

“The Sword of Peace”
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Rock Spring Congregational UCC
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Psalm 82
Luke 12:49-56

Some sayings of Jesus are harder than others to understand. And some are just plain obtuse! Sometimes I think that the lectionary, that schedule of scripture readings that takes us through the bible in a three-year cycle, was created to trick us into reading the parts of the Bible we'd rather ignore. Like today's passage from Luke, for example.

Hear again the first three verses:

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

You may recognize this saying of Jesus in its more familiar form in Matthew, where Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Wow. What in the world are we supposed to do with this text? It's a head-scratcher. And quite frankly, in the wrong hands, it's dangerous. What is Jesus talking about when he goes on about bringing fire to the earth and needing to undergo a second baptism, and seeding division among members of the same family? I was really tempted to find an easier passage to preach on today, because, let's face it, it's August! Somehow August doesn't seem like the best time to engage in deep exegesis of thorny scriptural passages in one's sermons.

However, it was the juxtaposition that caught me and demanded that I deal with this passage—the juxtaposition of going to an Ecumenical Peace Conference two weeks

ago and then having this scripture pop up in the lectionary reading for today. What a contradiction! At least that's how it seems on the surface. We call Jesus the Prince of Peace, and Jesus inspires Christian peace and reconciliation efforts around the world, including the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence initiative, which I have been involved in. And yet, we have what appears to be this violent saying of Jesus warning that he comes to bring not peace, but a sword, not peace, but division in our family and our community. What are we to make of this?

I remember what I made of it as a child. Being a child, naturally I took things literally, and so this passage scared me to death. I think somehow I conflated it in my mind with the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, because both passages seem to be about being forced to choose loyalty to God over loyalty to one's family. I used to lie in bed at night wondering if I would be asked someday to choose my love for God over my love for my parents. I'm not kidding...I really did. As an aside, this is why Sunday School and Christian education are so important—we really need to give our children the tools to understand stories like these! Well, in one sense, my childlike understanding of this passage wasn't entirely wrong. But it wasn't entirely right, either. So let's try to make sense of it together.

Sometimes, it helps to go back to the beginning of a story to figure out what's going on. Have you ever read a book over time, in fits and starts, and suddenly gotten to a part that refers back to something in the first part of the book that you read weeks ago, and found that you couldn't finish the book without re-reading the beginning? I think this passage from Luke is like that. So let's turn back to the beginning, and see what we

can learn from Jesus' birth story that might help us understand this strange saying of Jesus which came as he was nearing his passion and death in Jerusalem.

Remember this? From Luke 2:13-14: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people.'" That seems like a pretty straightforward equation right? Jesus' birth=peace on earth. That is certainly the theology of our Christmas carols. But wait, a few verses later in chapter 2, Mary and Joseph take the infant Jesus to the temple to have him dedicated, and they run into a prophet named Simeon, who had been promised by God that he wouldn't die until he saw the messiah. Seeing Jesus, he praises God, but then he does something troubling. Listen to Luke 2:34-35: "Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother, Mary, 'this child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'"

The takeaway? God's peace may be a little more complicated than we thought. I think the New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper puts it well in his commentary on Luke:

These verses explore the other side of revelation, commitment and kingdom values. Wherever the Word of God has been heard, division has occurred among the people who heard it. Peace has a price, too. The absence of conflict is not a present possibility. One can only choose the cause for which to fight and the commitments that are worth holding.¹

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9:267.

Or as Fred Craddock puts it, “Jesus is making a difference even within families. Peace in the sense of status quo is now disrupted.”² And that last part is the clue, the key that unlocks this biblical puzzle. *Peace in the sense of status quo is now disrupted.* Ah. In other words, God’s peace, the peace of Christ, is not the same thing as the absence of conflict, or superficial harmony, or the simple veneer of peace papering over the deep injustices that plague our world. Peace, in the biblical sense of *shalom*, is something quite different. In fact, it is more akin to the demands attributed to God in Psalm 82: “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” And this is where the Ecumenical Peace conference comes in.

The conference that I attended was intended to reinvigorate the Christian peace witness in the U.S. as well as to prepare for the U.S. contribution at next year’s International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in Kingston, Jamaica, which marks the conclusion of the Decade to Overcome Violence. We met at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana—people from thirty different Christian denominations and traditions, ranging from the historic peace churches such as the Mennonites and Church of the Brethren, to the so-called Just War churches which are basically the rest of us: mainline Protestants, evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox Christians. As you might imagine, we didn’t all agree on everything. What was exciting though, were the places where we were able to find common ground. And the shape of that common ground, the future of peace theology and practice among the Christian churches, can be summed up in one phrase, “Just Peace.”

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 166.

I suspect that some of you have heard this phrase before. Can anyone tell me where you've heard it? That's right! Rock Spring is a "Just Peace" Church. And Rock Springers helped spark the movement to make the United Church of Christ a Just Peace denomination, which happened at the 15th General Synod in 1985. Now I'm going to take a page from Doug Griffin's playbook, and come down out of the pulpit and ask someone to explain to everyone your understanding of what Just Peace means. Anyone up for it?

Here is how the Preamble to Rock Spring's Just Peace resolution reads:

We affirm that God calls us to be peacemakers in a world of brokenness, conflict and war, and that God calls us to seek and work constantly toward a Just Peace — God's shalom. We understand Just Peace to be the presence and interrelation of friendship, justice and common security from violence.

And I'd like to share with you another description of Just Peace which comes from Guillermo Kerber, a staff person with the World Council of Churches who spoke at the Ecumenical Peace Conference. He talked about the way in which the churches' understanding of peace had become more holistic over the years since the founding of the World Council of Churches after WWII. Peace can no longer be seen as merely the absence of war or violent conflict. Instead, Kerber said that "Just Peace can be understood as a multifaceted, collective and dynamic process of ensuring that human beings are free from fear and from want, are overcoming enmity, exclusion and oppression and are establishing conditions for right relationships." Now, let's be honest. Simply achieving a cessation of violent conflict in many countries would be a great feat in and of itself! Peace as the absence of war is no small achievement. But, increasingly, the churches are recognizing that it's not enough. God's shalom, the peace that God

intends for humankind, is so much more. And here is where today's hard saying from Jesus comes in. It turns out that Just Peace, peace with justice, is not easily won.

I'd like to share with you a few of the marks of a Just Peace church that are listed in Rock Spring's Just Peace resolution. Listen for how often you hear words like "struggle" "resistance" and "conflict." A Just Peace church is:

A community of spiritual nurture and support, loving one another and giving one another strength in the struggle for a Just Peace.

A community of honest and open conflict, a zone of Freedom where differences may be expressed, explored, and worked through in mutual understanding and growth.

A community of solidarity with the poor, seeking to be present in places of oppression, poverty and violence, and standing with the oppressed in the struggle to resist and change this evil.

A community of resistance, standing against social structures comfortable with violence and injustice.

Did you hear it? Advocates for Just Peace sometimes have to take sides, as strange as that may sound. The ultimate goal is always peaceful relations for the whole human family, but in order to get there, Christians are called to stand with those who suffer from injustice, abuses of power, poverty, and violent oppression. Christians are called to resist structures that victimize some human beings in order to enrich others. In doing so, we recognize that we inevitably will be drawn into conflict with those who wish to preserve the status quo. Sometimes, in the struggle for Just Peace, we may indeed feel, to recall Jesus' words, that we're being baptized with fire. And sometimes, deep differences of opinion over what constitutes peace can divide close-knit communities.

And here, in closing, I wade with some trepidation into a conflict making headlines right now—the conflict over the construction of the mosque and Islamic community center near Ground Zero. This conflict is sowing division among the tight-

knit community of families of 9/11 victims, as an article in last week's *Newsweek* discussed. Sally Regenhard and Adele Welty both lost sons—firefighters—on 9/11. They met with *Newsweek* reporter Lisa Miller to talk about their differences over the proposed mosque, not to change each other's minds, but to try to understand each other better. Regenhard opposes the mosque because she feels it doesn't respect the feelings of those who lost loved ones and it would disrupt the sanctity of the place. In her mind, it is shoving the Islamic religion into a place where it doesn't belong and disrupting a fragile peace. Welty disagrees. She sees the mosque giving a face and voice to moderate and peaceful Muslims who reject terrorism and Islamic extremism. As she explained to Miller, "If we manage to get it built, and can avoid violence in the process, the world can see that we are a towering nation, that we believe in and practice freedom of religion."³

Who is right? It's a tricky issue to be sure. But I think a fundamental point is being lost in this debate. Opponents of the mosque are equating Islam, as a whole, with the terrorism that created 9/11. They are equating an entire religion with a twisted political ideology that uses religion as a tool of violence. The most fundamental thing we need to understand as Americans about 9/11 is that it was not a Muslim act, it was an act of terrorism draped in religious language. The world is filled with peaceful, law-abiding Muslims who understand Islam as a religion of peace. Does it serve the cause of Just Peace, of God's shalom, to exclude peace-loving Muslims from our public square, from our sacred places?

Peacebuilding is hard. It requires that we take risks to cross boundaries and engage with those who are different from us in a search for reconciliation. It requires that

³ Lisa Miller, "War Over Ground Zero: A Proposed Mosque Tests the Limits of American Tolerance," *Newsweek*, 16 August 2010, 27-33.

we hew to our most sacred principles of freedom, fairness and justice even when it offends our emotional sensibilities. It even requires that we stand up for what we believe in even when it might cause division in our families and communities for a time. When that happens, we learn to disagree while still respecting each other's humanity, as Sally Regenhard and Adele Welty were able to do.

As we wrestle with issues like this one, let us recall our mission as a Just Peace Church:

The Church is a community of reconciliation and is a continuation of Christ's ministry of healing and forgiveness, made manifest to those who are in need. The Church is thus a real countervailing power to those forces which divide, which perpetuate human enmity and injustice, which destroy.

The hope of the world is shalom, a vision which pulls all creation toward a time when weapons are swept off the Earth and all creatures lie down together without fear, where all dwell secure from want. The Church offers this conviction to the world: peace is possible.