

Yr. C, Proper 15
August 18, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1503 Words

Lessons: Jeremiah 23:23-29
Psalm 82
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Way back in Advent I reminded you what the prophet, Zechariah, had to say about Jesus' imminent birth. None other than the father of John the Baptist announced in the very first chapter of Luke's Gospel that Jesus would "guide our feet into the way of *peace*."

I was here at Christmas to remind you of the angels who celebrated Jesus' birth in the second chapter of Luke's Gospel by singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, *peace*..."

I was here last month to remind you that when Jesus sent out the seventy in chapter ten of Luke's Gospel, he told them to deliver greetings of *peace* to every house they would enter.

And I was here back during Easter to remind you that when Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection in the final chapter of Luke's Gospel, he spoke these gentle, reassuring words. "*Peace* be with you!"

All year long, from Advent through Easter, and into this summer, we have been hearing from Luke's Gospel about the peace of Christ, the peace that surpasses our understanding. From the first chapter of Luke's Gospel to the last chapter, peace appears to be *central* to the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Yet, today I have to stand here and tell you something different. In the 12th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke, Jesus asks his followers this rhetorical question: "Do you *think* I have come to bring *peace* to the earth?"

Imagine their *long*, awkward silence, forcing Jesus to answer his own question. Jesus says, "No, I tell you, but rather *division*!" Can't you just see the furrowed brows, tilted heads, and pursed lips of the disciples in this uncomfortable scene?

We have been set up through the entire Gospel according to St. Luke to answer, "*Yes*, Jesus! *Yes*, you *have* come to bring peace to the earth." And so, we feel shocked and maybe even saddened.

After a tough week, many people come to Church *in search* of a little peace, love and joy. Maybe this was the Sunday to skip?

A friend told me a joke the other day about a son who wakes up on a Sunday morning and calls his mother to check on her. "Mom, I don't feel like going to church this morning." he said.

"You *have* to go." she replies. "You're the priest."

"What in the world does Jesus *mean*—bringing *division* to the earth?"

Desperate, I asked the vestry at our meeting Monday night. "What would *you* preach on Sunday?"

There *must be* something more going on here than a literal rejection of the peace that Jesus has been preaching, teaching, and sharing with people through miraculous healings of the sick and feedings of the hungry every day of his adult life.

Biblical scholars have debated this Gospel passage for millennia. Here is the best explanation I can fathom for this shocking and uncomfortable saying of Jesus.

Imagine a scenario in which there is an indisputably powerful leader. He's not just tough; he's ruthless—and everybody knows it. People don't have to like him. They just need to fear him. He does not respect the people under his authority. In fact, many of them he loathes and abases in public.

The top priority of this kind of indisputably powerful leader is the accumulation of more wealth and power *for* the wealthy and the powerful. And the second, highest priority is maintaining the kind of stability which allows the ongoing wealth accumulation and power accumulation to continue.

The good news for *some* of the political and religious authorities within the orbit of a really powerful leader like this is that they, themselves, become more enriched and powerful. Loyalty is always profitable when it is well-placed—blind loyalty, immeasurably so.

It should be obvious that I am describing the governorship of Pontius Pilate and the co-operative leadership of the High Priest in Jerusalem, Joseph Caiaphas. It all came together nicely (for them) in 26 A.D. when Pontius Pilate marched through the gates of Jerusalem with a legion of Roman soldiers carrying the image of Emperor Tiberius...and Caiaphas, the Jewish High Priest, was savvy enough to look the other way, keep his mouth shut, and keep on collecting revenue in the Temple's treasury.¹ As a result, Pilate and Caiaphas enjoyed ten good years working together.²

It was—objectively speaking—*the most* stable decade of the whole 1st century in Palestine.³ So, if you were part of this blossoming political and religious establishment, you would have called it a 'time of peace.' If you were a beneficiary of this blossoming economic enterprise which funneled more money to Rome, you would definitely have called it a 'time of peace' because—for you and your family—it was also a time of prosperity.

Money has an interesting way of shaping not only our values...but even our vocabulary about what and who is right or wrong.

Was it, in fact, a time of peace or was it a time of stability made possible through repression? Not everyone could agree about the answer to that question. In fact, the people could not even agree about what was true or false. You will recall that it was Pilate, himself, who asked Jesus, "What *is* truth?"

You see, this was the world in which all the opponents of those in power were labeled with derogatory terms...like 'thief' 'bandit,' and 'zealot.'⁴ To the people, these opponents were resisters of unchecked power; but to the authorities, they were disturbers of the peace.

This was the world in which John the Baptist—who spoke truth to power—was beheaded by Herod Antipas, the powerful authority who maintained stability in Galilee. Now, to the people, John was a prophet; but to the authorities, he was a disturber of the peace.

This was also the world into which Jesus came. In the simplest terms, he came to bring life, truth, liberty, and justice for all. Here's the challenging part, in case you haven't noticed.

Jesus' definition of *all* is bigger than your definition and my definition of *all*. For Jesus, all meant having both a tax collector and a zealot among the 12 disciples. For Jesus, all meant saving the servant of a Roman Centurion as well as the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman. For Jesus, all meant having dinner with Pharisees and with prostitutes. For Jesus, all meant healing enemies and foreigners as well as neighbors and friends. For Jesus, all meant forgiving his torturers as well as his disciples.

¹ Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life & Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, (NY: Random House, 2013), 47.

² Aslan, *Zealot*, 48.

³ Aslan, *Zealot*, 48.

⁴ Aslan, *Zealot*, 18.

You see the problem, don't you? Jesus' definition of 'all' is *so* expansive, that he creates division, even within households. We can't agree about who we think is truly deserving of that kind of grace and mercy. So, while Jesus *can* bring life, truth, liberty, and justice for all; the peace on this earth—it's up to us.

Will we pray for God's Kingdom to come as expansively and inclusively on earth as it is in heaven? Will we roll up our sleeves and work for God's will to be done as expansively and inclusively on earth as it is in heaven?

Probably not. And *that* is where the division emerges, even within households. That is what happens when we are challenged by the miraculously bold vision of such a merciful Messiah.

There is one thing Jesus will not do. He will not impose *his peace* through force. That is the *Roman style* of peace...and it *is not* peace at all. It is stability for the few at the *expense* of liberty and justice for all.

I believe that in today's Gospel lesson that Jesus was not actually rejecting peace. Rather, he was clarifying that he did not come to bring the kind of 'pseudo-peace' that the Roman and Jewish leaders bragged about bringing.

And Jesus was frustrated with people for being able on the one hand to see the *obvious signs* which corresponded with the weather, and yet on the other hand remaining totally oblivious to the *obvious signs* of violence and oppression which corresponded with the so-called 'peace' which was really just tyranny.

The faithful response to this challenging Gospel is for us to pray for peace in our own hearts and homes, knowing that it is a gift and it *will not* be imposed upon us. As we pray for peace in our hearts and homes, may we also pray for the courage to share this peace with others; knowing that it is a gift and we cannot impose it.

This is why it is a good and joyful thing for us to pray...that the peace of God which *surpasses all our understanding* will keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.⁵

When we are willing to boldly pray *that prayer* for God's peace, then we can trust that the blessing of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be with us this day and forever more.

Amen.

⁵ From the post communion benediction appointed for Rite I Holy Eucharist, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 339.