

Jesus's Peace Is Different

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 26, 2019

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” – John 14:27

The original seal of the commonwealth of Massachusetts showed an Algonquin Indian, without clothing, holding an arrow pointing downward signifying peaceful intent, with the words “Come over and help us” coming from his mouth. Those words are from today's first reading, spoken by a man envisioned by Paul, who asked the missionary to come over to Macedonia and help the people there.

There may have been some truth in Paul's vision – folks in Macedonia may have wanted help from those cult members they referred to disparagingly as Christians – but it's unlikely.

Christianity in Paul's day was not popular and it wasn't viewed by most people as a source of comfort. The Roman historian Suetonius, writing at about the same time the book of Revelation was written, refers to Christianity as “a new and mischievous superstition” that the emperor Nero punished with death (*Nero 16*). And Paul's letters make it abundantly clear that there was widespread suspicion and hostility toward this new religion centered around a crucified rabbi and healer from Nazareth, and that hostility wasn't limited to the Jews who thought that the first Jewish followers of Jesus had gone off the rails of their ancestral faith.

Greeks and Romans thought that Christianity was a kind of crazy cult that caught fire first among slaves and women, who were considered the most gullible people in ancient patriarchal societies. They were uneducated and thus didn't know better. They didn't know the traditions that had been handed down from head-of-household to head-of-household for generations, and thus didn't know what genuine religion looked like. In the world in which Christianity was born, slaves and women were regarded as easy prey for itinerant preachers like Peter and Paul and Silas and Barnabas, with their talk of love and peace and joy and resurrection and the poor being blessed and the meek inheriting the earth.

That's not how the world worked back then and it's not how the world works now. It's toughness, not meekness, that claims the victor's share. Life in the so-called real world is about getting ahead and figuring out what people want before the competition does. It's all about the hustle. It's about street smarts. It's about a strong defense as the best offense. It's about showing your enemies who's boss, not about loving them – that's crazy talk.

So it's easy to see why it might be Lydia and not the man of Macedonia, who'd be more receptive to Paul's message about Jesus. According to today's reading from Acts, a man asks for help, but it's a woman who initially accepts it.

And not just any woman. Lydia is described as a merchant in purple cloth, which means she ran a luxury item business. Purple cloth was very expensive to make, which is why only the wealthy or privileged could afford it. Lydia moved in moneyed circles, which means she'd made her way in a man's world, and she knew what that entailed.

Lydia very likely knew what it felt like to walk into a room and get looks that said, What are you doing here? She probably knew what it was like to be regarded as an outsider, an oddity, or an interloper. She almost certainly knew what it was like to have people wonder about how you came to your station in life, question your motives and methods, and resent your very presence.

Talk to any woman who's worked in a male-dominated workforce – professional athletics, the military, flying airplanes, performing open-heart surgery, pastoring churches, and, not so long ago, investment banking and practicing law – and those women will have plenty to tell you about what it means to feel like an outsider.

And that's where the peace of Christ is found – among the outsiders. It's not with the insiders – the old boys clubs, the movers and the shakers, the male have's that control the have-not's – but with the outsiders, those summoned to the banquet who get there limping and with their white-tipped canes.

A certain man prepared a great banquet, Jesus said (Matthew 22:1-14), which meant that this fellow had money. He was an insider. He invited a lot of people, but they all begged off. One had just bought some property and had to go check it out. Another had just expanded his business and needed to make sure it was running properly. Another had family obligations to tend to.

The rich guy was miffed and told his servant, “Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the city, and bring in the poor, and the crippled, and the blind, and the lame.” These were the outsiders who didn't take being on the inside for granted. They were the ones who didn't take even the most basic blessings for granted – blessings like sight and hearing and having enough not to worry and being able to walk unaided. They would be the ones most likely to receive the gospel as good news.

As many of you know, I walk every day, most days to the Euclid Creek Reservation and back home again, which is about three-and-a-half miles. Part of the reason I walk is for the exercise, and part of the reason is so I can say my prayers, but the greater reason I walk is simply because I can, and I never want to take that blessing for granted. Years ago, when I suffered my first attacks of gout and discovered what it means not to be able to walk, I decided then and there that I would never take being able to walk for granted.

And I know that some of you, who suffer from chronic pain, know what a blessing it is to have a few days or a day or even a stretch of a few waking hours free from pain. Simply to live without pain of one sort or another – the pain of physical illness, the pain of psychological imbalance, the pain of poverty, the pain of social isolation, the pain of domestic violence – to be free from all of those sorts of pain is itself a kind of peace, and the people who recognize that peace and cherish that peace and work to help others know that peace in their own lives are the folks who will be most receptive to the invitation to feast at the master's banquet.

Jesus offered his followers peace, the peace only he could give and the peace that the world cannot take away. That peace comes from living his way and playing by his rules. Jesus's peace doesn't come from playing by the world's rules. If you play by the world's rules, you get the world's peace, and we know how that goes. Remember the war to end all wars, when the so-called civilized Christian nations of western Europe and North America slaughtered 16 million of themselves using the most advanced technology of that day? Twenty-five years later, we did it again, killing even more people and laying waste to centuries of human achievement. And when both of those global conflicts were over we signed what were called “peace” treaties – while the killing in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, the Soviet Union, China, Rwanda, Serbia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and so many other places – continues. That's the way the world does peace.

Jesus's peace is different. His peace comes from working for God's realm rather than clinging to the passing realms for which we kill and die. His peace comes giving rather than grabbing. His peace comes from losing one's life for his sake in order to gain one's life for eternity. His is the peace that the world can neither give nor take away. It's the peace that passes all understanding, as Paul described it to the Philippians (4:7) -- especially the world's understanding of what makes for peace.

I can't convince you by reason that what I'm saying is true. You have to accept on faith that Jesus's way of self-sacrificial love is the way out of the world's mess. Rationality leaves no room for resurrection, which we believe is the proof that Jesus's way is THE way. Proclaiming that Christ had been raised from death, as the first followers of Jesus did, is probably one of the reasons Suetonius declared Christianity that “new and mischievous superstition” that Nero tried to put down. It is counter-intuitive – and unpatriotic and seditious and disloyal and irresponsible – to trust that the way of non-violence is the path to salvation, but every one of the world's greatest religious and spiritual teachers have taught just that. You can't fight your way to peace any more than you can eat your way to slimness; that doesn't work. You can't have peace if you maintain the conditions that lead to war. The only path to peace is peace itself, the peace that comes from surrender to Jesus the Christ. Anything else will take us to those places where the demons of self-centeredness and injustice and violence make their home.

We preach Christ crucified, Paul told the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:23), and that's what I've preached to you for going on sixteen years now – Jesus the crucified, not Jesus the crucifier. Those who nailed the world's savior to the cross were the ones with power, and we Americans continue to boast of being the world's superpower. If we American Christians cannot see how much we look like the ancient Romans and how little we look like the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, we'll never know his peace.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Let not your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”