



**Sunday, September 20**

Peace in Community

**It's War in America**

*Henry Koenig Stone*

Isaiah 58:2–3; 6; 9b–10; 12

<sup>2</sup> *Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments,  
they delight to draw near to God.*

<sup>3</sup> *“Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice? ...*

<sup>6</sup> *Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke? ...*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
<sup>10</sup> if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday. ...*

<sup>12</sup> *Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in. (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** Today’s prayer will take the form of a poem that I wrote in May of 2020, and it requires contextual understanding of a series of events taking place at the time. The extrajudicial execution and murder of George Floyd took place on Memorial Day weekend. This came only weeks after the nighttime home invasion and killing of Breonna Taylor, also by police, in Louisville, KY. By the end of the month, protests against the killing of George Floyd had broken out all across the country — even as a video circulated in which a white woman called the police on a black man *for asking her to please leash her dog*. She told police that he had threatened her life — a blatant lie, and one that instead put *his* life on the line.

Even balanced against the need for quarantine measures to contain the 2020 Covid-19 coronavirus outbreaks that had already claimed nearly 100,000 lives in the U.S. alone, these protests were *necessary*. It is crucial to dispel the illusion that we are already at peace within the United States. This goes beyond the specific issues of guns and policing, to the deeper, consistent reality that there is and has been a state of war between lethally armed white folks, on the one hand, and black victims on the other — going directly back to the lynching tree, which also returned as a tool of violence in California this year. The violence of this war has been celebrated, at times, by white supremacists marching openly. At others, it has been tacitly supported through the ever-present dog whistles of “those protesters are just thugs” or “well, he should have done XYZ differently [if he wanted to not get shot]. He had it coming.”

If we are truly to make peace in America, we must acknowledge the scope of this violence and take measures at every level of society — spoken word, raised sign, passed law and risked life — to stop these killings from continuing. The fact that God chooses for us is to “*undo the thong of the yoke*” that our society still binds to Black America, and let God’s oppressed people — finally — walk free from fear of unjust persecution.

**Practice for Peacemakers:** This week, we focus on building peace in community. Start by rereading Isaiah 58, and interpreting this harsh and yet hopeful Word of God as it applies to the United States of America. Then, throughout the week, reflect on the meaning, method, and necessity of public protest in order to reach a state of justice and peace. When violence next repeats itself, will you bear witness to the change that must come?

**Prayer:**

Peace is not achieved when you stop hurting.  
Peace is not a victory won from the inside.  
The protest-lines for peace are drawn up in your soul, for sure  
But they will always be there if you choose to hide.

Peace does not come to those who ask—not for free

It takes a greater sacrifice than war.  
As every Power is violent, every Principality  
Is strangling Justice beside “Others” and “the Poor.”

There is no peace between those with all and nothing  
Nor even when the conflict seems subdued  
The status quo of domination, in its enduring  
Perpetuates the Great Lie behind each smaller ruse.

Peace is not achieved while “they” are hurting.  
Peace has not been won through some past fight.  
There is no peace, absent justice: in practice and *de jure*  
to make peace is to care, repent, repair — and to make right.



**Author:** Henry Koenig Stone is the editor for this year’s Season of Peace Reflections. An activist and public policy wonk, he has previously served as editor of “*Unbound*” in Louisville, KY, and as associate for young adult social witness to the Advisory Committee for Social Witness Policy.



**Monday, September 21**

Peace in Community

**“Good Neighbors” Don’t Stay Quiet**

*Simon Doong*

Luke 10:27; 36–37

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” ...*

*“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” [Jesus asked]. He [the lawyer] said, “The one who showed him mercy.”*

*Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** “Love your neighbor as yourself” may appear the simplest, and seemingly most obvious commandment for us as Christians. We like to assume that our faith is built on the foundation of love. Yet, in practice we often forget this commandment when the going gets tough, particularly when it comes to standing up to injustice.

When there is a mass shooting, we talk about how tragic the event is and then let it fade into the back of our conscience until the next incident of gun violence. When a black man is brutalized, or even killed by police, we say how terrible it is and how wrong that particular officer was. Then we move on. When a friend of ours says something about a particular group of people that is insensitive at best or downright racist at worst, we shrug our shoulders and look away, unwilling to engage in an uncomfortable and possibly heated conversation.

Jesus teaches that being a good neighbor takes more than friendliness and goodwill. In the story of the Good Samaritan, he points out the true challenge of being a good neighbor — and that we cannot simply assume we are one. Helping to heal the wounds inflicted on God’s children requires more-than-normal care, mercy, financial commitment and follow-up. It also requires listening and allowing those in our community who are suffering to give voice to their pain. It requires us to take action. And we are to do this without expecting anything in return.

If we allow our neighbors to experience injustices of gun violence, police brutality, racism or limited access to necessary resources, and *do nothing*, we fail in our calling to love our neighbors and our community as ourselves. So long as we fail to take action to correct these systemic issues

— leaving God’s children on the side of the road, we fail at our call to be peacemakers as Christians.

When we allow one member of our community to suffer physically at the hands of injustice, we all suffer spiritually. We are one in the community of the Spirit.

**Practice for Peacemakers:** The next time you look at the news app on your phone or watch news on TV, remind yourself that every person on that screen is a part of God’s community. Pray for them. If you see injustice at work in your own community, do some research. Look into the specifics of the situation, as well as the larger systemic issue that situation represents. Then join a local group working to address that issue.

**Prayer:** God of Peace, give us the strength to speak up and stand up when our siblings suffer. Grant us the courage to engage in difficult conversations. And most importantly, help us to listen to each other. Amen.



Simon Doong served as a Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) in South Korea (2016–2017) and in New York City (2017–2018). He is currently a mission specialist for the Peacemaking Program of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). His recent work includes a webinar series on how faith communities can address gun violence, “[Standing Our Holy Ground.](#)”



**Tuesday, September 22**

Peace in Community

**Prayer Calls us to Reconcile and Repair**

*Rev. Dr. Ruby Wilson*

Matthew 5:23–24

*“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother [your sister] has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”* (“Berean Study Bible”)

**Reflection:** Our busy lives tend to distract us from doing what is right. Prayer is a critical discipline we can engage in to move toward peace in community. Time in prayer, time at the altar, must be a priority in our lives — especially prayer that calls us to fix things which we have left broken. The ancient prayer moans and groans that *“we have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.”* John’s third letter to the beloved Gaius opens with the words: *“Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul”* (3 John 1:2).

The time to pray, meditate and be still offers us a blessed opportunity to remember. We remember to be grateful, give thanks, praise God and worship our Creator. But this is all for naught if we fail to reconcile with someone who has something against us. We cannot experience the soul-filled joys of good health, as individuals or in community, if there is a wedge between our souls and our Savior. We cannot find peace in community if we are unable to bridge the gaps of human-made labels, with all the “-isms” and schisms that keep us separated and divided. When we remove ourselves from the cares of this life, even for a little while, to spend time with our Creator in that sacred space, God’s Spirit offers us time to make things right with God. That sweet and sacred time, punctuated with God’s power, also awakens the call in us to make it right with others.

When we practice peace in community, then community becomes a place where friendships can flourish, where common identity can be forged, where common pursuit is possible, and where our individual and communal aspirations can be achieved.

***Practice for Peacemakers:*** Be intentional today about reconciling with family members, with neighbors, and even with those in your local and global communities you may be connected to on social media.

***Prayer:*** Dear God, we ask for the power to love, to love using all that you have equipped us with to love you — with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength. Give us the power to embrace our divine love of self, a necessary step in following the teaching that we must love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And though this is tough, give us the power to love our enemies, even those who exploit us on every hand. Teach us to pray. Teach us to practice prayer in our community, empowering us to share your love with all whom we meet, each and every day. Amen.



The Rev. Dr. Ruby Wilson is senior pastor of Safe Haven UCC and was recently elected president of the UCC N.Y. Conference’s Metro Association. She serves on the New York Conference UCC Commission on Ecumenism and Interfaith Relations, and is also the founder and executive director of JasD’Jor: Emerging Philanthropists, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping families of special needs children and training children to use their gifts and talents for service to the world.



**Wednesday, September 23**

Peace in Community

**A Community of Mentorship**

*Rev. Dr. Annika Stroope*

Leviticus 19:33-34; 24:22

*“When the foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress them. The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. ... ‘You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the Lord your God.’” (NIV)*

**Reflection:** Human beings have a natural instinct to identify ourselves not only by who we *are*, but also by who we are *not*. But although this instinct is natural, it is not always helpful in the context of making peace. A key spiritual discipline for people of faith is to see another person as a child of God, beloved by God, just as we are. This spiritual discipline disrupts the human instinct to identify ourselves by who we are not.

Scripture carries this tension. Portions of scripture witness to human beings engaged in war, genocide, prejudice and separation. Portions of scripture also witness to human beings crossing borders and boundaries, holding religious customs to the test of love, and Christ’s witness to see everyone as God sees God’s beloved creation.

Each week on Tuesday evenings at Central Presbyterian Church in Des Moines, Iowa, mentors who are members of the congregation, as well as medical students from Des Moines University, gather as mentors for a reading program. The mentees are children of families who came to Iowa as refugees from Sudan. Mentees speak Arabic at home with their families and worship in Arabic at First Arabic Presbyterian Church on Des Moines’ near west side.

Most of the mentors are from the “Baby Boom” generation and have roots in the Midwest. Pairs of mentors and mentees have been together for several years. They know one another’s family members and the names of pets. They have inside jokes from reading chapter after chapter of the youth novels whose main character is called “Captain Underpants.” Mentors and mentees eat supper together, prepared by volunteers from Central.

The Holy Spirit is present in the peacemaking that is the partnership between each mentor and mentee. The students’ young minds are molded by the acceptance and affirmation of the mentors. The mentors’ minds — no matter how many chronological years they have — are



molded by the interaction and growth that they witness in their mentees. Without the intentional choice to create a space for these interactions, this growth could never take place.

**Action:** As we approach World Communion Sunday, ask yourself: Is there a neighbor with whom you have been reticent to connect? Allow the inspiration of World Communion Sunday's bold and inclusive spirit to guide you to make a connection.

**Prayer:** Gracious God of our whole lives, we lift our praise and thanks to you. Guide our looking inward and our reaching out. May we be peacemakers within ourselves, that we may be peacemakers in your world. In Christ's inclusive love, Amen.



The Rev. Dr. Annika Stroope is interim mission co-worker for Our Sister Parish, a partnership between a congregation in Iowa and the Pastoral House in Berlin, El Salvador. She also serves as parish associate for adult education and mission at Central Presbyterian Church in Des Moines, IA.



**Thursday, September 24**

Peace in Community

**“No Justice, No Peace!”**

*Rev. Dr. Geoffrey Black*

Jeremiah 6:14

*They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** I can remember the first time I heard the words justice and peace linked together. While participating in an anti-police brutality demonstration in New York City in the mid-1980s, I heard the other demonstrators begin to chant, “No Justice, No Peace!” One could hear the chant two ways, as I did later when reflecting on the day. (The second way to hear it, of course, is, “Know Justice, Know Peace!”)

The mantra, “No Justice, No Peace” describes the reality of community life in the United States as it has been since colonial days, through the American Revolution and into the present, because of the persistence of injustice. Enslavement and genocide are grave injustices. America has not come to terms with either. Each has only been compounded by the history of segregation, mass incarceration, lynching, impoverishment and economic exploitation.

It is true that over the course of American history we have lived through wars. We have reached the cessation of hostilities at home and abroad. Yet we have not known peace. At the end of each of these great tragedies, we only return to the context of American injustice, which thrives in communities throughout the United States.

Most recently, a spate of police murders of African American men and women in communities spread as far apart as Louisville, Ky.; Minneapolis, Minn.; and Brunswick, Ga., highlights the truth that racist violence is not only in our past, but remains a present reality. Because there is no justice in American community life, there is no peace. As communities, we deceive ourselves when we pretend that because violence, death and destruction are not at our doorsteps, there is peace.

Here I am speaking of peace as the holistic Biblical shalom, which is at the heart of Just Peace theology and the vision of the Just Peace church. Shalom is a much fuller understanding of peace

than simply the end of conflict. Shalom is the communal expression of wholeness, healing, righteousness, equality, fairness and justice working together synergistically.

When we hear the chant as “Know Justice, know Peace,” the chant becomes proscriptive, informing us that it is only when we know justice, engage justice and create just social conditions that we can know shalom, which is the fullest expression of peace. This can be understood as a way forward out of the abyss of racially inspired violence and racial injustice in its many manifestations throughout the United States.

People of color, African Americans, Indigenous/Native American people, Hispanic Americans and Asian American people are determined to struggle against racism and racial injustice. If nothing else, to do so is simply an expression of our humanity. However, the realization of peace in American communities requires that Euro-Americans become equally committed partners in that struggle.

Only then will peace, a “*just* peace,” be possible.

***Practice for Peacemakers:*** Today’s practice for peacemakers is to not let words get in the way of justice. Sometimes there may be a tempting excuse to hear the chants and to say, “They’re doing this the wrong way! That doesn’t speak to me!” But it is much more helpful to identify injustice and find meaning in the actions that are already being taken to remedy it.

***Prayer:*** Gracious and loving God, we thank you for showing us the way to peace and for inspiring us with a vision of your shalom and your beloved community. We pray that you would grant us wisdom and courage to engage in the struggle faithfully for a just peace. Amen.



The Rev. Dr. Geoffrey Black served as conference minister of the UCC's New York Conference for nine years beginning in 2000. He was elected general minister and president of the United Church of Christ in 2009, and served in that position until 2015.



**Friday, September 25**

Peace in Community

**Revisiting Prison**

*Adam Stone*

Matthew 25:37–40

*“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** As a public defender, I frequently encounter parts of the legal system that are irresponsible barriers to justice. One of the reasons so few people take on this work is that in many of these cases, even a good lawyer has a hard time protecting their clients from unjust sentencing.

In Iowa, simple possession of marijuana, *first offense*, is a “serious misdemeanor,” punishable by up to 180 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine. If the defendant has been convicted of possession of a different controlled substance, or in other ways violated the controlled substance statute in the past, other sentencing enhancements can apply, such as the “habitual offender enhancement,” making the mere possession of marijuana punishable by up to 15 years in prison or more.

That is *insane* — especially for a drug that hurts society less than cigarettes or alcohol. These sentences are employed almost exclusively against people of color, although whites use marijuana at a similar rate, which means that there are far more white users of marijuana, overall.

The debate over legalization is heated, and it would need to be accompanied by significant regulation. However, it strikes me as an obvious step to reduce simple possession of marijuana to the lowest possible level, a “simple misdemeanor,” and to keep all other drug possession charges to one level higher, “serious misdemeanor,” regardless of the number of offenses. At any level of

punishment, only providing access to care centers and treatment is going to produce any good, healing results.

We should also eliminate the “habitual offender enhancement” from felony drug possession cases and other nonviolent property crimes. In Iowa, if you have been convicted of two or more felonies, and are convicted of another felony, the minimum punishment you can receive is an indeterminate term of incarceration not to exceed 15 years, with a mandatory three years before parole.

Prosecutors regularly charge defendants with multiple felonies and then attempt to apply the habitual offender enhancement to each one. For example: a guy commits seven acts of forgery, and in so doing, steals about \$1,500 from a bank. He has previously been convicted of two or more felonies. The prosecutor charges him with seven class D felonies, each punishable by up to five years in jail, and then applies the habitual offender enhancement to each. Each charge is now punishable by up to 15 years in prison, for a total of 105 years, with 21 years mandatory before parole eligibility. This, too, is crazy. Life in jail does not fit the crime of stealing \$1,500, but this happens every single day. It is in the process of happening to one of my clients as I write this reflection.

Prison is not a tool of peace, and should be a place of last resort — a place for violent offenders, and offenders who commit inherently evil, “*malum in se*” crimes, and others who pose a direct and appreciable threat to the others. It should not be a repository for the mentally ill, which it currently is, nor be a mechanism for oppressing Black America, *which it also currently is*.

Demons within this system of “justice” are legion. Cash bail laws put impoverished people in jail without a trial. Racially profiled traffic stops, ostensibly done for trivial reasons like having too much dirt on a license plate, are not just. The overwhelming power of prosecutors leads to disparate treatment across the system, and a shortage of prosecutors of color contributes to this bias. District court judges need to stop bending over backwards to justify police conduct, stop doing lip service to the warrant requirement, and actually apply the law of the Fourth Amendment, strictly. And racial sensitivity training, substance abuse education and poverty simulations should be required for all prosecutors, every year that they practice.

***Practice for Peacemakers:*** Today, remember God’s children that are imprisoned and in jail. Consider giving to The Bail Project, which pays bail for those being held without a trial, or to an organization that provides resources to people recently released from prison. Alternatively, join or start a prison ministry organization through your church and live out the Matthew 25 call to visit God in jail.

*Prayer:* Dear God, we know that your justice is restorative, not retributive. Help us to heal our flawed institutions, and not forget those whom we have cast into prison. And help us to heal our nation, so that one day we may be — and feel — equal under the law.



Adam Stone is a lawyer and public defender who serves the communities in and around Des Moines, IA. He lives in Des Moines with his partner Melissa and their two children.



**Saturday, September 26**

Peace in Community

**On Being Open and Affirming**

*Rev. Jason Boyd*

Micah 6:6a, 8

*“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? ... [God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** Somewhat recently, the number of churches in the United Church of Christ that have adopted an Open and Affirming covenant surpassed 1,600. This is a long way from when the first churches did so, nearly 40 years ago. But, even as some progress has been made in making a more just world for LGBTQ persons, we must continue to ask ourselves, “What does it mean to be Open and Affirming?”

The first thing it means is that a congregation has made a specific welcome of LGBTQ persons. There are very few churches that do not proclaim some form of words like, “All are welcome here.” That doesn’t cut it. LGBTQ people have learned, often the hard way, that this doesn’t really mean them. LGBTQ folks have come to understand, through lived experience and through the relentless bigotry practiced in society and in so many churches, that, “All,” in practice, rarely means “Yes! YOU! You are welcome here!”

Being Open and Affirming also means that a congregation has taken the time to study itself, unpack where any anti-LGBTQ prejudices may exist, and work to eliminate them. Intentional emotional and spiritual injury of LGBTQ people inflicted by churches is real, and is a sin for which many churches still need to repent. Eliminating and repenting of homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia — all the phobias of gender and identity — are necessary processes for there to be a state of peace in God’s beloved community. To really be Open and Affirming is to recognize this, and to provide a safe place where LGBTQ people are embraced and celebrated as God made them, lifted up as the holy and beloved children of God that they are.

Being Open and Affirming means, well, just that — affirming who God made LGBTQ people to be, and rejoicing in the beauty and joy of God’s creation. It is making the church a place of love and justice, and affirming God’s creation of LGBTQ people as a part of God’s gift of love.

***Practice for Peacemakers:*** If you are a member of an Open and Affirming, More Light, or other church with an “LGBTQ-friendly” commitment, take the time to go back through the checklists of that commitment. Is your church ready to celebrate when an LGBTQ member or visitor gets married, no matter who their partner may be? Is your church ready to follow the leadership of LGBTQ members in local Pride events? Are your study groups comfortable with discussing issues of gender and identity, learning and self-improving inclusive language, and maintaining a safe space for honest self-portrayal? If, in discerning where your church’s comforts and discomforts lie, you discover consistent hang-ups or limits to welcome, then it may be time to start again from the beginning and follow the process of learning to truly be a welcoming space.

***Prayer:*** God of the rainbow, we give you thanks for all your creation, and ask your blessings on us as we strive to love one another as Christ loved us. Strengthen us on this ongoing journey of making Earth as it is in heaven. Amen.



The Rev. Jason Boyd is senior pastor of Henrietta United Church of Christ in Henrietta, NY. He has served churches in a number of states, previously worked in higher education for more than 20 years and is a proud Schnauzer parent.