

Strife in the Sod

[Isaiah 5:1-7](#)

[Luke 12:49-56](#)

Sometimes I hear an Old Testament reading – like the one we had a few weeks ago where Hosea was told to take a “wife of whoredom “ – and I wish we could skip all that and just listen to Jesus. But then we get to gospel passages like this one. Jesus is not having a good day. He is looking ahead to his betrayal, trial and crucifixion and he just wants it all to be over. And he gives his disciples some unpleasant news: this is going to be difficult.

Actually, very difficult. We want to think that loving Jesus and being filled with the Holy Spirit are going to make our lives easier – in fact, we often hear Jesus being sold that way – give all your burdens to Jesus and your life will be so much better. But becoming disciples of Jesus brings a whole different set of problems.

There are a couple of ways we can understand Jesus’ words in this passage. The first is the more obvious. Everyone will not agree with us. That’s very clear in Jesus’ life – people loved him when he came into Jerusalem on the donkey and hated him a few days later when his life hung in the balance. Were these the same people? We don’t really know, but clearly following Jesus will not win us a popularity contest. In a world where violence, bullying and hate-mongering are valued, the non-violent values of Jesus are anathema.

The second way we can understand it is a little more complex. Humans have a tendency to bury their violent feelings toward one another by attacking a third party. You can see this powerfully in political rhetoric. In order to keep a group of people loyal and connected with one another, politicians describe another group or person as a threat. Think of the demonization of Saddam Hussain with his so-called weapons of mass destruction. Those of us who believed in the likelihood of Iraq using

nuclear weapons were drawn closer together and were more loyal to the administration in response to the perceived threat. Saddam Hussain was made out to be a very evil person and it was un-American to say anything positive about him.

Jesus was scapegoated in this same way. By declaring him a threat to the Jewish people and the Roman state, the religious and political leaders united Jerusalem against him. But the peace thus created was very short lived. Because Jesus was clearly an innocent victim. And the mechanism of scapegoating relies on everyone thinking that the victim is guilty as charged.

Theologians who base their ideas on the work of the French thinker, Rene Girard, believe that this was a hugely important part of the work of Christ in the cross – unmasking the underlying scapegoat dynamic that was keeping human society peaceful. So you can see that if part of his work was to take away the unconscious use of scapegoating, when Jesus said he was going to bring division instead of peace he might well have meant that he was going to end the way that humans usually kept peace with one another.

Which then begs the question – so if he was going to end business as usual, what was he going to replace it with?

I love the hymn we just sang. Not because I enjoy singing about martyrdom but because of the way it tackles this problem of peace:

The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.
Yet let us pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God

I think this paradox may be solved if we use two different words: peace and serenity. Jesus does not bring peace. But Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27). Jesus offers untroubled hearts – Jesus offers serenity.

Yes, we are called to be reconcilers – we are called to help all of creation be reconciled with God and each other, but we do that with eyes wide open. Conflict happens. It is not peace when we pretend that conflict does not exist. We are called to be peacemakers and that takes time and energy, and sometimes it means taking an unpopular position. Just like Jesus. But conflict happens among humans. Since we now have more people trying to live on this planet and since our natural resources are threatened by global warming we can expect to see an increase in conflict. Jesus also said, “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” (Matt. 24:6)

In the midst of the divisions among people, in the midst of a divided nation, in the midst of global crisis, Jesus offers serenity.

Serenity is the peaceful heart. Serenity is the quiet calm of the presence of God even in crisis. Serenity is the peace which will make a difference and which will sustain us in the hard times. Serenity allows us to take a step backwards and see when we are getting tricked into scapegoating an innocent victim.

One of the many things I will miss about Bishop Mary is the way she always starts her sermons with the Serenity prayer. I don't know why she does it, but I have come to love the reminder that we can be serene. Serenity is radical acceptance of things the way they are. Most of us push against the way things are. If you listen to the conversation in your head you may be surprised at how often you are complaining about the way things are or the ways others are behaving. And that ruptures your peace.

Radical acceptance allows us to let go of that narrative and observe how things are. Simply how they are.

Sometimes it seems that things are so bad that the one thing we **don't** want to do is look at how they are. But that's when we have our focus out of balance. Instead of seeing the world and seeing God's unconditional love at the same time, we are seeing the troubles of the world with a much clearer lens than the one we use to see God's care for us. It was the knowledge of God's hand underneath everything that helped Jesus to go forward towards his death, towards his baptism of fire. It was that same knowledge that sustained John in exile and Peter as he too was crucified.

Writing to the Romans, the Apostle Paul said, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) Nothing is able to separate us from the love of God that is expressed in Jesus the Christ.

That is the basis of our serenity, that is the basis of our peace -when we really, truly come to know that nothing can separate us from the love of God. And then we will become true peace-bearers and peace-makers. Our hearts will not be alarmed even in the midst of conflict. And when our hearts are not alarmed we will no longer escalate conflict or try to resolve it by scapegoating. There will be no need because we can look at the divisions and disagreements without fear, knowing that God's love underpins all things, and in him is every conflict already resolved.

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