

Prophets of Peace

[Hosea 11:1-11](#)

[Luke 10:1-11, 16-17](#)

Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Lynnewood United Methodist Church

July 31, 2016

In the time of Jesus, the Romans occupied Palestine. They claimed there was a "Pax Romana," a Roman peace, throughout the empire. The "peace," though, was based on Roman subjugation of the land. The Roman armies conquered communities and then gave protection in exchange for obedience to Caesar. The spoils of their campaigns brought wealth to Rome, but left the people in the occupied lands to pay the price. So the elite few gained power, while most people lived in poverty and in fear.

Jesus was born to poor Nazarene parents in this climate of fear. In contrast to the "peace" of Roman occupation, Jesus in his ministry had a very different peace strategy. Jesus told his followers to go in pairs, door to door, saying, "Peace to this house!" Whoever listened would be blessed with God's peace. And many people did listen. Jesus sent his people out as lambs into the midst of wolves, and, surprisingly, they came back saying, "It worked!" Even the demons submitted (<http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-bringing-peace-luke-101-11-16-20-amy-allen/>).

What a different approach Jesus took from Caesar Augustus. The Romans conquered and demonized the "other." Jesus treated people as if there were no such thing as "other." He approached everyone equally and openly.

Jesus recognized the needs of the people. He didn't exercise authority over them. His method was to tell stories and to heal people. He asked the people to follow him and do as he did, going from door to door. He was one of them. He was, like Hosea, a prophet with the promise of God's peace, who wanted to unite people and bring about God's reign.

Both Hosea in the 8th century BCE and Jesus in the first century CE recognized the social dimension of peace, as well as the personal dimension. Hosea condemned the sword that raged in the cities and the false idols, which the people of his day worshiped. He said the people would suffer under foreign kings because they had rejected God Almighty. Jesus condemned the money changers at the temple, and he criticized the people's indifference to the poor. And Jesus said the people should repent. Both men asked the people to change by turning back to God.

The passage you heard read from Hosea is one of the most tender descriptions of God in the bible. God says, "When Israel was a child, I loved him....It was I who taught Ephraim to walk...I led [him] with cords of human kindness, with bands of love" (v. 1, 3, 4). This is the image of God as a loving father. But "my people," God said, "are bent on turning away" (7). You remember last week, Hosea never gave up on his wife, Gomer? Well, God never gives up on us. God had fierce anger and could have destroyed the people, but God said, "I will not execute my fierce anger...I will not destroy [you]...I will not come in wrath" (9). In fact,

God promised that the people would come home to God, "trembling like birds, like doves from the land of Assyria" (11).

The thing that really gets the prophet mad is when people see their neighbors as "others" and refuse to treat them as they would treat themselves. The three groups who are singled out, most often in the bible as not cared for, are strangers, widows, and children.

We know who the strangers are. They are the men with turbans, the women with head scarves, and the people whose skin color is different from ours. We have trouble with their names. (They are hard to say and hard to remember.) And sometimes we cannot tell the people apart. We make prejudgments and even say that they smell, or that they could be criminals or terrorists. The strangers are immigrants and refugees, who may be recent arrivals, or perhaps they were born here and are American citizens, yet we still treat them as strangers. So often we make these people feel like they are "other," and "other" is not just different, it's worse. In our political climate today, we need not to build a wall that demonizes the "other," but we need instead to demonstrate respect and hospitality. Now is the time to assert that *every* life matters. So often we view people as strangers simply because they are Black or Asian, Hispanic, or White...or whatever we are not. "Other" means not the "normal thing" you are. "Other" can also mean lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. It is time to stop looking at people as "other." We don't want another Charleston. We don't want another Orlando.

The Israelites were taught from their scriptures to remember that they were once aliens in a foreign land. In fact, they were more than once displaced: first as slaves in Egypt, then as nomads in the desert, then as newcomers in Canaan, and then as exiles in Babylon. God commanded the people not to oppress the stranger, not to label him as "other," but to welcome the stranger. For we all were once strangers.

The second group not cared for are the widows. To be a widow in bible times was to be poor. A woman had no status or income without a husband. God always admonished the people to care for the widows. But today, how often we label the poor as "other," many of whom are women.

In 2013, former President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn brought to the Carter Center experts on the status of women around the world. Out of that conference and active work in over a hundred countries, Jimmy Carter wrote his book, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power* (2014). The plight of women is Carter's focus now as he approaches the end of his life. He writes about his international work:

"Almost everywhere, we find that women are relegated to secondary positions of influence and authority within a community but almost always do most of the work and prove to be the key participants in any successful project. Whenever men are plagued with poverty, disease, or persecution, the women are suffering more. When there is a shortage of food or limited access to education, the men and boys have first priority. When there are few opportunities for jobs or desirable positions in any facet of life, they are rarely filled by women. When a civil conflict erupts, women are the primary victims of bombs and missiles, the displaced adults in

charge of children, and the victims of rape. Beyond all this are the special biases that come from the distortion of religious beliefs and the imposition of discriminatory tribal customs that lead to honor killings, genital cutting, or child marriage. Waging peace, fighting disease, and building hope are the major themes of The Carter Center," and these goals relate directly to women (71-72).

The fact is, women are regarded as "other," even though we are half of humanity. And even in the United States, where women now earn more college and graduate degrees than men, government statistics show that full-time female workers still earn about 23 percent less than men" (Carter, 168). Women are still viewed as "other" and somehow as *inferior* to men. This church, however, appreciates strong female lay leadership, and you have two women as your pastors.

In the United States, 1 in 7 women live in poverty (<https://nwlc.org/resources/national-snapshot-poverty-among-women-families-2014/>). Poverty befalls women more than men, and women of color, women with disabilities, women with children, women who are single, and women over 65 are hit the worst.

Hosea says (God's words), "My people are bent on turning away from me." We are bent on turning away; and to the prophets, when you turn away from the poor, you turn away from God.

The third group not cared for are the children. In the United States, 1 in 5 children are poor. We seem to be able to turn our backs on this fact. We had a program in our Conference of the United Methodist Church some years ago, called "Children and Poverty." We wore t-shirts and took on initiatives to alleviate poverty among children. But people objected to putting the words together: "Children and Poverty." We didn't like the association of those two words. We wanted to deny their connection. The program did some good, I'm sure, but it faded out. The problem is not fading out, however. 2.75 million more children were poor in 2013 than before the recession in 2007 (<http://www.childrensdefense.org/library/data/child-poverty-in-america-2012.pdf>). Poverty is defined as living with a family income of below \$2000 a month. Can you imagine a family of four living on \$2000 a month?

One of the places in the world where children are especially oppressed is in the occupied Palestinian territories. Just this week the Israeli government approved the building of more settlements on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. Already a half million Jewish settlers live in these communities. There are 150 settlements now, and they are illegal according to international law. The United States and the European Union are opposed to the building of settlements, yet the Israelis bulldoze over Palestinian villages and olive groves to build roads that only Israelis can drive on and homes that only Jews can live in. They have built a wall with checkpoints where Palestinians must wait for hours to pass through. When the Palestinian children throw stones, the Israelis sometimes shoot them. There has been violence perpetrated by both sides. But many Palestinian families have been displaced first in 1948, again in 1967, and now in recent months and years. Half the Palestinian children do not have enough food to eat. They do not have the medical care or

schools that Israeli children have. The Palestinians are the "other," and the world has turned its back on them.

The situation in Israel-Palestine is not so different today from when the Romans occupied Palestine in Jesus' day. The people are not free in their own land. What would Jesus say about the Palestinians who are treated like unwelcome strangers on the land where they have always lived? What would Jesus say about the widows whose husbands have been killed in the Intifadas (the uprisings)? Three times more Palestinians were killed than Israelis between 2000 and 2004, and the United States gives \$3 billion to Israel annually. What would Jesus say that 700 Palestinian children died at the hands of Israeli armed forces and settlers during the 2nd Intifada? (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Intifada).

As a global community, we have turned away from God. We are not demonstrating God's love toward our neighbors. We treat many of our neighbors as the "other." We are not caring for the stranger, the widow, and the children.

I told you in 2013 about the Palestinian Bedouin family I visited when I was in the Holy Land. The father of seven children, Khalil, taught school in a neighboring village in the Negev Desert. His village had no school because his village was unrecognized by the Israeli government. It would be bulldozed over any day, he thought. His children had no medical care; that was his greatest concern. On the door of his modest home there hung a poster that said, "We refuse to be enemies." Khalil said the Palestinian people always offer hospitality to the stranger. Khalil plans to work for peace by studying law and teaching Bedouin children to read, to be independent thinkers, and to share in the community.

Hosea says we can turn back to God. We can change our ways, and when we do, God will take us in and welcome us home like doves.