

“Not Peace but A Sword”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 21, 2020

Scripture Reading: Matthew 10:34-39

³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.



Sermon: *“Not Peace but A Sword”*

“Not peace, but a sword.” Does that sound like Jesus? If you saw this attributed to Jesus anywhere else but in the Bible, you might think it was made up. But it’s legit. And it’s hard to reconcile with the Jesus we think we know.

One of the most common names for Jesus is “Prince of Peace.” Jesus calls himself “the Good Shepherd.”
¹ I still have the children’s bible my parents gave me when I was like, 5; the one with the picture of shepherd Jesus tending his sheep on the cover. We love that tender, kind, compassionate Jesus. But this? What exactly is this? “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword?” I have come to set family members against each another? What kind of Jesus talk is that?

That may not sound like the Jesus you know, but the question to ask may be “how well do we really know Jesus?” As jarring as they are, his words don’t seem so out of line if you think about who he really was and what he really did. If we can get past our romantic notions of Jesus as just a kindly Sunday School teacher, walking around giving out hugs and kissing babies like some kind of first century congressional candidate, we can see him as the radical revolutionary that he was.

But it helps if you can step outside your 21st century perspective and see him the way the Roman authorities and the Jewish upper class did. See, Jesus spent a fair amount of time ticking off those authorities; so much so it got him in trouble. While death and resurrection were certainly part of God’s plan, Jesus - in proclaiming the Kingdom of God - did not shy away from challenging the way things were. And he was so effective, that his own people turned him in and the authorities to whom they turned him in executed him. In the harshest way imaginable.

Jesus was a kind, compassionate person. But he was also a troublemaker, of the highest order. Think about it:

- When the community was trying to carry out the law - the actual Old Testament, written right there in the Bible law - by executing a woman accused of adultery, Jesus disrupted the proceedings by pointing out that they were all guilty of sin. And then let her go free. (John 8:1-11)
- When the temple authorities were exchanging foreign currency so pilgrims could pay legally mandated Temple taxes and they were selling supplies so those same pilgrims could carry out

legally mandated sacrifices, Jesus said that they were cheating people in God's name and stormed in and overturned their tables and chased them out with a homemade whip. (John 2:3-16)

- Even though Old Testament law - the written down in the Bible law, one of the top ten laws - said you can't work on the sabbath, Jesus went ahead and healed sick people and fed hungry people on the sabbath. (Luke 13:10-17, et al)

From where we sit, Jesus was a good guy. But in the eyes of the authorities of his day, and the comfortable people who liked the way things were just fine, thank you very much, he was a dangerous religious radical.

Now, it'll help us to understand what Jesus means here, if we clarify what he does not mean:

- He does not mean violence. Jesus is not advocating for violent overthrow of the way things are. Jesus is not advocating force or use of weapons to achieve the ends of the Kingdom of God. Remember that earlier in Matthew's gospel, in his sermon on the mount, Jesus says "Blessed are the peacemakers."² Then later, when he's being arrested, one of the disciples pulls a sword to defend him and Jesus rebukes that disciple saying "Put your sword back into its place for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."³ No, Jesus is not advocating violence.
- And he does not mean division for its own sake. Jesus is not advocating that people separate themselves from those who believe and act differently, but he was trying to point out that things were not as God intended them to be. Which is the kind of thing people who like the way things are don't like to hear. He wasn't trying to cause division, but he understood it was a possibility. Because when you call on people to do the right thing, to stand up for the Kingdom of God, some will, and some won't. And being a disciple means being loyal to Jesus. Which is more than just clicking the like button on an "I love Jesus" post on somebody's Facebook page. It means always following Jesus, doing what Jesus calls us to do, no matter what.
- And finally, he does not mean the end of the family as we know it. Jesus' words are descriptive, not prescriptive. He describes what will happen when people are forced to choose between loyalty to him and loyalty to things we traditionally value as being most important in our lives, like family. This is not a reversal of the fifth commandment to honor your father and mother. It is a reminder that our loyalty to God is our highest priority, even if that puts us at cross-purposes with our family and the people we love and respect the most.

Jesus is here calling his disciples, calling us, to dedicate our lives to him; to go where he goes, do what he does, knowing that that will sometimes put us at odds with the world. But that's hard for us to hear because that means turmoil and who wants more turmoil in their lives? You see we like peace that is the absence of violence and turmoil. We like the world we live in to be quiet and free from disturbance. But Jesus is here stirring the pot. That kind of peace when it's not available to everyone is no peace at all.

Does that mean Jesus is against peace? No, but you have to remember, that the Jewish notion of Peace is captured in the word "Shalom," which is not simply the absence of violence, but also the presence of health and wholeness for everyone. Frederick Buechner describes it beautifully when he writes that "Shalom means fullness, [it] means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself."⁴ To know shalom is to know joy and harmony in life.

And there are lots of people in this world, in this country, in this community, who do not know that kind of peace; that kind of shalom. And often it's because the world is geared more towards some people

having calm and quiet at the expense of other people's health and wholeness. And there are moments of crisis, when we will have to choose whether we will settle for peace that is calm and quiet for ourselves or follow Jesus in working for peace that is health and wholeness for everyone.

Last week Mary and I and the boys were eating dinner in our back yard. Hamburgers on the grill, a beautiful summer evening. It was nice. At one point, Harry, our youngest who is on the autism spectrum, was running around in the backyard, as kids will sometimes do, yelling out one of the quotes from one of his favorite TV shows. "Soccer Monster!" Yes, he was being loud, but all of a sudden we heard a very angry voice from across the wall of honeysuckle that separates our yard from our neighbor's yard yelling "Shut up!"

At first, I got mad. But then I got to thinking that our family has a child with autism. That poses problems and difficulties that you just can't understand if you don't live in that same experience. My neighbor didn't want to take the time to understand what that situation is like or offer any help to make that situation better. She just wanted it to stop. She just wanted quiet. She wanted peace for herself. But the kind of peace she wanted wouldn't stop the turmoil or change the true nature of the situation, it would just allow her to ignore it more easily.

And I think that's a challenge we face as disciples, especially today. We would be just fine, hunkering down in our privileged world, untouched by the struggles of other people who don't know shalom in their lives. With all the turmoil in our world, the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement to abolish the hatred and violence of systemic racism; all of that can leave us just wishing for things to be quiet, for peace, a return to a more calm, comfortable existence in which we are not faced with the ugly realities of this sinful world. Yet Jesus rejects that kind of false peace that values personal calm at the expense of justice for all; that just wants the boat to stop rocking while ignoring the turbulence that causes the boat to rock in the first place.

Peace isn't really peace until it's peace for everyone. As much as we may want to see ourselves as individuals, we are tied together in a web of mutuality. What hurts one hurts us all. And there cannot truly be peace and justice for anyone until there is peace and justice for everyone.

Jesus calls us over the tumult of this chaotic world and invites us to follow him. And in moments of crisis such as this when we are forced to choose, will we settle for personal peace that is freedom from turmoil, or will we follow Christ along the path that leads to the Kingdom of God and peace for all God's children?

"Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ John 10:11, NRSV

² Matthew 5:9, NRSV

³ Matthew 26:51-52, NRSV

⁴ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. Harper & Row, 1973, pg. 69.