

The Peace of Christ

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Acts 17:22-33; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-27

“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

Someone has said that if you can find out what people are afraid of, you'll have a better understanding of why they live their lives the way they do. It's an insight from evolutionary biology. That insight says that all animals, including the human ones, strive to maximize their comforts and minimize their dangers. It's instinctive for animals to do so, which means that we do it unconsciously, that is, without thinking about it. Much of the behavior we engage in is done without thinking, and much of that behavior is hurtful – to us, to those around us, and to the creation.

Common sense and parenting makes this a fact so obvious as to be almost without significance, except that it turns out, in the grown-up world, to be very significant indeed. When we ask a child, “How would you feel if someone did that to you?” we're actually asking them to move from the level of feeling – they were angry and lashed out or they wanted the toy and took it – to the level of reflecting, of using their imagination to put themselves in the position of the victim of their selfishness or violence.

When did we stop learning those lessons? When did we stop asking ourselves, “How would you feel in that person's position?” When did we stop feeling accountable to an authority beyond ourselves and our group? I'm not sure I know the answer to those questions, but I know they're worth asking.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, and I hope, as I hope for all of us every year, that we will use the occasion to remember – as well as to celebrate with cookouts and parades and, yes, increasingly, trips to the mall to take advantage of Memorial Day sales – those whose lives have been sacrificed by our demands for security and comfort, as well as those, like my friends and former students Jason, Jim, and Seth, who have survived our call to arms. I am proud of these young men, and many like them, who recognize that if we will have a fighting force, and we will, then let it, like the rest of our society, be led by the best, and they are among the best. We do well to remember and honor them, but we would do better to create a world where their kind of sacrifice is obsolete.

The adult forum has just finished watching and discussing a documentary on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and I said to that group, as I've said to all of you before, that the seeds of violence are sown in injustice, and that by the time the shooting starts, it's too late to begin thinking about peace. The time to make peace is now, all the time, in the day-to-day decisions we make as individuals and groups about how we will not only spend our money, but how we will earn it as well. Decisions about where we will live and the risks we will take with our own security and comfort. Decisions about whom we will elect to draft our laws and develop our policies. Decisions about whether we pay attention to the events around us that matter or whether we will continue, in Neil Postman's words, “amusing ourselves to death.”

But perhaps the most important decision of all we have to make is which story will we believe. An old friend of mine used to say that we live more by our metaphors than by our metaphysics, and what he meant by that was that the stories we tell about ourselves and about the world are the narratives that help us make sense of whatever reality is out there and also shape our own reality, the one that we interact with day in and day out.

This isn't as abstruse as it sounds; it's actually quite obvious, and the Bonhoeffer film made it painfully clear how important the stories we listen to and the stories we tell are to the reality we shape.

If you've ever seen film footage of Adolf Hitler making a speech, you know that he was a spellbinding speaker. He held massive audiences in thrall and was able, bit by bit, to convince millions of ordinary German people, that the Jews and their supporters were responsible for the economic and political problems of Germany. The story that Adolf Hitler told, and which millions and millions of ordinary people inside and outside of Germany listened to and repeated, was that the international Jewish financial conspiracy was responsible for the economic crises of the early 20th century, and the only way to overcome those crises was to remove the Jews from their positions of undue influence and control – to take Germany back for the German people, as Hitler put it. And with that narrative were planted the seeds of the final solution.

The church has always known how important narratives are, which is why most of its foundational document is stories. People who aren't familiar with the Bible think of it, dismissively, as a collection of obscure and pointless rules or convoluted theology or bad science.

But those of us who live with the book and have actually studied it carefully know that its primary purpose is to give us a story in which to believe, that is, a story in which we can place our trust. It's a story that sets itself up, unabashedly and explicitly, as an alternative to the stories that the world gives us and asks us to believe.

From the twenty-seventh verse of the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John: "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."

Tomorrow we will remember the sacrifices of those who have given us the peace that the world gives. We used to say that peace was the period between wars, but I've been alive for over half a century and my country has been engaged in military activity of one kind or another somewhere in the world for that entire time. There has been no period between wars in my lifetime. Oh, yes, most of the wars have been little wars, and some of them we don't call wars at all – the Korean conflict, for example – but they were war enough for the young women and men who died fighting in them, like Chief Warrant Officer Christopher Thibodeau, from Chesterland, who died this past Thursday in Afghanistan.

The peace in which we live is, we say, the best we can do. We tell the story of 9/11, the story of global jihadists, the story of Osama bin Laden, to remind ourselves to be vigilant, to be prepared for further violence, to justify our feelings of anger, hurt, and fear. We used to tell stories about communists for the same purpose. We live by the stories we tell, and this is our version of peace.

The peace of which Jesus speaks in his last conversation with his closest followers just before his crucifixion – just before he became the victim of the world's version of peace – is a different story. It's a story about Jesus. It's a story about a man who prepared for the violence against him not by arming himself and his followers for war – there were plenty of freedom fighters around Palestine in Jesus' day who did that – but by reminding his followers of the choice they had to make every single day: to choose the

peace that he and his way of life alone can give, or to choose the world's peace and wait anxiously for the next outbreak of violence.

The peace of Christ is just that – the peace of *Christ*. We say we want peace. I say we need Christ. I know that sounds suspiciously fundamentalist to some of you, but I'm not saying the world needs Christianity. I'm saying that it needs the uncreated Word of God who was with God and was God at the beginning, as John says in the opening verses of his gospel, and who became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. When I speak of Jesus the Christ, that's who I'm talking about, and when that Jesus Christ, God made flesh, says that the only way to the father is through him, he's most definitely not saying that the only way to the father is through Christianity. He's saying that the way to God is through God.

And the peace of Christ says that the only way to peace is through peace, that if just and lasting peace is our destination, the only path that will get you there is peace. That's why we tell the story of Jesus the Christ. We tell his story because his story is the path to peace, his peace. That's what he meant when he said he was the way and the truth and the life. You don't get the peace of Christ without the Christ, and the only way to get the Christ is to get his story.

And if you read that story – really read it and live with it – you will see pretty quickly that the peace Christ offers he offers on his terms and not on ours. We want peace our way – nuclear arsenals, smart bombs, deterrence, that sort of peace – and Christ says that his peace is different: “If any wish to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

The Christ we follow – we're called Christians, after all, and not Jesusites – is the one who was with God and was God at the beginning, through whom all things were made. To follow that Christ is to leave behind the smallness and narrowness of our perspective, of our wants, of our concerns, and of our notions of peace. To follow Jesus *that* Christ is, in the words of Willa Cather, “to be dissolved into something complete and great.”

I don't know when we stopped asking ourselves how we would feel if we were the ones living in Afghanistan or Iraq, in Haiti or Somalia, in El Salvador or Israel. But I know those questions are worth asking, and they're worth asking tomorrow, over the hamburgers and watermelon, as we remember those who have struggled and sacrificed to bring us the world's version of peace. Remember and honor those brave women and men, ask the questions of what it is to live in war-ravaged and impoverished areas of the world, and lift up a prayer for God's help to make the peace of Christ, the story of Christ, our peace and our story. Amen.