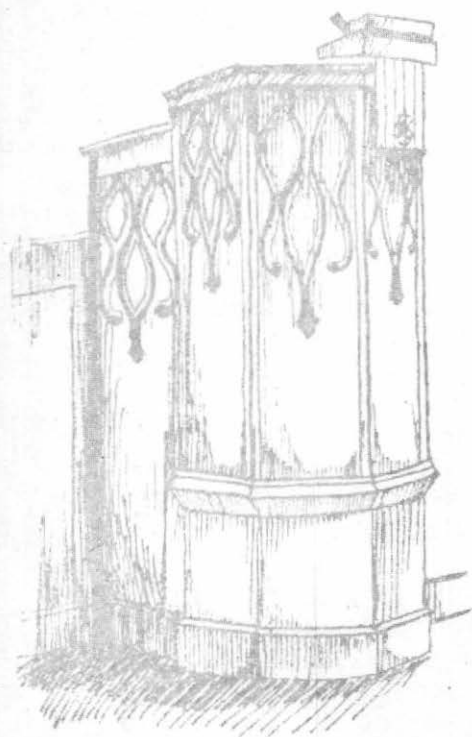


The Southminster Pulpit

"FREDDIE JONES AND ME: A SERMON ON PEACE"



Text:

"Would that even today you
knew the things that make
for peace."

Luke 19:42

October 4, 1981

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Back in the years when I was a student in Fort Pitt School on Garfield Hill in Pittsburgh, there was a semester-long kind of horror which dominated my waking hours and occasionally entered my dreams as well. For reasons which I cannot now recall, a kid named Freddie Jones was "after me"; that is, he was out to get me, to pummel me, or in my quiet lonely hours of worry anyway, to murder me! Freddie Jones used to tell my friends to tell me that he had a big fat right hand fist with my name on it! I can still see the figment of my imagination which had R-I-C-H-I-E C-R-O-M-I-E written on Freddie Jones' knuckles. It was awful.

For a long time I was terrified. I often refused to go to school, and never walked alone. I seldom left the Cromie yard after school was over, and I ran a lot, especially if I was anywhere where Freddie Jones might chance to be. In my embarrassment and pride I used to send back messages that Freddie's name was on my knuckles too, and that my brother Bob, Davie Herron and his brother were ready to assist me if Freddie ever laid a name-filled hand on me. I sounded tough, I think even Freddie would agree, if he is listening. But oh how the fear that Freddie Jones would get me controlled my sundry movements.

In time I took to intensive preparation. I persuaded my Dad to help me make some barbells which we fabricated out of concrete moulded in paint cans at the end of an old 3/4-inch piece of pipe. I practiced shadow boxing until the cows came home, or at least until I fed the chickens. I plotted and schemed and rearranged my entire life for that block of time, so that I was a single-minded boy and my single mind was set on escaping the menacing presence of little Freddie Jones.

But after that, you know, I got tired of worrying about Freddie Jones and his fist with

my name on it. I had other things I wanted to do as the Autumn rolled around. Lifting homemade barbells I found to be no more pleasant than all the other kinds of exercise I have dabbled with in the years and decades since. It was too exhausting, too consuming, too lacking in rewards...But Freddie was still there, or at least I thought he was. So I decided to face it squarely, and determined to settle it up once and for all. One day, screwing up my courage (no doubt at the behest of my courageous mother), I trucked on down to Freddie's house, rehearsing my lines and movements all the trembling way.

"Is Freddie home?", I said. "Sure, he's out the back", his mother said. (What a long, long road that was, the forty feet or so up into Freddie's backyard. I have taken many long journeys in these past years, but none so long as that one.) There I saw him, and we met face to face and alone for the first time in maybe six or seven months. "A-a-are you after me?", I said. He said, "I guess so. Everybody tells me you've got a fist with my name on it." I said, "Why, that's what you said about me." He said, "Who told you that?" I said, "I dunno..." Freddie said the equivalent of "What a crazy world this is!". One of us said, "Let's forget about it and go play some ball", and we did, and our days of detente and potential warfare both were over. While we hardly became the best of friends, we did manage to survive it and go on about our separate lives and ways. Now, in this sermon on peace, I want you to remember Freddie Jones and me and all those knuckles with the names on them.

Now shift the focus for a moment. I read some months ago that at every moment of every day and night of every week and every month of every recent

year, there is a huge Soviet thermonuclear weapon aimed and at the ready with a name written on its cosmic knuckles. The name is P-I-T-T-S-B-U-R-G-H. Further, there are probably at least two back-up missiles, also with something between ten to twenty million tons of TNT aimed at our Steel City and most every other major city of the U.S.A. Within four minutes minimum, depending from which location they would be fired, every major city in the United States could be annihilated by the power already at the ready.

Then just to make it more specific, a scientific friend of mine helped me to figure out what would happen if that bomb with Pittsburgh's name on it should be dropped in the center of our downtown. Everything and everyone in the great valley and plain between the southern hillsides of the Monongahela and the northern slopes of the Allegheny, out to Oakland and East Liberty and down to and through the West End, everything from West View to Dormont (five mile complete radius) would be gone. Out in Bethel and Upper St. Clair and Peter's Township a few lower buildings would be standing. One and one-half to two million people - men, women and children - would be dead! And, half a million others would be maimed and forever broken to the third and fourth generations of their genes; and, the selfsame carnage would be reproduced all around the globe, using only the weapons which presently are available!!! Are you listening? And I was worried about little Freddie Jones!

That is not very likely to happen, to be sure, but it is a wonder we can sleep at night, any night, knowing that somewhere in this world there is a cosmic set of knuckles, maybe even three of them, with Pittsburgh's name on it - or them - and every other city in America. And just to turn it over and to put it all out on the table, a similar

American thermonuclear power-pack is aimed at every city of 100,000-plus in the Soviet Union. What a world!

Now, let those two sets of named knuckles rest and come for a walk with me to the overlook platform on beautiful Mt. Washington, standing 500 feet above the water on the South side of the Monongahela River down at the Point in Pittsburgh. I was up there the other night to show it all off to some Scottish visitors. What a sight! What a view! What a city! And, with this sermon and Freddie Jones in the foreground of my mind, I tried to envision what it would be like if the nuclear holocaust ever should occur. It would be much the same as it was when the Ice Age reversed the rivers and the broad and massive Allegheny Plateau, like Shelley's lone and level sands, stretched far far away. Before I knew it, a tear had formed in the corner of my eye.

Now leave the old sentimental Reverend standing there, pondering the distant past and uncertain future, and go back to our reading in the nineteenth chapter of Luke. Here we come to a familiar hillside, looking in on old Jerusalem through the eyes of Jesus Christ. It could be one of the most significant moments in all the Gospel, the one longing which covers all the other longings which our Saviour had for you and me and all the deep dynamic meaning of what he wished we would become: righteous, kind, but peaceful. He had tried his best to offer to the world of men and women, to show them how to master life with a gusto and a grace. He had given everything in hopes that someone there would understand and give up self to serve the greater happiness and peace for all, to get beyond the harangue and heartaches of the daily round,

to find some higher ground and, when it did not come, his heart was broken, friends, in two. This was his beloved town, Jerusalem. It is Palm Sunday evening in the Scripture. The Lord and Master of us all had gone out alone for one last peaceful look. The tears, it says in Luke, were running down his cheeks. He could see now that what he loved and longed for would not come to pass. In fact the will of God five days later would allow him to be nailed upon a cross.

Can you read between the lines? "What a pity, friends. I loved your adoration, friends." Even the Lord of all liked to be appreciated. Who doesn't like applause or some little plaudit for his work? - "But when you proclaimed me King, you wanted me to ride in on a great white stallion carrying the banners of my victories, throwing down the gauntlet to the godless greats of Rome; and, when they pick it up to spear them to their certain end and give the world and all back to the chosen people of the Lord. 'Get them, Lord Jesus!' But, how could I ever tell you? I could have twelve legions of angels at my beck and call. God Almighty would bring them to me like Elijah when he was consumed upon the altar like a heavenly fire. I could bring 50,000 impenetrable, imperishable all-powerful warriors from the Heavens..." But, "Put up thy sword," he said to Peter. "I could win the battles of the world with just a word." For if Christ had prayed, "God, finish them" - Poof! (Do you believe it?) They would all be gone.

But that was not the message of the Gospel. The Good News was not for might and majesty. The purpose of it all was not to win and be the victor. The purpose was much deeper and so different. "Why can't they understand it, Lord? What have I done wrong? It does not seem a better place all for the whole thirty-three years I have taught and healed

and lived. It all seems quite the same. Will they ever change?" So, in tears and bothered by it all, he looked down on the city and spoke the words which will ring forever poignant and true: "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace."

Now, we could linger at that moment for a long, long time, speculating what Jesus really meant and all the things they did not know, but I want to jump it out to the present to share with you some thoughts I have about the things that make for peace.

There are many different ways to say it, but I bring it down to three, three things that make for peace, three things we need to know, three great headings for all the future weeks and months and years and decades of our lives. The first one sounds the easiest, but I will warn you it is a trifle harder than it looks.

I. A personal commitment. Like everything else in God's good earth, it must begin with you and me and what we feel within our souls and lives and hopes and all, in the way we think about the universe and how compatible it is with all we are and all we long to be. It must begin within and then it stretches out to meet our neighbors and our fellow family members and our fellow human beings all around the earth. It begins with what we feel God has in mind about the purpose of our lives and how much he cares for peace. So I ask each of you, my friends, to make it work for you right there at the start of every morning. It includes everything from the simplest prayer to the most profound of all the thoughts you have about our new emerging world and how frail that seems in light of all the force that is waiting with our names upon it.

But then I like the image which Father Teilhard gave us. The search for goodness, that great Frenchman said, was like trying to fill a bucket full of water. All that any individual has is one tiny drop of water. The forces for evil act so quickly; the force of good moves slowly through the history of the earth. So all that each of us can do is to literally put our drops into the bucket. HMMMMM, that's not so very consequential, is it? One little drop in a great big bucket...but Father Teilhard said one day the bucket will finally be filled and it will overflow with peace and goodness, and justice will flow like the waters and righteousness like a stream. It takes patience to be peaceful and to wait while the time and purposes of God unfold.

And I warn you as I go, people will condemn you for your naivete. It's not practical to be peaceable within our world. "Stand up for your rights!" I heard the mother say. "Go hit him back," I heard the father once advise. Be tough and realistic. Be strong. Don't let them walk on you. You know what I mean...

One of my favorites of James Thurber's "Further Fables" for our time is "The Peaceable Mongoose". You know mongeese or mongooses or monganders always fight with snakes. It is bred into their natures, and I'm told they usually win. But, writes Thurber, one time over in Cobra country a mongoose was born who did not want to fight cobras or to fight anybody, or anything else for that matter either. He loved peace and quiet walks in the woods. He was the "Peaceable Mongoose". So the word spread, and people (pardon, fellow mongeese) began to complain of how it was Peaceable's duty to fight for the good of the geese. They said he was a crazy mongoose who did not deserve his freedom, and a coward too, and they were all ashamed. Rumors spread about his disloyalty, living on happily in a world where snakes were removed by others. Rumor said he was

secretly planning an overthrow, and so they had a trial and the show of mongoose paws voted to banish him from the land forever. And they did. Where he went no one knows at all. Then Thurber adds - as he always did - his little moral of the story. It goes like this:

Ashes to ashes
And clay to clay;
If the enemy don't get you
Your own folks may...

They may or might. If you stand up too tall and speak too loud for peace, all kinds of things might happen to your normal routines and equilibrium. So while it does not end it must begin with you.

II. Then secondly, I think it goes through the community. It does not mean that we must automatically open up the windows of our vulnerability. It does not mean that we should lie down and let the Freddie Joneses of the world all walk on us. Sure, we need to be quite strong. I am quite realistic. And when Reagan proposed his new budget of the MX Missiles and the B-1 Bombers and the Trident Submarines and the new Triad defenses - Well, I have my reservations, but I am grateful he did not go further. I think the B-1 Bomber probably will be dropped before it is over. I gag when I read 100.3 billion dollars in the next six years..like a giant echo in the canyon I hear the Russians say in the paper just this Sunday morning, "We will match whatever the militaristic United States will do." Match it and more!

It does seem worrisome that with 400 billion dollars per year being spent, with more money in research for arms than for all the total research of health, education, energy and food combined - it does seem strange that a billion human beings are suffering in sub-human deprivation. I would

not like to be the President and have to make the decisions which he has to make. I am grateful, friends, for that. But while we need to work upon the preservation of our power, we need with equal love and great devotion to work upon the preservation of our peace, to go over and rap on Russia's door and say, "Let's talk about it." It's demanding too much energy. What will happen to our children and our grandchildren in the end?

What I am saying is it will take some concrete action, some plan and program, some proposals through our government to make sure there is a peace academy, that our children are taught the worth of peace, that we all set it as our goal and get there as quickly as we can. It would be idle to talk about our personal devotion to peace without talking about a corporate commitment of our community and our nation and our world.

I don't know much about the Russian people, save what I read, and the few Russians I have met. But Solzhenitsyn taught me through those massive volumes of the Gulag Archipelago that the Russian people are people first of all. I know enough about political systems to know the differences between the Soviets and us, and I don't propose that we go soft. But I don't propose that we go daft, either. Human beings struggling with their problems, Solzhenitsyn says, trying to rear their children in a timely way, to find the meaning for their lives and the depth of their belief, struggling with problems of economy and comfort and how to handle anger and frustration, that's what they are about. Of this you can be sure: The Russian people are people, and all the rumor-mongers pass it back and forth like Freddie Jones and me. And one solution, anyway, is to soften what we know and feel about the people of the earth.

III. The last thing I would want to say is it must have a church commitment too, a fellowship of kindred

souls of Jesus Christ who take him at his word and search out the things that make for peace, to study it and learn it and love it and share it. There are a myriad of great proposals which our Committee and our church members will be making, all in favor of peace. I close with simply one:

There on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh is St. Giles Cathedral, the homeland of our Presbyterian faith, a church of Jesus Christ, a place of peace. But it is always quite astonishing when I walk up and down the aisles and chapels there that in every nook and cranny of its vaulted ceiling, hanging high above the lectern and the pulpit and the choir, the nave and narthex, are the royal flags and regimental banners of the heraldry of war. Oh sure, I'm glad the Scots remember, and I hope that you and I would never quite forget what others have given in the battles of the centuries, that flags could wave at all.

Yet, here at Southminster Church, will you help me? Could we help each other to raise some different kinds of banners and display them proudly from our Sanctuary ceiling? To carry them along with us as we march through the daily corridors where we live until we breathe our last. Would you help me? Right here above this center column, I would like to see the banner of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship hanging. That's first. And then up and down the halls and aisles and transepts, let's propose another and another and another and another. So that when people come within our church and say, "What's that? What do those banners mean?", I could say, you could say, we could say, "Ah...Southminster Church believes in peace, peacemaking is our calling." You can tell it in our banners, in the flags we wave on high, and you can tell it in the gentle loveliness we quite proudly now parade around this Godforsaking world, following the Prince of Peace whose tears will turn to joy, now and evermore. Amen.

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