

Pentecost 4 / June 28, 2020

Matthew 10:34

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth, I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Shocking words. The disciples often had a hard time understanding Jesus. He had to explain His parables to them. He warned them about the leaven of the Pharisees and they thought He was talking about bread. They were mystified when He spoke about rising from the dead. But nothing seems more difficult to understand than Jesus saying He had not come to bring peace, but rather a sword. Didn't you think that Jesus came to bring peace? Be honest, we're having a virtual service so no one else can see you, except your family. If there is one thing we all expect Jesus to bring, its peace. Isaiah called Him the Prince of Peace and sang in anticipation of His birth, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” That's like the Messiah's job description! It specifically says Prince of Peace.

Of course Jesus is right. It sounds odd to us, because there is something deeper He wants us to understand. He didn't come to bring peace. He came to make peace! There is a difference. A person who brings peace is a 'peace keeper.' A peace keeper smooths differences over so that people get along, at least for a time. Perhaps you have a peace keeper in your family. A person who knows who gets along and who doesn't get along. A peace keeper is essential for planning group gatherings. She or he will make a seating plan for a banquet and make sure compatible people sit together, while antagonists are kept far apart. A peace keeper is not concerned with resolving differences. She or he wants to make sure people don't fight! Peace lasts only as long as the peace keeper is present. The United Nations functions as a peace keeper. They send neutral soldiers to keep warring factions apart. Typically, peace lasts only as long as they are present to keep it.

Jesus did not come to keep the peace, He came to make peace between God and human beings through the blood of His cross. He came to make peace between human beings in the reconciliation of forgiveness. People who make peace resolve differences so that there is real peace, the peace of reconciliation. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the sons of God.” Jesus came to make peace by setting aside everything that separates human beings from God; and from each other. He made peace by atoning for sin; taking away God's anger and the hostility people feel in their hearts, because of sin.

He made peace between God and humans in a most violent manner; shedding His righteous blood to make atonement for our sin. He brings peace to human beings, by uncovering our sin and revealing it to us as the source of trouble in our lives. Do you like to have your sin uncovered? Of course not, and so when Jesus first comes to us, He brings a sword; the law that shows our sin and need of forgiveness. We naturally resist and fight against the law, but those who see their sin and confess its guilt, receive peace. The peace of forgiveness from God; the peace of a good conscience in relationship to God. Jesus made peace and brings it into the hearts of those who receive Him through faith.

Jesus made peace through His cross and so the cross and suffering are central to our lives as Christians. Even as He made peace through the cross, we experience His peace under the cross. He said plainly that His peace comes with a cross. In our gospel He said, “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” The way Jesus spoke to His disciples, you would almost think He didn't want disciples. First, He warned them not to think He had come to bring peace. Then He told them the trouble that would come to them, because of their association with Him. He said, He had come to set families against each other. He said, “A person's enemies will be those of his own household.” Finally, He said that whoever loves anyone, even his or her parents, more than Him is not worthy of Him. How could He say such things and expect to have disciples? John tells us that at a certain point almost all of his disciples stopped following Him. Only the twelve remained. More importantly, how could He say such things in the first place? What would you think if you turned on the news and a political leader was demanding that kind of devotion from his or her followers? We would think they had serious psychological problems; and that a person would have to have their own serious problems, to follow them. Who in their right mind would say something like that? Who in their right mind would follow someone like that? Who but God can make such a claim on people as to say, “Whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it?” That's the point, only God can make such a claim on the human soul. In making this claim, Jesus is claiming that He is God. He is claiming to be the only begotten Son from eternity, who clothed Himself in our humanity and joined us as a human being. As Isaiah sang He is claiming to be, “Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

And that's where the great division begins. It's not that Jesus claims to be the Christ, the Saviour, or the Redeemer. It's that Jesus claims to be God! Do you believe Jesus is God? I hope you do, that's the teaching of Scripture and the confession of the Christian Church. That's the very foundation of faith, the thing that makes Christianity different from every other faith and religion. That is what makes Jesus different than any other human leader, prophet, or religious teacher. Jesus is God! Because Jesus is God, He could do what no other human being could do. He could make atonement for human sin and bring peace to the divine / human relationship. Because Jesus is God, He has a claim on the human spirit and truly and legitimately can call for our absolute devotion, saying whoever loves anyone or anything more than Him, is not worthy of Him. No one else has the right to say that! That's what the first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me." He is God and that's why He is our Saviour; and that's why in Him we peace with God in time and for eternity. He is our God and Saviour and our peace. But not everyone believes this about Jesus and so there is division. There was division among Jesus' disciples. Jesus claimed to be the living bread that comes down from heaven, which a person may eat and live forever. Many of His disciples said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it." John says "after this many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him." There was a wide variety of opinion about Jesus. Some people said he was a prophet. Some said He was the prophet Elijah or one of the other ancient prophets returned to life. Some people just said He was crazy and was possessed by an evil spirit. The twelve disciples who remained said He was 'the Christ the Son of God' and that He had 'the words of eternal life.'

And so as Jesus said, He did not bring peace, but a sword and became the cause of division among the people, even His own disciples. Jesus was a source of trouble for the disciples. Their peaceful lives ended when they met Jesus. Each one experienced violence as they proclaimed the gospel. All but John, died violent deaths for proclaiming Jesus as the Prince of Peace, who made peace between us and God by the blood of His cross. Jesus doesn't promise us easy lives for following Him. He promises us eternal life! In fact, our lives might be made more difficult because we follow Him. He calls us to say 'yes' to Him and 'no' to the world. The world won't like that! He calls us to conform our thinking to the eternal mind of God revealed in Scripture; and not according to the thoughts of the world that thinks one way at one time and a different way at another time.

Even during this period of decline, our culture is decidedly more Christian than the world into which Christianity was born two thousand years ago. In the first centuries people literally had to decide between their families and Jesus. If you were an up and coming leader in government in the Roman world, it was a decided disadvantage to have a Christian in your family. If you were that Christian you would feel the heat. If you were making your way in the world, your social advancement would have definite limits, if you were a Christian. In some places at certain times, being a Christian could cost a person her or his life. It's like that in some places today. It's getting to be like that here too! But consider this: Every single social and political climber from the ancient world is long dead and gone. Time passed. Everything they received has been taken back by death. All they accumulated is gone. Everyone who gained the world at the cost of following Jesus is dead and gone. Their fame is forgotten. But everyone who took up their cross and followed Jesus, even at the cost of their place in society, even at the cost of their family life, and even at the cost of their lives; now rests in heaven's peace and awaits a life that will never end at the return of Jesus; and their share of His resurrection to life everlasting. Following Jesus is of the utmost importance! He is God. He brings us to God. He makes us children of God through the adoption of Holy Baptism. Our most important and enduring family is God's family; and our most important relationship is with Jesus. Jesus calls us to consider the cost of following Him; to take seriously the division it will entail; and the hardship that will come. He doesn't do this to discourage us from following Him. He wants us to follow Him with our eyes wide open. He wants us to follow Him, because there is no one more important than Him, nothing more important than the life He gives; and nothing more important than the peace of His cross. He calls us to consider the cost of following Him, so that when hardships, divisions and troubles come, we are not surprised or discouraged, but prepared to meet them and stand strong in Him. St. Paul urges us to armour ourselves in the power of God, so that when evil days come we may stand firm in faith. There was lots of suffering among Christians because of Jesus in the first centuries. The letters of the New Testament abound with references to suffering and persecution for the sake of Jesus. But as Paul said, the things we suffer now will appear slight and momentary in comparison to the glory that will be revealed to us at the return of Jesus. He calls that He might give us peace! We follow because He is our peace with the Father. We take up our cross, because in Him we have the gift and reward of life eternal. Nothing is more important than eternity. No one is more important than Jesus! In His Name. Amen