



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 4 Proper 9 (C)

Peace

[RCL] 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

In the movie, “Miss Congeniality,” there is a scene during the beauty pageant in which contestants are asked what society needs most, and each contestant responds predictably, “World peace.” And then Sandra Bullock’s character is asked the same question, but she responds, “That would be harsher punishment for parole violators.” She smiles and the crowd looks back blankly at her. There is a long and awkward silence. Then she blinks and says enthusiastically, “And... world peace!” and the crowd goes wild with cheering and applause.

Wishing for “world peace” is so predictable and overused that it has become cliché, even the punchline of a joke. And yet, just about every human being on the planet genuinely does desire world peace. In fact, people deeply want peace in their hearts and lives, as well as in their nation, and ultimately in the world. The hope for peace expresses a universal desire that lies in the heart of humans, even if we sometimes disagree on exactly *how* to achieve it.

Mother Teresa spoke a lot about the concept of peace, but she always spoke about peace in a very practical and tangible way. She was interested in the things we can do here and now, the small things that really make a difference, in order to achieve peace. Peace was not an abstract idea for her; she once wrote, “Peace begins with a smile,” and later wrote, “All works of love are works of peace.”

Yet it’s easy to feel as if peace is totally beyond us, as if it is merely an abstract ideal or pie in the sky and nothing more than a cliché. We may even be tempted to despair of peace in light of the violence we continue to witness in our own nation as well as in places like Ukraine. But Jesus and the Gospels encourage us to never stop striving for peace. As we read about the 72 missionaries that Jesus sent out in pairs, we learn that Jesus’ followers already have the peace of Christ in their hearts. In fact, this peace is ours the moment we say “yes” to Jesus, and it is ours to give and share with others. Notice that Jesus says whenever you enter a house, extend your peace to all those who live there, saying, “Peace to this house!” And if anyone is willing to share in that peace, then, he says, this peace will “rest on that person.” This passage, as well as other passages in the Bible, urges us to offer God’s peace to others. Indeed, this is at the heart of our practice in the liturgy when we “pass the peace” to one another. We even hear echoes of this

Scriptural injunction when the Celebrant says, “The peace of the Lord be always with you.” And the people respond, “And also with you.”

This passing of the peace is not just a nice and cordial concept for use in our worship and liturgy. This is actually our practice for taking Christ’s peace to the outside world wherever we go. Have you ever tried to bring the peace of the Lord to those you encounter each day? Just imagine the ways you could begin to practice “passing the peace” outside of church. Perhaps you practice passing the peace by simply smiling, as Mother Teresa described. Or by engaging in acts of loving charity. Or by saying “peace” to people as you pass by them, even if it is just a quiet prayer under your breath. What if we saw ourselves as missionaries and understood our missionary task to include bringing and proclaiming God’s peace wherever we go? How might that change our perspectives and our lives, as well as the lives of those around us?

And notice that, according to Jesus, not everyone will be ready to receive this peace – or even want it. Jesus says, “And if a person of peace is there, your peace will rest on that person, but if not, it will return to you.” Maybe you have experienced this: you smiled at someone and they simply scowled back. Or you tried to offer a peaceful solution to an argument, but your solution was rejected. On a global scale, the rejection of peace is actually quite alarming. But according to Jesus, regardless of whether this peace is accepted or not, we are still called to extend this blessing of peace to those we encounter, knowing it will return to us if rejected.

This is related to what it means when Jesus says, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” Peace is evidence of the Kingdom of God in our midst and the Kingdom of God is indeed present, here and now. But here’s the problem: the peace that God has placed in our hearts can get buried and hidden underneath fear, impatience, shame, resentment, bitterness, or even hatred. In fact, it is not a coincidence that one of the results of the missionaries’ experience in this passage is discovering that they had the power and authority of exorcism, the ability to exorcise evil. Jesus says, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. Indeed, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy.” In Jewish tradition, snakes and scorpions were symbols of the sources of evil, not literal reptiles or arachnids. This passage is not a call to engage in snake handling, as some have interpreted it, but a call to engage in exorcising evil whenever and wherever we, as followers of Christ, encounter it.

As Christians who have accepted the peace of Christ into our hearts, we all have been given the power and authority to exorcise the evil in our world. The responsibility to exorcise sin and evil from our own hearts and lives is first and foremost, however. Wherever fear or hostility reign and threaten to control us, we are called to declare the peace of the Lord and to announce the presence of the Kingdom of God, which is one powerful way to dispel evil. We should never forget that God has come near and is with us. From there we can confront evil with the power of Christ’s peace that leads to acts of justice and righteousness.

And sharing Christ’s peace really can begin with something as simple and small as a smile. We can choose the smile over the scowl, even when others don’t deserve it. It was once confessed by Arthur Bremer, the

serial killer, who had made the decision to commit mass murder followed by suicide one day, that his mind was suddenly changed because when he went to eat his last meal at a diner, “The waitress was friendly and smiled at [him]”. Her smile meant that no one died that day. Talk about the power of peace in dispelling evil.

The big audacious goal that is being proposed by Jesus and by Christians like Mother Teresa is that world peace really does start with us, with the peace of Christ in our own hearts, given to us by God and then extended to others. This peace can carry us out of fear and bitterness and into the blessed calm and sanctuary of God’s love and presence – God’s smile upon us. From there, we can spread this peace to others: our family, our neighbors, our nation, and yes, even the world. We can choose to bring the blessing of peace wherever we go.

May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

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