“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

So here we come to the final few days before Christmas. Now, one of the perennial Bible excerpts read during this time of year is a Messianic prophecy from Isaiah: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)

And so, as we look at our world … it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas!

Or not.

(Sigh) Russia building up troops on the Ukrainian border. China exerting increasing control and presence near Taiwan, and clamping down on its own. And, of course, there are the perpetual regional strife in the Middle East, Africa, etc. That’s not even to mention the discords and fracases occurring internally within our own nation and within others. The lust for power or prestige, the coveting of resources and wealth, or simply pride and difference of opinion; no matter the cause, little time ever goes by without some new eruption of conflict.

Sometimes people in frustration might react: “Why can’t they just get along? Live and let live!!” But they really know why. The power of the vice of myopic self-interest can take hold of any of us if we aren’t very careful. We see in our world—and all too often—how St. Paul’s statement proves eternally (and often tragically) prescient: “…those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pang.” (1 Timothy 6:9) At this time of year we can take a quick litmus test of our own intentions by analyzing our own focus: is it “What am I going to get?”, or rather “What can I get/give/do for others?”

Similarly, when we think of the unrest in our own community/nation/world, we need first ask: “How successful am I in cultivating peace in my own circles?”

Dear reader: Can you say that you have no stresses, tensions or outright feuds in your own relationships this Christmastide? How do you know for sure? (If you thing they are not there: “Yes!”, but I’d bet that few are so able. Even within families, there tend to be simmering conflicts and resentments, sabotages and backbiting. Boy, do we priests and ministers see all these types of things boil over when families are tested at the passing of loved ones: what funeral rites, where to bury, often coming to a head with what they were left in the will. Teeth become bared … claws come out … and even families once close-knit can be shattered over … stuff. Precious (and often rare) familial love sacrificed on the altar of avarice.

In a rather dreadful example, I recently heard of a grown child who refused to bury a parent because of what the child was bequeathed (or, actually, what he was not bequeathed). I could not help but recall: “With all your heart honor your father, and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother. Remember that through your parents you were born; and what can you give back to them that equals their gift to you?” (Sirach 7:27-28) Or, much more alarming is one of the twelve curses that Moses commanded to be proclaimed when the Israelites came into the Promised Land: “Cursed be he who dishonors his father or his mother.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’” (Deuteronomy 27:16) Something to remember when you’re frustrated with mom and pop.

But, the main point being: if we can’t even get along within our families, with our co-workers, and other people with whom we are in contact daily, is it reasonable to expect peace between strangers concerned solely for their self-interest?

We might knee-jerkingly think: “No way!” But … maybe. There is always hope. As the saying goes: Even the longest journey begins with a single step.

We are all products of our societies to some extent—both in the micro- and macroscopic levels. But, as a brick may be the basic building block of a house and that single step begin the most arduous and unlikely journey, so each of us—and each of our relationships—are improved by small increments moving inexorably toward the goal. If we don’t establish peace with those with whom we are closest, there can be little progress or hope for peace within/between communities. If WE are not examples of peace and reconciliation (especially us, O Christians, who “hang our hat” on such ideals), how can peace proliferate? It only behooves all to be that building block—that example—to be emulated. Or at least imitated.

Thus the wisdom of Isaiah’s—and Christianity’s—Lord, the “Prince of Peace”: Jesus, and by extension, His teachings in the Biblical Gospels, expanded in the writings of the New Testament. We note that Jesus’ “Love thy neighbor” admonitions does not include the exception “…if you like/agree with/can stand him/her”; after all, how can peace arise without following Jesus’ admonition to “Love thine enemies,” or to at least reconcile with them? Reconciliation may grow into love if cultivated with care. But, if we digress to the perpetual “get even-ness,” then nothing will ever be gained, only lost.

So, in this season in which we hope for “Peace on Earth,” let us each be a vehicle to make peace happen! Virtually everyone wants to have peace in their lives, and to live in its resulting calm and serenity. But such begins only with each of us making that first step on the long journey. So, especially in this wonderful time of year, let us pass on to one another one of Jesus’ most common and apparently favorite wishes: “Peace be with you.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)