

Peace: A Series Of Small Actions

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When we think of peace, we tend to imagine it in global terms—an end to all fighting, a settling of every conflict, a complete resolution of differences. When we dream this big, we may find ourselves doubting that peace is in any way achievable, or wondering how it begins.

But perhaps we are looking at too big a picture.

When Paul writes to the Romans (12:18) “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all,” he gives us a simple statement about peace; rather than focus on the big peace, he says, we should focus on each little peaceable act.

That is exactly what a small group of visionaries is doing at the Jerusalem Peacebuilders-Kids4Peace Leadership Camp in Brattleboro, Vermont, where this summer a few of us from St. James’, Fordham saw peaceable acts up close as we worked with young leaders on a unique video project: Three Sabbaths.

The idea for the video was born in November 2014 at an informal Holy Land reunion in Rye, NY, where the Brattleboro camp’s founder and former chaplain to the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, Canon Nicholas Porter, described a place at which teenagers from opposite sides of the knotty Palestinian conflict—Christian, Jewish and Muslim—confront their feelings, beliefs and differences. Porter’s account made us hungry for exposure to those teenagers’ thoughts and dreams—we wanted to know what peace looks like through the eyes of a generation who are ready and courageous enough to give it a try.

Seeing this as an opportunity to work together, I offered the services of a group of volunteers at Saint James Fordham to help him create a video documenting the work of the camp. I explained that in January of 2014, we founded “The Elijah Project of St. James’, Fordham,” a volunteer effort to turn creativity into a ministry to feed mind, body, and soul; and since then, a small group of dedicated parishioners have met regularly to take on projects from video production to web design—learning new skills, meeting new people, and sharing time, meals and love.

Canon Porter (whose partner in founding the camp was his wife, Dorothy) enthusiastically invited us to Brattleboro as part of an unusual experiment. Could members of St. James’, he asked, share our love of storytelling with the program’s young voices and empower these Israeli, Palestinian and American teens to carry their stories to the world?

This we could do!

This past summer, four of us drove up to Brattleboro from the Bronx, equipped with video cameras paid for by donations from friends, families and supporters, who offered words of encouragement that we shared upon arrival. The project immediately took flight. Throughout

our threeday stay, we assisted in video production and editing— and after we left, a documentary film-maker, Gordon Fischer, generously worked with the campers to help them turn their video clips into a finished product.

Because the focus of the camp was leadership development, we gave them a challenge. They would capture a glimpse of the Sabbath Day from the perspective of the three faiths, but to do that, they would have to depend on each other to get the job done. They made all the decisions on the structure of their teams, what they chose to film and how they assigned the work. They learned that they had to respect Sabbath restrictions and customs within each faith, which gave all of us an understanding of how important it is to listen to each other's concerns and needs. They did not have to give their names, but after a week working together, when my wife and I returned to help them wrap up, they decided to film the closing credits with each member sharing who they were, where they were from, and what faith they observed.

What we learned from these courageous teenagers, who had traveled from far and wide to work, eat, pray, study, and play together, is that peace is not an immediate end-state, but a journey. It is a series of small actions, each challenging the norms and standards we have come to accept, and plowing forward faithfully toward the unknown.

When we left Brattleboro, we did so with the hope that the bonds we made will grow stronger with time and not crumble under the weight of oppression, anger, fear and neglect. We pray to continue working with these young leaders and with those who follow in their footsteps. Perhaps one day all of us will marvel at the sight of that New City, built without walls, on the hill.

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