

Our lessons this morning are focused on a pretty familiar topic. How do we live faithfully in a world where we are not at peace with one another? How do we live in right relationship with God when we are not in right relationship with each other?

It won't do us much good to ponder that question in the abstract. It doesn't help a whole lot to ask how to live in a GENERIC world that is broken by HYPOTHETICAL sinfulness. YOU have to live in right relationship with the stubborn, selfish, smelly, irrational, beautiful, precious, and holy people that make you want to tear your hair out.

So take a moment this morning - I'm guessing it won't take very long - and pull up the name and image of the person or group that you have a broken relationship with. Who am I NOT at peace with right now? Where is the wounded, scabbed-over, or stony part of my heart? Figure out if it's your sister or your spouse, or Donald Trump or Fani Willis, or some group of people, or your son or boss - whoever it is for you. It could be the person you see in the mirror. Whoever it is, whisper their name silently to yourself, and hold onto their image. Test the gospel message against your real-life situation.

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St. Paul is challenging challenges you to live with that person or group differently from how the rest of the world would. Not just to live by a generic code of respect and love, but to live by a code that is formed by your faith in Jesus AS the crucified and risen Lord.

And you can apply his words broadly to the cultural and political issues of our day, or zoom in close with them for the common life of this parish, or you can zoom them all the way in to the quiet recesses of your heart - to that relationship with your spouse, or your child, or your best friend, or the people you work with.

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“Hold fast to what is good,” Paul says.

“Be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.”

He says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”

“Do not repay anyone - ANYONE - evil for evil....”

And he says if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

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Paul’s advice has been misinterpreted over the years as being passive in the face of injustice, as turning a blind eye to the suffering of others. But a better reading is that sometimes God calls us to rely on him for a peace that the world simply cannot give.

And remember who Paul is, remember the life he led. Remember when his name was Saul. As a young man he watched as his mentors stoned Stephen to death and assured him that killing heretics was all for the greater good.

So young Saul took for himself the role of persecutor. He hunted down and arrested the first Christians, until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus and became one of the very people he used to hunt. As a follower of Jesus, Paul was persecuted by Jews & Gentiles alike. He was ridiculed, flogged, and imprisoned.

So, in his life Paul was witness to, participated in, and victim of, more violence than you or I will ever know, and Paul is telling us that there is no life to be found in any of it, that whether you are in the right or in the wrong, the way of violence is not the way of God. That whether you are fighting for a better society or fighting with a family member, Paul is telling you this morning that violence, in all its forms, is not the way of Christ.

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Jesus took his disciples to a city built by Herod the Great. They stood near a shrine to a Roman god and a temple to Emperor Augustus. Today they would be standing at the steps of the Capitol Building, or in Tiananmen Square. And in the shadow of monuments to human power, Peter made a theological AND political confession. He said that Jesus - not Herod or Pan or Augustus - was the anointed Son of God.

Now, Peter thought he knew what that meant. He thought the anointed Son of God was there to use his identity and power to overthrow the false gods and false emperors and false messiahs, and to establish a new society of justice and equality. Instead Jesus told them he was there to be humiliated, to be killed on a tree, and then to rise from the dead three days later.

But Peter wanted a different kind of messiah, one that worked within our existing human constructions. One that brought good jobs for everyone, good schools and a stable economy - affordable health care! One that tore down the patriarchy (or was it one that brought back traditional family values?)

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There is always - ALWAYS - the mystery of why Jesus' mission was death and resurrection. A mystery that does not fit neatly into any theology, into any human understanding of salvation. And yet it is always the heart of our faith.

“By his blood, he reconciled us. By his wounds, we are healed.”

There is no tidy explanation for Jesus' death and resurrection, but I think Jesus IS teaching us that none of our human constructions are ultimately able to save us.

Not the power of the emperor. Not the idolatry of false gods. Not the military or the social security or patriotism or public education. Not our righteous anger against our enemies, nor our righteous anger against our loved ones.

How else could God show us the limits of human constructs than by going to the heart of them, dying rather than surrendering to their power, and then rising from the dead to show that salvation belongs only to God?

Like I said, a mystery, and one I can't shed much light on today. So let me offer one more thought, not from scripture but from our prayer book.

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Last Sunday when Ellen was celebrant she said a phrase I have heard or said hundreds of times, but it hit me Sunday like I was hearing it for the first time.

“On the night he was betrayed, he took bread.”

How had the force of those words never fully hit me before? How did I not hear what they were telling me about how to live in a world where conflict and betrayal separate me from others?

On the night he was betrayed, they were right there in the room with him! Judas - moments away from his evil, Peter - moments away from his denial, The other disciples - moments away from their cowardice.

On the night THEY were about to betray him, Jesus pulled them in close, washed their feet, called them friends, and then gave them his body and his blood. There is no moral or ethical framework that justifies what Jesus did that night, unless he truly is the Son of God showing us God's response to human brokenness. Why would Jesus give himself so completely to the very ones he knew were about to betray him?

Because those who try to save their life will lose it, but those who give their life away, will find eternal life.

Amen.