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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Sermon – August 16, 2026
Scriptures: Luke 19:41, 42; Mt 5:43-48; Revelation 21:1-7

“The Things that Make for Peace”

I’ve spent a great deal of my life engaged in the art of peacemaking. I’ve done this, not through official diplomat channels as some do, but by organizing global and regional conferences, serving on NGO boards, and leading travel tours to resource and equip those who feel called to do this good work in low-intensity conflicts in their homelands.

In doing so, I’ve come to believe there must be thousands, if not millions, of people practicing some form of peacemaking around this planet, even though this work is usually carried out with little fanfare or media attention, which is too bad, since it’s where some of the most effective efforts are made (e.g., NGOs, academia, local governments, religious institutions and communities, etc.). As a rule, public interest in peacemaking is usually limited to leaders of state negotiating major peace accords and treaties, which is the common perception of “peacemaking”—something larger than life and globally consequential, worthy of a Nobel prize.

However, the thing is, even the most significant and vaunted accords (at least in our lifetimes) usually come up short in guaranteeing a lasting, enduring peace. Why is that? Mainly because most formal negotiations focus on merely containing the conflict, rather than inspiring new ways of thinking and relating to build trust and cooperation between the warring parties. Just look at the saber-rattling between the U.S. and Iran as one example. If you want the war to end, how does threatening each other with utter ruin help to build trust?

Even if enemies come willingly to the negotiating table out of a weariness of war—to end the suffering of victims or to avoid the humiliation of outright defeat—these agreements also tend to be short-lived. Grievances and resentments remain; justice gets traded for relief. I mean, where do things stand in Gaza or Lebanon, Sudan or Yemen? There may be a formal truce in place, but did that quell the violence; did they establish a durable peace? Therein lies the problem with most so-called “peace” agreements. Unless the thinking changes and the calculus is altered, a transformation of the conflict between warring parties will not come about until they mutually pursue the things that will make for peace. A ceasefire is a beginning point; however, it will take new ways of engaging each other to see it

through. This takes time and a different level of commitment, and involves some risk, though it promises greater benefits with the outcome. Short of that, diplomatic measures will usually lessen violence for a while until the next uprising.

In all fairness, maybe that's all people really expect and bargain for—a truce, not a lasting peace. The risks are high, new ways of relating don't come easily. It could also be one of the reasons “peace through strength” remains popular because it views “peace” as an acceptable standoff, one where enemies are kept at bay. This is why the Cold War lasted for decades—a standoff with the rather telling acronym, MAD—Mutually Assured Destruction—which “kept the peace” under a nuclear threat. Yet, were we the better for it, thriving with a spirit of shalom as fears of a mushroom cloud loomed over us? Not likely, even though, we're still addicted to this MAD-ness! Build your armies large enough, powerful enough, sophisticated enough, threatening enough, to make your enemies think twice before taking you on.

What has this standoff cost us as a nation, not only in the present, but for future generations? Security through coercive force has proven to be a perplexing rabbit hole and very expensive; it's a standoff that is dangerously uncertain and predictably insecure, especially in a time of asymmetric warfare. A large conventional defense no longer can overwhelm an enemy who uses inexpensive drones and cyberattacks. Go figure.

That's why peace is so much more than ending wars or containing threats; peacemaking is a process of removing violence and insecurity from being foremost in our thinking—enough that we might be capable—simply capable—of building cooperative, just, and trustworthy relationships (even with our enemies) that are more conducive to peace and security than we can even imagine.

This is why it's best to view current peacemaking, not so much as something for governments to figure out, but for citizens to practice by building it into our daily world and relationships. We might not achieve world peace, but at least we will help bring peace into the world. Peacebuilding is working to counter the underlying presumption that human relationships are by nature untrustworthy, tribal, and violent—because we know they aren't! We don't have to compete for survival, but to change that, we must invest ourselves in peacebuilding through concrete steps to mutually build that trust and help each other thrive and do well—“Loving your neighbor as yourself”—which is a thumbnail ethic for being able to build trust and cooperation into human relationships.

Sound familiar? It should. The teachings of Jesus show us this way. In fact, that was what his movement was referred to at first, e.g., *the Way* (obviously, we've lost the way!). Unfortunately, Jesus's

teachings became institutionalized as religious liturgy and widely dismissed as naïve and unserious for the “realpolitik” of this world. With that, many Christians view the Sermon on the Mount as impossible to follow, intended for the distant future—the afterlife—when everyone will be, not as they were on earth, but as they miraculously will be in heaven.

Friends, don’t believe that. Jesus didn’t spin this as pie-in-the-sky impossibility; he envisioned another way of engaging the world. During his life, his words were tested daily on the battlefields of Galilee and Judea under a heavy-handed Roman occupation. Even within his band of disciples, he brought together those who were from polar ends of the political spectrum; you had Matthew, a collaborating tax collector for Rome making company with Simon the Zealot, who was part of a militant movement rebelling against that very taxation! I doubt there were many campfire “kumbaya moments” when they first met.

I think Jesus’s message was compelling precisely because his teachings revealed a different way of being—a different approach for addressing human differences, conflicts, fears, vulnerability, rivalry, and injustice which, in their ultimate objective, was to rehumanize and create new relationships with old enemies. All the grievances people harbor for hatred and bigotry matter very little when measured by the primary divine aspiration to build a world from love where everyone thrives. That was the everlasting and universal vision of the realm of God (e.g., Revelation 21:1-7). That’s what we pray for when we recite the Lord’s Prayer. As followers of Jesus, this is our primary calling: to help build peace in this world by following the Way, which is truth and life. That is the good news of the gospel.

So, how does this work when facing enemies in the real world? Well, allow me to share a bit about a good friend who builds peace into his world in a prophetically courageous way. Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili lives halfway around the world in the Republic of Georgia; he and I have been friends for a long time, we’ve done many things together, and continually I’m inspired to follow his lead. Malkhaz embodies a simple principle with a profound effect that guides his life and vocation: Wherever one sees ugliness, respond to it with beauty—something healing, something redemptive and hopeful. Malkhaz and his congregation have done this against all odds in a country and culture that has experienced much ugliness and pain during their lifetimes.

Georgia is ancient crossroads of cultures, where Christianity first made its impression on the population 1700 years ago. It’s also the birthplace of the brutal tyrant, Josef Stalin; it’s a nation that secured independence from the former Soviet Union through the Rose Revolution over thirty years ago,

yet is still shadowed by Russian dominance, which reinvaded in 2008 and currently occupies two of the country's provinces.

Consider where Georgia lies. It's surrounded by Russia, the Black Sea and Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Armenia and Iran—a very complex region of the world. As a culture, Georgia is religiously conservative and patriarchal, dominated by the Georgian Orthodox Church, with a government run by a political party close to Putin, though the younger, post-Soviet population tends to be largely oriented toward the West and, much like its sister state, Ukraine, eager to join the European Union.

In this context, Malkhaz has led the Peace Cathedral to take on ugliness in their society. In 1999, when Muslim refugees fled their homeland during the Second Chechen-Russian war, these traditional enemies of Georgia faced terrific hostility from the Georgian population. Members of Peace Cathedral responded to this show of ugliness by intervening and providing safe passage and shelter, feeding and supporting these Muslim families when no one else would, under the Abrahamic ethic of hospitality to strangers. Over the past four years, they've done the same for Ukrainian refugees.

In 2008, Peace Cathedral ordained the first female bishop anywhere east of western Europe as an affirmation of women's dignity and rights. This bishop is Rusudan Gotsiridze who, for all her work for women's rights in Georgia, six years later received the State Department's International Woman of Courage award, presented to her by Michelle Obama.

In the spring of 2013, Peace Cathedral responded to more ugliness, when the Georgian Orthodox Patriarch condemned gay rights and the queer community. So Malkhaz led the congregation to stand up for them and to intervene when they were attacked in the streets by Orthodox hooligans.

Shortly after this, Malkhaz had a vision for responding to rising antisemitism and Islamophobia in Georgia by literally building a common place where Christians, Jews, and Muslims (both Shi'a and Sunni, mind you) would create a community together with adjacent houses of worship. He is a professor of Comparative Religions at the state university in Tbilisi, so he had firsthand experience dealing with religious bigotry in his own country and through his frequent visits to various countries in the Middle East, Europe, and North America.

One unique aspect of this interfaith Peace Project was the stated rule that Muslims could only contribute to the building of the synagogue (Beit Knesset HaShalom, or Peace Synagogue), while Jews to the construction of the mosque (Masjid as Salaam, or Peace Mosque). This unique approach toward raising funds and investing in each other's sacred spaces required much more time, but both spiritual homes were finally completed in the last few years. As supporters from around the world have

contributed to the idea and development of the Peace Project, a Buddhist meditation room and an interfaith library have been added, while a Hall of Light for meals and community gathering is still being planned. Unfortunately, over the past week, heavy rains and floods in Tbilisi have damaged part of what they have built, so the Project faces some significant repairs.

Building worship spaces for individual religions is one thing—that has happened in others places as well. However, at the Peace Project, each community is intentional in making their sacred space, prayers, and liturgies inclusive and welcoming to all. Why? It's the friendships and relationships that matter most; that's where love is expressed and trust experienced. When Malkhaz leads in the Eucharist, he intentionally includes teachings from Islam and Judaism and Buddhism to allow the wisdom from each tradition echo the others. The same occurs with the Sunni and Shi'a imams who lead prayers in the mosque, as well as the Rabbis who shepherd the synagogue. This commitment exists because the vision is to build trust and mutuality, even though each tradition has arisen differently from the others. The underlying belief is that our Creator, the Eternal Source of our being, is blessed by an interreligious life together that breaks down historic barriers, instead of maintaining tribal exclusions that have only divided our world. All for the prospects of peace.

I find this inspirational as a peacebuilder. I see it as the challenge we face, i.e., to reframe the way we live and engage people of different faiths, histories, and political allegiances. Given the ugliness of our world, we must counter it with something beautiful.

Let me put it this way. Have you ever wondered, as we see in our text from Luke's Gospel, why Jesus stood before the city of Jerusalem, weeping over the hardness of heart of his own people? I sense it was because they were unable or unwilling to let go of deep-felt anger and rivalry over political, religious, and tribal identities that ultimately brought about their downfall through schism, insurrection, bloodshed, and the savagery of war. It wasn't as if they didn't yearn for lasting peace and prosperity, they didn't recognize what it requires of us to truly thrive as human beings, which is to know and embrace the very things that make for peace.

We face a similar reality: everyone clings to their own identities and prejudices; everyone has their grievances and complaints; everyone has their traumas to overcome and injustices to address; everyone has their fears and insecurities they cling to. Yes, we are different, we are meant to be different, and we will have our differences. But too many make a choice for ugliness when the way of beauty offers so much more promise and hope. Are we not able to call upon our better angels—to rise out of our tribalism and separate silos and look to the future, not the past, for what we can be, for who we can be,

and for how we can be? For the future lies before us and it remains open and unfinished for us to co-create with God, and with our neighbors and our enemies, led by peacemakers and peacebuilders all around this planet, to seek and pursue a peace—a genuine way to peace—that surpasses all human understanding.

May it be so. Amen.

For more information on the Peace Project in Tbilisi, go to www.peacecathedraltbilisi.org, and also view the documentary, “I Will Build this World From Love,” by Emmy Award winning director, John Block, which is currently streaming on PBS Passport.