

On Peacemaking – Luke 12:49-56

Rev. Natalie Webb, 8/18/19

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” Jesus asks in today’s lectionary text. Well... yeah, Jesus. Haven’t you? I mean, in the very first chapter of the gospel of Luke, before Jesus is even born, Zechariah prophesies that he will “guide our feet into *the way of peace*.” In the next chapter, upon Jesus’ birth, the angels’ joyful refrain is: “Glory to God and *peace on earth!*” During his ministry as an adult, Jesus heals women and sends them off saying: “Go in peace. Your faith has made you well.” At the end, when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, his betrayal, crucifixion, and death on the horizon, he cries, “If only you had recognized the things that make for peace!”

But in our text today, from the very same gospel, Jesus asks, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” And his answer is not what we’re looking for, “No, I tell you, but rather division.” These are difficult words. Maybe unfamiliar words. Certainly words that would be easier to skip over in our search for a more palatable, feel-good Jesus. Probably not the words you were expecting to hear on the first of two “peacemaker Sundays”.

So what are we supposed to do with this? When we look at Jesus’ ministry, surely it is one of peace. Unlike other messianic hopefuls of his day, Jesus is not gathering up troops. He’s not plotting to overthrow the Roman rulers of Judea. Jesus is travelling around the countryside, feeding, healing, preaching – “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” When he is betrayed, does he fight back? No. He heals people who’ve come to arrest him. When he is tortured and killed, does he call down God’s wrath and judgement? No, he prays for the forgiveness of his enemies.

At the same time, Jesus’ peacemaking ministry is constantly enmeshed in and surrounded by conflict. Wherever Jesus goes, there’s a lawyer or a religious leader or a politician waiting to argue with him. His peaceful actions cause violent re-actions – in Nazareth, his hometown, they try to throw him off a cliff for his interpretation of Scripture. In Jerusalem, there are plots to kill Jesus because of his blasphemous theology. Legend has it that even just being born was enough to cause a King to go on a killing spree, to force the Holy Family to become asylum-seekers in a foreign land. And the author of Luke’s gospel, who is writing decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, has seen firsthand the kind of division that this story – this confession that Jesus is Lord – brings forth. There’s no unity in Judaism, no agreement that Jesus is the messiah. There’s a whole lot of disunity,

and eventually the church splits off from the synagogue (or is kicked out, depending on who you ask). Luke has seen the gospel message split families in two, estrange children from their parents, spouses from one another.

Throughout the gospels, we see that Jesus' ministry is one of peace. And throughout the gospels, we also see that Jesus' peaceful ministry constantly causes division. Jesus' words and actions rarely bring people together, instead, they force them to make a decision, pick a side. And I think this is what Jesus is getting at in our text for today: that peacemaking is not the same thing as peacekeeping. This is an important distinction. Jesus is a *peace-maker*, and he works toward true and lasting peace by disturbing the *false* peace that we work so hard to protect.

You all know what I'm talking about. More than ever in my lifetime, our world is fraught with division. The old advice to never bring up politics or religion at the dinner table seems more important than ever in keeping the peace, in our families, in our churches, at work. You never know what land mine you're going to step into, right? So we avoid conflict (as long as it doesn't affect us too much), and we call that peace, or unity.

One church that I know of, on the "values" section of its website, boasts that it doesn't let "social issues" get in the way of its unity, its peace. But I can't help but wonder whose peace is being protected? By not talking about social issues like systemic poverty, are they promoting peace for the poor? Or peace of mind for those whose vocations depend on exploiting the poor? By not talking about LGBTQ affirmation, are they promoting peace for the gay teenager who worries that God doesn't love him? Or peace of mind for those who are threatened by anything that might challenge what they've always thought to be true. I imagine this church seems very peaceful – they keep their membership numbers and pledge amounts. They keep the peace by avoiding conflict.

On the other hand, just last week 30 churches in Birmingham, Alabama declared themselves to be sanctuary churches. In the wake of the sudden and mass deportations in Mississippi, these faith communities (conservative and liberal, catholic and protestant) came together to say that despite all their differences, they would offer their spaces as a safe zone for families in danger. Five of the pastors on the list are friends of mine – I just traveled with them through Israel and Palestine for 2 weeks. They are black, white, male, female, conservative, liberal – all very different pastors of very different churches. And all willing to risk disturbing their own peace – losing congregants, losing funding,

creating conflict – in order to promote the peace of their neighbors. So which church, or which churches are *peacemakers*?

Martin Luther King, Jr., in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, writes to white clergy in the south. And he says that perhaps the biggest stumbling block in his struggle for freedom and equality is not the KKK or other hate groups like it, but that the biggest struggle is “the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

I think this is the distinction that Jesus wants to be sure his followers can make -- that the absence of tension is not peace. The absence of tension *is not peace*. Division is still there, in our country, in our church, in our families, in our own hearts, it's just been swept under the rug, or maybe thrown out the back door. In his ministry, and in ours, the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ does *not* alleviate tension. And in fact, avoiding tension in order to preserve the peace (for those who already have it) often involves perpetuating the oppression of those who don't have peace. The gospel of Jesus Christ has always brought and continues to bring tension to the surface, to draw it out of the shadows, to force us to look at it in the face and deal with it honestly.

Looking at our division honestly, repenting, making difficult choices and changes – that's the only way to true peace – the kind of peace the angels sing about, the peace that isn't the absence of conflict, but is a response to it – a way of being that is unafraid of whatever division is lurking under the rug, but that meets that division with truth, forgiveness, courage, humility.

Even those words: truth, forgiveness, courage, humility, are bound to bring up division, aren't they! They go against everything our world teaches us to value: power, self-preservation, financial security, prestige, winning. Making peace stirs up division, and Jesus needs us to know that if we are going to be a part of his work on earth. “From now on five in one household will be divided... father against son and mother against daughter.” Even our most important and intimate relationships are put at risk by the gospel. Sometimes we forget that we serve a God that the world put to death. A messiah who tells us that if we follow him, we should expect the same kind of treatment. “If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first,” Jesus says in the Gospel of John. The Prince of Peace turns our notions of what peace means on their head.

We'll talk more next week about what this might mean for us – specific ways that we can follow Jesus' way of peace humbly and courageously in a world that runs on pride and fear. But in the meantime, here is some good news:

1) Today we read: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled...” I know that may not sound like good news, but it is! Fire here isn’t about burning it down and being done with us, but about God’s presence in the world – refining our communities and our hearts. It is painful but GOOD news that God has the power to effect change in the world, even when it seems impossible.

2) Jesus challenges us to interpret the present time. Pay attention to what is happening around us and what it tells us about where God is at work – what God is up to. “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It’s going to rain’; and it does. When you see a south wind blowing, you know it will be hot, and it is. You can interpret the earth and sky, so why can’t you interpret the present time?” Jesus asks. The ancients may have been better at predicting the weather than we are, but we’re all equally terrible about interpreting the time. “What time is it?” Jesus asks. It’s time to wake up, to look honestly at the divisions around us and to align ourselves with God’s priorities. God is not divided, we are. When we feel the impulse to keep the peace, not stir up division, it’s likely because that division lives in our own hearts. We want to have our cake and eat it too, but Jesus says, it’s time to pick a side. It’s time to get on board and do the hard work, the costly work of pursuing the things that make for peace. This is hard news, but this is good news. The time is now.

How is Jesus disturbing our peace today? How are we called to the difficult and sometimes divisive work of peacemaking? What are you afraid of? What weapon is God asking you to lay down? Where is God exposing division within your own heart?