

Sermon for Sunday, August 18, 2019
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 15, Year C (Track 1)
The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA
The Reverend Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (Luke 12:51)

Most church-goers squirm when we read passages like today’s Gospel reading. This isn’t how we like to think of Jesus.

Jesus “loves the little children,” Jesus’s message was to “love God and love neighbor,” Jesus was the “Prince of Peace.”

So why does Jesus say he has NOT come to bring peace, but rather division?

Sometimes we act as if “be nice to one another” sums up the entire Gospel. But that’s not quite all of it.

Jesus didn’t just say “be nice to each other.”

He also said

to free the oppressed
and heal the sick
and release the prisoners.

He taught us

to fight against injustice,
to stand in solidarity with the marginalized,
to question any institutional structures
whose rules about right and wrong
ignore and even perpetuate human suffering.

As most of you know, when you start doing those things,
the reactions from others are often less than peaceful.

Yes, Jesus does call us to love God and love neighbor,
but he wants us to understand that “loving God and loving neighbor”
doesn’t mean always being nice,
or never getting into conflict with anyone,
or “keeping the peace” at all costs.

Sometimes loving our neighbor means
riling up the powers that be,
the ones who benefit from not questioning the status quo.
They call for “peace,” but can’t see that their “peace”
is actually causing harm to others.

Jesus’s words echo other scripture passages from the Hebrew Bible
that admonish false prophets
for assuring the people that everything was ok when it wasn’t.
He would have known these passages well:

From Ezekiel, chapter 13:

**“They [the false prophets] lead my people astray,
saying ‘peace’ when there is no peace.” (Ezekiel 13:10)**

From Jeremiah, chapter 6:

**“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.
‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.” (Jeremiah 6:14, NIV)**

“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.”

The New Living Translation of this passage puts it this way:

“They offer superficial treatment for my people’s mortal wound.”

I’m reminded of a line from one of Taylor Swift’s songs:

“Band-aids don’t fix bullet holes.”

Band-aids don’t fix bullet holes.

That’s essentially what the prophets are saying.

Too often, that’s how we attempt to solve problems,
in society at large and in the church.

We offer superficial treatments for mortal wounds.

We don’t want to look seriously at the gravity of the problem.

We are like the false prophets Ezekiel spoke about, who cover a flimsy wall
with whitewash to try to make what is actually weak and rotting look good
on the outside (Ezekiel 13:11).

That’s the kind of “peace” Jesus is talking about when he says “I come not
to bring peace” – he doesn’t come to bring peace that would shove conflict

under the rug, or worse, deny that there's even a problem at all.

“Well, I'm not sure that would REALLY count as a rape.”

“I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it.”

“Quit talking about your depression; just cheer up and snap out of it!”

“He shouldn't have reached for his wallet.”

“If we just provided better mental health care services, we wouldn't have mass shootings in this country.”

Stop blowing things out of proportion.

You're being too sensitive.

There's not really a problem.

Everything will be all right.

But everything is NOT all right,
and as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to say so,
even if doing so causes conflict or division with those closest to us.

How many of the social issues I just alluded to
would cause arguments if you brought them up with your family members?

When Jesus says, “I have come not to bring peace but division,”
he didn't mean that his GOAL was to divide people,
but that following Jesus will inevitably cause conflict
because following Jesus
 means refusing to ignore the injustices in front of us
 for the sake of peace.

Most of us would rather bury our heads in the sand and say,
 “everything will be all right”
than to acknowledge that there is something seriously wrong
 with us or with our society.

But Jesus calls us not to deny the wounds, but to name them,
to shine spotlights on things that others would rather stay hidden.

Jesus comes to bring peace, yes,
but not peace at the expense of justice.

It seems to me that there are two kinds of churches in this world:
churches that are willing to turn a blind eye to oppression and injustice
for the sake of preserving unity, and
churches that are willing to risk division
rather than make any peace with oppression.

For example, during the Civil War,
some churches chose not to take a stance against slavery
because it might upset their wealthy slave-owning parishioners.

Other churches went through denominational splits
because of those who were unwilling to compromise
on the Gospel message that there should be “no longer slave or free,”
but that all should be one in Christ Jesus.

When we reviewed the history of St. John’s
during the celebration of our 130th anniversary two months ago,
we saw **that St. John’s has always been one of those churches
that is not willing to make peace with oppression.**

Although our parish was established after the end of the Civil War,
St. John’s was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, when the rector went
to Selma to march with Martin Luther King. We gave women leadership
roles long before it was fashionable or “allowed” to do so. We became an
LGBT welcoming parish in the late 90s.

When I quoted a line from the 1974 history booklet of St. John’s that said
we as a parish have always been “**more oriented toward giving Christian
witness in the community than to behaving itself as a small element of
the orderly Diocese of California,**” it got big laughs, knowing laughs that
indicated that many of you present identified with this characterization of the
parish. I sensed an energy and resonance with that statement that I had not
sensed with any of the proposed mission statements that had been circulated
throughout the parish since May.

In reflecting on today’s Gospel passage with our as-yet-unfinished quest for
a mission statement in the back of my mind, it occurred to me that the lively
and energetic resonance with “bucking the system” and with not being
concerned with “behaving ourselves” was connected to this parish’s long
history of being unwilling to make any peace with injustice or oppression.

That isn't all we are, of course – a bunch of disagreeable nonconformists or strident activists – we're also humble servants who desire to welcome and show compassion to all people. But our unwillingness to compromise on the Gospel's call to justice seems integral to who we are, and in the discernment process over the past year, I've heard that it's something you desire to maintain moving forward.

So, after going back and reflecting on all the many sources of input I've received from the parish-wide discernment and the mission statement drafts, I propose we try this mission statement on for size:

The mission of St. John's is to love God and love neighbor as Jesus did – by welcoming all, serving humbly, teaching compassion, and making no peace with injustice.

Jesus was clear that following him would not be a walk in the park. He said those who want to follow him

must be willing to deny themselves and take up their cross.

They must not say “peace” when there is no peace, but confront the injustices of society and be willing to face the consequences of doing so.

Although this is a daunting task, the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, that we are not alone. We are surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses,” the saints who have gone before us who have suffered, like Jesus, through rejection, persecution, and violence.

During my vacation last month, we stopped at a UCC church in Redding where my husband's friend had played a concert last fall. A poster on the wall caught my eye. It was a quote from someone who attends the United Church of Christ about why they love the UCC. It said,

“I love the United Church of Christ because we're giraffes, not turtles; we aren't afraid to stick our necks out. We ordained the first African-American in the 18th century, the first woman in the 19th century, and the first gay man in the 20th century! That helps me stick my neck out and take a risk every now and then.”

When things get tough as we are striving for justice and peace among all

people, I encourage you remember remember that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in this place, our forefathers and foremothers at St. John's who refused to make peace with injustice. Because they are with us, we too can "run with perseverance the race that is set before us," as the letter to the Hebrews says, and **love God and love neighbor as Jesus did – by welcoming all, serving humbly, teaching compassion, and making no peace with injustice.**