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 Texts: Matthew 5:1-12
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Blessed are the Peacemakers

*“Today, I set before you blessing and cursing.
 Choose blessing so that you may live.”
 -Deuteronomy 30:19*

“We all have a story to tell.” So begins the poignant movie, *Belfast*, by actor and Director, Kenneth Branagh. Have you seen it? It depicts Branagh’s childhood memories growing up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, during the Troubles of 1969. Branagh was a boy of 7 at that time and he takes us through the days when the safe and secure world of his childhood was shattered forever. The Troubles were a harsh and bloody civil conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants.

I recently walked some of those streets in Belfast learning more about the imprint of the Troubles on Northern Ireland and how successive generations have tried to make sense of the world since then. While it’s been 24 years since they officially ended in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement, divisions between Irish Catholics and British Protestants, unionists and loyalists, continue at an uneasy pace. I witnessed a disquieting peace that was made all the more fragile by Brexit –and every summer’s parade “marching season” when nationalistic tendencies can get pretty intense.

Overall, during the thirty year period of the Troubles, more than 3,600 people were killed and about half of those deaths were in Belfast. Everyone I met has had someone in their family they’ve lost to the violence.

As a visitor to the beautiful and complicated city, I saw a bustling and cosmopolitan small city with delicious seafood restaurants, corner cafes and its proud history of shipbuilding; afterall, Belfast is where the Titanic was built and sailed from its pier in 1912.

I was thrilled, too, to be in the hometown of singer- songwriter Van Morrison, and we played his music as loud as it would go as we drove along the dusty roads in our rental car.

I came face to face, too, my own naive sense of peace and peacemaking. I learned that the history of this place spans 700 hundreds years of conflict. A conflict bound up with all sorts of allegiances from the conflictual identities of Irishness and Britishness to settler colonialism and who owns what land and whether one still prays to a Catholic God or a Protestant one or One at all. It is a story unique to Northern Ireland and yet, strangely similar to lots of other places in the world where nationalism and its threats continues to tear communities apart.

The violence of the Troubles may be over but Belfast neighborhoods remain separated with walls–lots of concrete walls– keeping it divided today under the rubric of “Peace”. Many of these walls were constructed during the worst of the violence of 1969 and meant to be up for only 6 months. At last count, today there are some 97 walls in and around Belfast¹ long ones and short ones, 40 foot high cement ones, a half a mile long, some with barbed wire on top, others with intersecting gates that are closed every night closing off city streets and neighbor from neighbor.

¹ <http://www.peacewall-archive.net/peacewalls-50>

A friend reminded me of the poet Robert Frost's wisdom, "something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Like the separation wall snaking through the West bank in Palestine the Belfast walls and others throughout Northern Ireland, are decorated with murals. Powerful messages honoring those killed or highlighting human rights causes from around the world from Palestinian Rights to the Workers of the World Unite to Climate Activism.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from a Birmingham Jail cell, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere".

Blessed are the peacemakers...

How is this peace? I wondered.

On a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, Jesus taught a growing crowd the way of blessing. The way of peace. Counter-cultural to the powers-in-power, Jesus reframed the Ten Commandments, given to Moses at Mount Sinai. His 1st c listeners would know this liberation history by heart—a theme important to the writer of Matthew's gospel. And, now in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pronounces God's blessings on just about everyone; those who expose our vulnerability, those wounded at heart rather than the "more" deserving and privileged of society. The blessings, or beatitudes, speak to those least likely to power. They speak to you and me. They include those whose voices are never heard, those at the end of their rope, and mourning the world, those who stand up for others, risking their lives.

These are the blessed ones. These are the ones Jesus seeks out on the road, to minister to, to feed, to heal, to spend time with.

After my time in Belfast, we were invited to spend the day at a peace and reconciliation center called Corrymeela, about an hour's drive from Belfast. On the front of your bulletin is a picture of the welcome sign you see as you enter the campus.

Corrymeela is located on the north-eastern most coastal tip of Ireland, with a view of Scotland far in the distance. THE landscape, dotted with sheep and sea views, shapes the perspective taking, tolerance and storytelling fostered here. It is a bridge place that is worlds away from the barbed wire, walls and memorials to the fallen I saw in Belfast.

While it was quiet on the day we visited, Corrymeela often receives visitors from all over the world to come and tell their stories and also hear the wounds of others. Its mission is to bridge differences and build new relationships beyond conflict- however long that may take whatever your religious tradition, or background, neighborhood or language you speak.

What is respected is your story. And that you came.

As one local said, the Troubles were solved but not "resolved."

Corrymeela is committed to a peace that is not a one and done kind of thing. It is an ongoing work of the heart whatever the outcome. It's a daily practice.

Every day, we try again.

It so happens that on the day of our visit, we were invited to attend the annual remembrance day, honoring those over 3652 people who were killed in the Troubles. Candles were lit, names spoken, tears shed. Sighs deep. Hugs shared. There were only 12 of us, and I was struck by the intimacy of generational wounds that still remain.

Corrymeela was founded in the 1960's by a chaplain and peacemaker named Ray Davey. Davey had been a prison chaplain in Dresden during WWII and lived through the bombing and imprisonment there. His experiences in the war with refugees and fellow soldiers shaped his

heart and his growing understanding that we can either become the violence we see or seek to build a community based on our common humanity and desire to understand one another.²

The heart of Corrymeela's campus is a unique building, a worship space known as the "Cree", Croi, Galeic for heart. The building itself was literally designed to mimic the inner ear and one immediately feels embraced by the rounded inner chamber space where stories are told around a simple table with chairs and pillows in a circle.

As you enter the Cree one opens a big front door with a wooden door handle carved with one word, Peace.

The metaphor is not lost on me. When you open the door, you are invited to enter with an open heart and to come in peace.

It is a living place where peace is practiced story by story, step by step, day by day through the never ending endless work of dialogue and hope. It is a counter-culture community, meant to embrace difference, invite in those with opposite viewpoints so conversation can be had, so that hearts might be changed or even healed. You tell me your heartache, I'll tell you mine and we'll go from there.

A sign on the wall of Corrymeela by its founder reminded me of the spirit of our church and what church is meant to be: It read, "may we be known as the open village, open to all people of goodwill who are willing to meet each other, to learn from each other and work together for the good of all" (Ray Davey)

Blessed are the peacemakers.

As I sat in the Corrymeela chapel listening to the grief of those who spoke and all they carried, I wondered at the healing power of storytelling and the experience of sacred listening; how it holds the key to peace-making community building, and healing.

Whether one is situated in Belfast or in Old Lyme.

Writes the 13th c mystic, Rumi, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing is a field. I'll meet you there."

Corrymeela is that field.

Our church, too, is that field. Or aspires to be. That village place of listening and truth telling and sharing the wounds and filling the coffee pot yet again.³

Life-changing things can be discovered when we meet each other in that field.

**Music begins, Into the Mystic by Van Morrison played on guitar by Dan Stevens.

² Ray Davey, *Take Away This Hate: The story of a search for community.* (1979)

³ Padraig O'Tuama in *Between the Bells: Stories of Reconciliation from Corrymeela* by Paul Hutchinson.