

A Lectionary 12 6.21.20

Matthew 10:24-39

Focus Statement: Jesus brings true peace.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace,” Jesus said. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” I don’t know about you but given all that is going on in our world today, these are not the comforting words of Jesus I could have hoped for this morning. Things had started out ok, with two separate commands not to fear. A nice change from last week’s talk about what to do not if, but when they persecute you, this charge not to fear. But Matthew follows it up not with Luke’s endearing “little flock” but with this frightening pronouncement of violence.

But I guess the first question we have to ask here is what does Jesus mean by peace? Or maybe, more specifically, who’s definition of peace are we working from? What is the peace which Jesus is speaking of, and who is deciding what that peace looks like? Jeremiah six, fourteen warns, “They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace” and that is the kind of careless peace that ruled in Jesus’ time.

Both the life of Jesus and the life of the writer of Matthew’s Gospel occurred during what is known as the Pax Romana, the “peace of Rome.” But historian Walter Goffart noted: “The volume of the Cambridge Ancient History for the years AD 70–192 is called 'The Imperial Peace', but peace is not what one finds in its pages.” Historian Arnaldo Momigliano added that “Romans regarded peace, not as an absence of war, but the rare situation when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist.” During this time, history

records among others, no less than three Jewish-Roman Wars, reminding us that the experience of peace can be very different between the ruler and the ruled. When Jesus said, "I have not come to bring peace," I think this was the kind of peace he was referring to. The kind of peace that is "all opponents beaten down and lost the ability to resist." The kind of peace that is maintained not by justice but by strength. Where peace is not experienced but imposed. The kind of peace under which one cannot breathe.

I mentioned last week when we read the sweet story about Abraham's eagerness to greet some visitors, that Abraham and Sarah would not always get it so right. Today's Old Testament reading shows us just one example of how wrong they could go. To recap, because the lectionary left this part out, back in chapter fifteen, so before even what we read last week, God came to Abraham in a dream and promised that his descendants would outnumber the stars. After a while, however, with no descendants forthcoming, Sarah became impatient and "gave" Abraham her slave girl Hagar. Which, there's a whole lot of problematic stuff in there that we don't have time to get into in a sermon, but let's just acknowledge that it exists. Abraham had a child with Hagar and that child, Abraham's oldest son's name was Ishmael.

And many bad things followed for Hagar, but the final story was the one we read this morning. How Sarah saw Abraham's oldest son playing with her son and, filled with jealousy over what Ishmael might have inherited over Isaac, ordered the boy and his mother cast out. How Abraham complied and left Hagar and her child in the desert with

nothing but a loaf of bread and a skein of water, and how Hagar put Ishmael under a bush and waited for them both to die.

And yes, we could rush to the end where God showed Hagar a well of water, and they both lived, and Ishmael too became the ancestor of a great nation but I think the question remains why is this story told? When the people of Judea were complying their sacred text so many millennia ago, why leave this story in here? No one, not Abraham, not Sarah, not even really God come out looking good in this story of betrayal.

I am impressed with the courage of our forefathers and foremothers in faith who chose to preserve this story. It would have been so easy to leave Hagar out entirely, or to paper over it in a way that makes everyone involved look better. But I am glad that our ancestors had the foresight not to do that. Because I think this story is a gift to us. I think this story persisted to remind God's people that theirs/ours is not just a story of God's freeing them from slavery, theirs/ours is also a story of God's freeing of those whom we have enslaved. This story challenges God's chosen with the truth that they, that we, do not have a corner on God's care, and that we too are not without the sin of thinking that we matter over others. This story forces us to reckon with what we say when we say we are God's children, and wonder who else God might have God's eye on, who's pain we have overlooked.

June is a big month for reckoning. There are a lot of grievous anniversaries in June which require reckoning with. Five years ago Wednesday, Dylan Roof, a young man born and raised in an ELCA congregation not unlike our own, attended a bible study at Mother

Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. At the end of the study, Roof opened fire, killing nine people who had welcomed him in prayer and study. Friday was Juneteenth, a celebration of the day that word of the Emancipation Proclamation reached the slaves in Galveston, Texas and, two and a half years after it was issued, slavery finally ended in America. June 1st is the anniversary of the Tulsa race massacre, when mobs of white residents attacked black residents and businesses in the Greenwood, which was at the time the wealthiest black neighborhood in the country and was commonly referred to as Black Wall Street. Hospitals overflowed, hundreds of people were killed, and the property damage totaled over thirty million dollars by today's standards. Juneteenth and the Black Wall Street Massacre are well known parts of Black American history, and that they are only now coming to the forefront for many of us is in and of itself an important question. What might our country have looked like if we had had the courage of the people of Judea, to preserve such history as sacred text, reminding us of what we are capable of, and how God cares for those whom we oppress? What kind of a world might that be?

The good news dear people of God is that our Gospel text for this morning invites us to not just imagine, but to create such a world. This text is Jesus inviting, calling, cajoling us into the fray to create a world where swords have no power and peace is not a weapon. This text is also Jesus loving us enough not to sugar-coat the challenge of this message, and assuring us of God's presence with us throughout the struggle of its unfolding. "Have no fear," Jesus declared, "for nothing is covered that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret will not become known." Try as we might to forget our history, to clean it up or sanitize it

for posterity, to memorialize it in a statue, Jesus assures us here that nothing is unknown to God, and nothing will not become known.

“For I have come,” Jesus said, “to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother... and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” To us this sounds terrifying, but to Matthew’s audience, this was the assurance of a reality they were already experiencing. So the good news that Jesus gives here is that the way to peace is not peaceful, and that is ok. I listened to a podcast where a Korean woman talked about going along with Asian jokes so as not to upset her white friends, and how a part of her died inside when she did. And I was challenged to reflect on times when I have been silent in favor of likeability, what parts of myself and someone else have I allowed to die in service to the peace that was not peace? This text promises us that it is not only ok but right to not seek peace in that way. That it is not only ok, but the Gospel imperative that we learn the parts of history that have been left in the shadows. Not just Black Wall Street, but the Internment of Japanese Americans, the Dawes Act, the Stonewall riots, and other uncomfortable truths of American history that define us more by our silence. That it is not only ok, but a Gospel imperative to speak out when we hear racist, sexist, ageist, ableist, or any other derogatory comment, rather than go along to get along. That it is not only ok but a Gospel imperative to lift up the voices of those who have been marginalized and overlooked, to admit we were wrong, to have our minds expanded, our eyes opened, and our hearts changed to encompass all of God’s people.

This will not be easy. And it will often not feel peaceful. But this text promises us that not only is it God's work that we are being called to, but it is work in which God walks with us. I want to close this morning with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I have this quote taped to the monitor of my computer, to encourage me on the days when my own courage falters and the way of peace seems easier than the way of Christ. The quote reads: "There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is itself the great venture and can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to want to protect oneself. Peace means giving oneself completely to God's commandment. Wanting no security, but in faith and obedience laying the destiny of the nations in the hand of almighty God. Not trying to direct it for selfish purposes. Battles are won not with weapons, but with God. They are won when the way leads to the cross." Thanks be to God. Amen.