

Peace is not tranquility

By [David Henson](#)

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Last Saturday, my youngest son and I spent an afternoon carefully stacking a half-dozen rocks that had been worn smooth and elliptical by the French Broad River that eddied around our knees. The swift river and its small pockets of whitewater drowned out the world around us as we built a small impromptu cairn together for his birthday. After we balanced the final stone, he sat on the large foundation rock rising out of the river and clasped his hands together.

As his lips whispered a prayer, I looked around and felt at peace.

In that moment, the river seemed to carry away the stress, insecurity, and anxiety of life, and the cairn became a impermanent memorial to what it felt like to let go of the plague of existential worry that sentience brings.

*Blessed are the peacemakers*, I thought, drawing in a deep breath of warm mountain air.

This would be the moment I most remembered from the Wild Goose Festival this year, I thought, the memory of blessed peace.

But, in retrospect, I couldn't have been more wrong.

Nothing about that bucolic experience—as wonderful as it was—had anything to do with peace.

What I had experienced wasn't peace. It was tranquility.

Tranquility isn't bad, mind you. We need it. In fact, in a world wrapped up in busyness and anxiety, disciplined tranquility and stillness is essential to the spiritual life. But tranquility isn't the same thing as peace.

We often equate the two, buying into the comfortable lie that peace comes from calm and stillness. But a wide, wide river runs between tranquility and peace.

For example, when we exchange the peace each Sunday, we say, "Peace be with you," and if I were to guess, we might frequently understand that moment as a wish for tranquility and calm upon our sisters and brothers, a hope for respite, a prayer for the churn and stress of life to slow down. I know I have. But that misunderstands the exchange of peace. It isn't in the liturgy to bestow tranquility in the midst of worship but to symbolize the restoration of community needed for worship.

Ultimately, that is what peace in the world is about—creating just, beloved community on earth as it is in heaven.

Peace isn't a call to retreat. It's a commission. It isn't an invitation to quiet stillness. It's a sending forth into the world. It's not the cessation of violence, but the creation of justice.

I think the false equivalent of peace and tranquility often colors the way we hear Jesus' own practice of retreat and Sabbath. In [this week's Gospel text](#), Jesus gathers his disciples along the water's edge and calls them away to a deserted place to be by themselves and to rest. They didn't go away seeking peace and quiet as we like to think about. They just went seeking quiet.

It was demands of peace, though, that interrupted their plans for quiet.

They had wanted tranquility, but there was peace to be made. And so they made it, by healing, by teaching, by feeding the hungry, and by creating a feast of community, sharing, and equality out of the ether of wilderness and need.

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*

Peace isn't the sound of a tranquil river and respite.

Peace is the sound of #ThisIsOurSelma marchers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the sound of voices chanting #BlackLivesMatters.

Peace isn't the still, small moment when stress melts away.

Peace is the voice of Traci Blackmon calling us to cut off the head of the giant of racism; it is the impassioned preaching of William Barber calling us to interrupt the world's violence; it is the voice of the marginalized and oppressed saying, "No More!"

Peace is breaking the rules of violence that dehumanize, brutalize, and oppress others. Peace is not still. It is not tranquil. It is not calm. It is not respectable.

Violence isn't interrupted by quiet tranquility.

It is interrupted by loud, forceful, creative, and unyielding peace.

Perhaps we should realize just how radical it is to exchange the peace, to say to one another, "May the peace of the Lord be with you."

That peace of God is a burning passion that requires action. It can be a burden that interrupts needed rest as it does in Sunday's Gospel. It can be sword that cuts open families. It can be the reassurance that no matter how violent, how oppressive, and how bloody the world, God and God's people are called to blessed peace in the world, not blessed tranquility.

So think carefully when we say, "May the peace of the Lord be with you," before responding "And also with you."

Because we end worship with the call to take that peace, to go into the world, and to love and serve the world as peacemakers.

When I was building a cairn this weekend, I had a wonderful moment of tranquility with my son in the French Broad River. It was a holy, beautiful moment.

It just wasn't peaceful.

The peaceful moment came when he asked to visit the powerful art installation by DeWayne Barton about the death of black men at the hands of police officers. The array of discarded water guns had attracted my kids' attention early on in the festival, and they had spent a walk back to the campsite discussing, unprompted, their desire to transform all weapons into candy-shooters.

But it wasn't until we were leaving the festival that we finally got around to engaging Barton's sculpture.

We read the stories of the victims. We looked at the guns. We saw the cross.

And I told my son the truth, and it broke my heart.

We were at peace in that moment. But we were not tranquil. Not even close.

*Originally posted at [Henson's blog](#)*