *I sing and I pray and I play my instrument*. When nothing seems to help, says your Pastor, *I go to Wendy's and share communion with a stranger*.

When we practice perseverance, we do come to find, as the Zen Master affirms, *if you want peace, you have peace right away*. For Thich Nhat Hanh, for the Psalmist, for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for you, for me, for the climate, as for the stonecutter, when we practice perseverance we come to find *it was not that last blow that did it, but all that had gone before*.

Let the church say, Amen!

*Note: quotations from Thich Nhat Hanh are taken from Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet, Part 1: Radical Insight: A New Way of Seeing, "Zen in a Storm."*