

Lately, when I listen to the news, I find myself thinking about a Steve Earle song called Jerusalem. It has to do with a part of the world where peace seems impossible—although increasingly, that seems to be every part of the world. Anyway, in this song, he starts out in the first verse talking about listening to the news in the morning, how none of it is good, how death machines are rolling across the Holy Land, and he hears some TV commentator saying that this conflict has gone on forever, and nothing will ever resolve it. “I almost believed that,” Steve Earle sings, “but then I looked inside my heart, and I realized I didn’t believe it. I believe that one day all the children of Abraham will lay down their swords forever in Jerusalem.”<sup>1</sup>

In these times, I try to remember what Steve Earle finds inside his heart. I think what it must be is that what he looked into his heart and found the desire for peace there, and that if he could find it in his heart, then he could have hope that we can all find it. I think what he’s saying is that, even though peace has to do with justice, and economics, and inclusion, and all kinds of complex social interactions, at its very heart peace is a spiritual issue. Wherever we are, whatever we experience, we will never have peace until we have the heart for peace. But if Steve Earle can look into his heart and find peace there, then he believes others can do the same. That’s where his hope for peace comes from.

What worries me, though, is that I’m not so sure it’s a desire for peace that I find when I look into my own heart. I mean, I think there could be peace there, through God’s grace and my own prayer and work. But I’m not so

sure that what's there most of the time is actually peace. I suspect the largest part of what's there is fear and a longing for security. And even though my mind knows there's greater security in love than force, force is quicker and cheaper. Force doesn't cost me the way love does. It doesn't protect me that way either, but I can get by on force, and I don't have to change much about myself or my relationships with others.

I remember reading about a region of Kenya called Wajir (I have no idea whether I pronounce it correctly), and the bloody fighting between different nomadic clans that was happening there until a small group of people decided they'd had enough killing and stealing and war, and they were going to see what they could do to get the clans and tribes to stop the fighting. And when they formed this peace group, made up of people from all the clans that were fighting, they decided they had to make a promise to each other. And the promise was something like this "no matter what happens: If my clan were to kill your relatives, would you still work with me for peace? If you can't say yes, then don't join the group now." There were folks who left the group over that promise. And there was one woman who kept that promise even when fifteen members of her extended family were eventually killed, and when her family was raided and stolen from several times.<sup>2</sup>

If my family were to kill your family, would you still work with me for peace? That's a question that just kind of vibrates all through the New Testament. I think especially of the passage in Luke 9 where Jesus talks about the way the God Movement takes over our lives. I'm reading from the Cotton

Patch version here:

[Read Luke 9: 57-62, Cotton Patch]

Luke 9:57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 58 And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” 59 To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” 60 But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” 61 Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” 62 Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” [NRSV]

Lately I’ve been reading some sermons and commentaries by Clarence Jordan, the guy who made the Cotton Patch translation, and his comments on this passage are pretty strong. He says:

“In the first situation, Jesus places the obligation to the kingdom above your material welfare. In the second one, He places it above your relationship to society. Even your father and your relatives [and Jordan points out that waiting until I’ve buried my father doesn’t mean waiting for the funeral tomorrow, it means waiting for another ten or fifteen years until the father has died, and your obligations to your family have ceased] ...Even your father and your relatives can’t take priority over the demands of the kingdom of God.”<sup>3</sup>

Neither can your friends, or other important people. Your loyalty goes to God.

And Jordan says:

“You can’t come face-to-face with the kingdom of God and respond ‘I like this idea of the God Movement, but you know, I got a spouse and some children. I gotta raise them, and let me get them up out of the way and off to college and get them through college and let me get my house paid for and all these things. And then, when I get free from all these obligations, I think it’d be nice to retire into the kingdom of God.’ Jesus said, “The kingdom of God just isn’t an old folks home. You don’t retire into it. I want you to get busy NOW.”

The third fellow, Jordan says, is also looking for some kind of security. He wants to go home and make sure he’s in line for his father’s inheritance before he joins up with the God Movement. Just in case the Movement should fall through, you know. But the answer keeps coming back the same: you can have the kingdom, or you can have the world, but you can’t have both. Even though you live in the same place, and among the same people, you’re going to have to make a choice whether your allegiance will be to God’s security, or to the security of the world.

When I think about what stands in my way to giving my full allegiance to God, it isn’t necessarily my family. Sometimes it is, but we don’t really belong to clans and tribes any more, the way the Israelites did. More often, it’s the idea of what others expect of me. Or it’s money—my bills, my debts, my

house. It's the question, what will happen to me when I retire? It's the technology that I keep trying to keep up with. There are a hundred things, things that seem like needs, that keep me from leaping into love, from aligning myself with God's purpose, from trusting God as my security. These other things are substitutes; I can convince myself that they are my security, but every so often a parable comes along that rips off my blinders, and I see that they are only security substitutes.

Another story that Jordan talks about is the dual parable of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, from Matthew 13:

“The God Movement is like a man finding a treasure buried in a field. He covers it over again, and then with great excitement he sells all he owns and buys that field. Also, the God Movement is like a jeweler looking for special pearls. When he finds a super-duper one, he goes and unloads his whole stock and buys that pearl.” [Cotton Patch version]

Jordan talks about how the guy who's willing to sell everything really knows what he's doing. He's selling his house, he's selling his boat, he's selling the tools in his garage. He looks crazy to us. But Jordan says no. Maybe it looks like he's going out of business, but he's really just getting ready to go into

business. And maybe the reason we're not all going into the kingdom business is because so many of us aren't very smart business people.

I mean, isn't peace a real security, and worth more than anything I try to substitute for it? In those wars in northern Kenya I spoke about earlier, the

clans stole goats and sheep and camels from each other. What good are 500 sheep, or 100 camels, no matter how hard you work for them or what they cost, when they vanish in the air because there is no peace? And the folks that came together to work for peace there, they knew that peace is a spiritual issue. They knew that it has to do with justice and economics and corruption and opportunity and all kinds of things that have to do with our feelings of security, of being able care for ourselves and our families.

But they also knew that beneath all that, peace is a spiritual issue. “If some of my family kills some of your family, will you still work with me for peace?”—what else is that but the deepest kind of spiritual question. And one of the tactics the peace workers used was to call in Islamic leaders from other areas of Kenya, and ask them to take preaching tours through the region of Wajir, to call the people back to the Qu’ran’s message of peace. And despite the dangers, those leaders did that—they called their people back to peace and the rejection of violence as a way of gaining security.

When I look inside my heart and I don’t find the hope of peace there, because I don’t find peace in my own heart, that’s when I begin to wonder about the treasure in the field. Because I think it’s only when I buy that field, when I give up all the security substitutes and take possession of that field, it’s only then that I’m going to look into my heart and find the peace that says, “yes, even if your family kills my family, I’ll work with you for peace.”

Maybe buying the field is going to take me a little time. Maybe it’s going to take me a little while to sell the house and the boat and the fishing tackle,

and all the other stuff. Maybe, for me, it's going to happen inch by inch, and not all at what one time like it does for some folks. But even so, I need to get busy now, and see what stands in my way, see what promises me security but offers none, and begin to release myself from it—to give it away or sell it off. And then maybe, on that day, I can look into my heart and find the peace that says that I, too, can believe that one day all the children of Abraham will lay down their swords in Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> "Jerusalem," Steve Earle, Sarangel Music.

<sup>2</sup> Dekha Ibrahim and Janice Jenner, "Breaking the Cycle of Violence in Wajir," ch. 10 in Transforming Violence: Linking Local and Global Peacemaking, edited by Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> This and future references are from Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation, Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976).