Sunday, October 19,1986
A LITTLE PEACE
John 20:19-21

What is it that fighting seems to come so easy to us while peasce seems to come so hard? What is it that makes violence so exciting to human beings while peace seems boring?

When I was in the first grade, and it may have been on the first or second day of school (we didn't have kindergarten), I got into a fight with another school boy, two years older. I've forgotten a lot of the details, but the overall scene is still vivid in my mind. The boy's name was Willard Maune. I don't remember what we were fighting about. He got a bloody nose, and I was messed up too. No one really won. As I remember it, I got in trouble with the first-grade teacher for being in the fight. I remember too that a crowd of other school children gathered in a circle around us and encouraged the fighting to continue. They wanted to see blood, and they did. They were disappointed when a teacher separated us.

I haven't seen or heard of Willard Maune in years. I assume that he still lives in the little Missouri town where we grew up. We never became close friends after that fight — maybe we never would've, anyway — but the memory of that fight has stayed with me all these years.

I thought about this fight and the crowd which surrounded us when I read a newspaper feature story about fights that were going on in Hara Arena, a converted ice rink on the outskirts of Dayton, Ohio. Whether or not these fights are still going on there in the same fashion, I don't know.

Here's how the reporter who was present one night described that evening. "Steve Caudill, a 23-year-old airfreight handler, bled from his nose, mouth, and eyes. The blood formed a mask over his face; with each breath he took, the bleeding grew worse. As he moved to avoid getting hit one more time, a paper cup full of beer dropped from the darkness and splashed his legs.

'Kill somebody,' came a voice from high in the arena, but it was hard to make out individual voices amid the animal chant. More beer was thrown into the ring. Caudill's opponent, David Guidugli, twenty-six, a construction worker, was also losing blood, but the sound of the crowd seemed to make him afraid to stop.

The evening had been promoted as a boxing match, and indeed it was something different. These two contestants were not boxers; neither were the 34 other local men who were providing the entertainment for the audience of almost four thousand.

The crowd was excited to see Caudill and Guidugli spill their blood, yes, but if the truth be told, they had been even happier several minutes earlier, when Stanton Long, a machine operator, had staggered to the side of the ring and, in great pain, vomited the entire contents of his stomach onto the concrete floor below. And they had laughed mightily when Raymond Morris, a 45-year-old bartender, had convulsed on the mat after taking a beating from a man 22 years his junior.

The arena had been chilly before the people had arrived, but now it was steaming. You could feel the heat.

Three weeks earlier, the posters had gone up in the bars and factories around Dayton. ‘How tough are you?’ read the headline that stood next to a large drawing of a man’s fist. The subhead: ‘We’re looking for the toughest man in the southwest Ohio area. Could it be you?’

The winner would receive $1,000. The runner-up, $500. All others who were beaten up would receive nothing. Tickets for the two evenings would be from $6 to $10. Virtually every weekend of the year, a Toughman contest is held somewhere in the United States.

The premise is simple — as devised by Arthur Dore, who invented ‘Toughman’ in 1979. People in towns that have not been able to support professional boxing for years will pack the nearest arena and fairgrounds coliseums to see the local braggarts and barroom bullies try to hurt one another. And the meanest men in these towns will fight — most of them for free — out of some vague dream of glory.

Most matches end up with one contestant either on the floor or begging for someone to stop the beating. There is fear and cruelty and humiliation in that ring. On the final night, a contestant who continues to win his matches may be required to fight four different opponents. These elimination bouts go on until there is only one man left.

High in the arena, fueled by beer, the crowd was on its feet and screaming. Although the fighters were being led into the ring one pair after another, the pace was not fast enough for some members of the audience. ‘Bring on the meat,’ a voice called out. A number of fistfights had broken out in the stands, the frequency of these brawls increasing as the night grew longer.

‘Those are everyday people out there,’ said Jerry Johnson who had paid his way into both nights of the contest. ‘They’re people just like us, mashing each other’s noses and mouths up. There are no rules, just good action.’

The people in the arena seemed to feel no revulsion. They felt only an urgent tingling. The crowd was mostly male, but the women who were in the audience seemed to be enjoying the show more even than the men. ‘I think it must be exciting to hit someone like that,’ said Rosa Ginger, 33, a nursing home employee. ‘I don’t think it’s true that women don’t like violence. I’d like to see even more action, if you want to know the truth.’

About halfway back on the main floor, a 20-year-old woman named Tonya Hopkins, a cashier at a local K-Mart, sat with her husband, watching a particularly bloody exchange. Her eyes were alive. Asked if she wanted to sit at ringside, she left her husband to accompany a reporter to the card table that had been set up against the ring. Up close, she could hear each punch tear at flesh, watch each spurt of blood spatter from the mouths and noses of the fighters. She did not take her eyes away from them. ‘I like it,’ she said, her eyes still on the men. ‘I really like it.’”

“The Toughman Contest — Rambo!” What is it that makes violence so exciting to some of us? And why is making and keeping peace so difficult?

Deep down, I believe that we all want peace. After all, haven’t most military enterprises in the last twenty years been initiated in the name of peace?

Furthermore, we are told in the New Testament that the coming of Jesus, his birth, life, death, and resurrection were all for the purpose of bringing peace. At his birth, the angels sang to the

shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men and women with whom God is pleased.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

And after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the disciples who were so afraid that they were hiding behind locked doors, Jesus appeared to them and said, “Peace be with you,” and as he left them, he said again, “Peace be with you.”

The resurrection gift is the gift of peace.

All of us know how much more beautiful life is when we are in peace. The Hebrew word for peace is “shalom,” which means much more than the absence of fighting or the absence of violence. It is a positive state of living, wherein we recognize our connection and interdependence with all of God’s creation. It is a state of harmony.

Again, this brings us back to our earlier question — if all this is true, why is it then that violence seems so exciting, and peace so difficult?

First of all, in our culture, violence is frequently glorified. It pays at the box office and on television. It is not uncommon for the heroes in our culture to be those who have gained whatever they have through force and violence.

Secondly, not only are our heroes frequently those who have practiced violence, but we seem to want to believe that violence and killing will solve our problems. Of course, that’s nothing new. Almost 2,000 years ago, people believed that Jesus and the movement he began could be gotten rid of by putting Jesus on the cross. In our own time, there are those who thought the civil rights movement could be stopped by killing Martin Luther King Jr.

Thirdly, destruction and violence give one the illusion of power. That’s the attraction of the Toughman Contest described earlier. The winner believes that his winning has made him into something bigger and better. Now he is successful. He doesn’t need talent. He doesn’t need ambition. He doesn’t need grace. All he needs is the meanness and the toughness to beat up everyone else. The terrorist believes that if his group practices enough violence, it will make everything right. We connect violence and power.

Where then do we, as Christians, begin so that we can have at least a little peace?

First of all, the life, the teachings, and the death and resurrection of Jesus proclaim to us that there is no connection between violence and power. It wasn’t violence that won the day when Jesus was crucified — but rather the suffering love of God. God’s peace, the peace that passes all understanding, comes not from the use of force, but comes ultimately from God’s loving will.

Knowing this means that, secondly, we who profess to be followers of the way of Jesus begin to practice the way of peace in the little things of life as well as the big. The apostle Paul put it this way in the letter to the church in Rome, “If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.”

Notice especially what Paul said, “So far as it depends upon you.” There are some things in the world that do depend upon each one of us. We can make some difference. Each one of us cannot do everything, but each one of us can do something. Sometimes, however, we get discouraged and because we cannot do everything, instead we do nothing at all.

We will still keep our larger vision of peace for the world, and we will work at that too, but at the same time, we do our best to live peaceably with all in our homes, and churches, and schools, and businesses.

One person who responds to a put-down with a kindness makes a difference. One person not striking back makes a difference. One person reaching out to another makes a difference. It may seem like only a little peace, but it has its effect. One less spouse or child abuse incident makes a difference. It may seem like only a little peace, but it has its effect. And just maybe, someday, all these little steps toward peace will blossom into a more glorious peace. Certainly, that’s the promise of God. “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.”

The good news of the gospel is that the peace which God wills for God’s creation cannot ultimately be thwarted. We may slow it down; we may sidetrack it or delay it for a while, but God’s peace and justice movement prevail.

We live in a time of violence, brutality, terrorism, and torture. And perhaps the only peace that is available to us seems only like a little peace. But little or big — it’s there. And we can add to it. And in doing so, we are doing God’s will.

If you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember the words from St. Paul: “If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.” Amen.