

“FIRST SAY ‘PEACE TO THIS HOUSE’”

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

July 4, 2010 - incorporating Disability Inclusion Materials (designed for 6/27/10)

2 Kings 5:1-14 and Psalm 30 • Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Today’s reading from Luke is from chapter 10. But it is brought more clearly into focus if we first read from chapter 9, verses 51-56:

When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

So then we read in the next chapter: Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!'

There are many sermons that can be written on any passage of scripture, but today we have been almost assaulted with so many varied and even contradictory images! We heard the passage about lusting in your heart that Jimmy Carter confessed publicly many years ago . . . to great ridicule. There’s the passage about having authority over snakes and scorpions . . . which I’d prefer to relegate to the exterminator, rather than to the session! There’s Jesus sending the 70 without purse or bag or sandals . . . in fact, in that passage we have the snakes, the scorpions, the command to shake the unwelcoming town’s dust off their feet, the sending of lambs in the midst of wolves, and the much quoted, "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few". What’s a preacher to do??

But several things have been swirling around in my head, related to Independence Day, to peace-making, and to aggression, enemies and prayer. That verse in Luke “Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!’” continues to push itself to the foreground. Jesus rebuked the disciples for even suggesting they command fire to come down on a Samaritan village.

“first say, 'Peace to this house!’”

And in Matthew, we have “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Jesus continues, noting that to do otherwise didn’t make them any better than those they shunned – tax collectors and Gentiles. But instead, Jesus notes that God makes the sun rise and the rain fall on everyone – good and bad alike. And in words that challenge us beyond human capability, he sums it all up with, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Now before we run off screaming “I give up – it’s impossible!”, the first thing we do is check to see if the translation might be a bit skewed. Maybe the word translated as “perfect” doesn’t mean exactly what you and I mean by “perfect.” We mean without error, and we know that that is not a human possibility.

So we go to several translations to see if there’s another word that has been used instead of “perfect”; and, unfortunately, almost all the English translations use that word. However, there’s one that’s quite different, and it fits so well with the rest of that passage, that I’m inclined to suggest it to you. The Contemporary English Version (or CEV) says, “But you must always act like your Father in heaven.” That follows! First, Jesus says God makes no distinction between folk who are good or evil in the blessings and trials of creation. That’s a really important thing . . . Sunshine and rain, hurricane and flood, harvest or drought . . . these things

don't occur to people because they are good or bad. God's judgement is reserved for another realm, not this earthly existence. This is good news for the person with cancer or a resident along the Gulf Coast. Their difficulties are not a result of sin. This passage should eliminate whatever guilt feelings one may have in those circumstances. All the "what did I do to deserve this?" type questions. And likewise, it should counter our self-congratulation when we're spared those perils. That, too, is engrained in us, as we hear it in the *Sound of Music* lyrics, "So somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good."

So . . . let's leave that (*important*) little rabbit trail and get back to the main point here. If God does not discriminate, and Jesus commands us to love our enemies and pray for them, then the translation, "you must always act like your Father in heaven" is a logical summary. It's about human beings, made in the image of God, choosing to model ourselves our actions after the divine, as manifest in Jesus Christ.

But now we must look for a Greek scholar, one of the commentators whose days are spent in teasing meaning out of these passages, to confirm our interpretation. And M. Eugene Boring fits the bill! So what does he say? He notes that Matthew takes "perfect" from the Hebrew bible he knows, very likely the Septuagint, where the word "perfect" is used often in Deuteronomy and elsewhere.¹ In any case, the Hebrew referent word is *tamim*, "which means 'wholeness'. To be perfect [then,] is to serve God wholeheartedly, to be single-minded in devotion to . . . God, . . . It is the kind of living called for in all the antitheses [in the preceding passage], and it is their appropriate summary, corresponding to the 'pure in heart'" of the Beatitudes only a few verses earlier (5:8).²

This rendering is supported by the parallel passage in Luke, who uses the word *merciful* instead of *perfect*: "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (6:35-36)

Whew! Feeling any better? Perfectionism not required!! But on the other hand, each time Jesus repeats, "you have heard it said, but I say," the standard is still uncompromising. In Matthew, Jesus is holding us to a higher standard than even the Scribes and Pharisees, as well as the tax collectors and Gentiles.

And today, since we're celebrating the birthday of the United States of America, I've focused on verse 44, "love your enemies." I've found that instruction to be quite challenging as relates to the issues of war and violence. Let's look at our Old Testament reading for some more insight.

In the passage from 2nd Kings, we saw both the King of Israel and Naaman the Aramean almost bristling for a fight! The King says, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." And Naaman, equally prickly, has to be talked into doing the simple task of bathing in the Jordan River, without the King OR Elisha actually coming to him in person.

This tendency to arrogance, injured egos, imputed motives, and aggression isn't new. We saw it first in Cain and Abel, and the New Testament witnesses to it in both the crucifixion of Jesus and the persecution of the apostles. And today we see it in the global arena in horrific fighting and terrorism. Each action ups the ante, raises the stakes, and ensnares us in deeper conflict. Martin Luther King Jr. said it best, that violence engages us in a descending spiral.

“Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’”

“Whatever land you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this land!’”

Some of the materials that are in your bulletin today were prepared for Disability Inclusion Sunday, a day set aside by our denomination to consider how we may be more welcoming to those who live with disabilities: limited mobility, sensory impairment, chronic mental or physical illness, etc. This year’s packet is entitled, “The Wounds of War: The Church as a Healing Community.”

Having looked at the human propensity for aggression, and knowing that religion in general (and the Church in particular) frequently contribute to violence and war, I found these materials to be redemptive. We may feel impotent in changing national public policy or intervening between warring nations. But we can be the context for healing those who have been caught up in the violence. Reverend Roger Ezell, a Vietnam veteran, observes that “We don’t have any idea what the cost is. I hope the church is ready. We must be ready.”

On your insert, you will find prayer requests from veterans, and in a little while we will pray a litany for veterans. And after that, we will gather around the table, hearing Christ’s words of forgiveness in the New Covenant, sealed in his blood, seeking to find a place where we can be the healing community. One veteran, Randy Kautto, found such a place. He writes:

I wish that I could find a place...

A place where I could heal and regain faith in myself, and again feel the joy and happiness that I so long ago lost – displaced by despair and hopelessness.

A place where my friends live, if only for awhile, for I sorely need to belong... where I am accepted without judgment, and where I am loved for who I am.

A place where forgiveness reigns...where the future will become clearer and brighter...and filled with hope.

A place where I can find spirituality and wisdom, and where I can be embraced by those who know and can show me the path.

This place existed only in my dreams – until now – and I am once again me.³

Christ’s table —the Welcoming Table — is indeed a place where each of us can be “me”.

ENDNOTES

1. Interestingly in the passage that Boring specifically cites, the NRSV translates that same word as “loyal”. (M. Eugene Boring, *NIV*, Volume 8, p. 196.)

2. Boring, 195-196.

3. Randy Kautto, Vietnam Veteran, “I wish that I could find a place...”, Dec. 20, 2009, <http://www.eft4vets.com/>, reprinted in “The Wounds of War: The Church as a Healing Community,” <http://gcmc-test.pcusa.org/ministries/phewa/disability-accessinclusion-Sunday/>.