

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

Nov 9, 2014

The Peace the Passes Understanding

Ps 70 & John 20:20-21

(727, 742, 740, 726)

When I was teaching at Vancouver School of Theology,
academic discipline was history.
I was interested in how leadership forms culture,
shapes the way we think about and do things.
My primary research was into church leadership in Canada
about 100 years ago,
just as World War 1 was starting.

That war, especially the tragic ways in which it unfolded,
shocked and dismayed most church leaders in Canada.
There had never been a war like it before in the world.
Trenches, mud, gas, stupid strategies that cost tens of thousands of lives ...

Jill's uncle, Louis Diespecker, served in the front lines in World War 1.
He was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery.
Describing the action
in a letter published in the *Victoria Colonist* on May 18, 1915, he wrote:

*We took up a position yesterday which we could only get to
by galloping down a road with 'Jack Johnsons' flying all around,
dead horses and men everywhere. ...
The gas from the shells is awful.
One can hardly breathe and one's eyes are running.
I have not slept for three days.
It is certainly a veritable hell here.*

That was not the way the world was supposed to develop.
These church leaders, and many civic leaders as well,
expected the world to evolve towards peace
through the spread of providential progress –
increasing enlightenment and harmony guided by God.

There might very well have been threats to this vision of a peaceable kingdom that needed to be eliminated with the just and judicious use of military force, but the rule of just laws, prosperity, and diplomacy were seen to be the best ways to bring about well-being throughout the world.

All of the key institutions responsible for shaping good citizens – family, church, school, and governments – worked together to ensure that the values of selflessness, togetherness, honesty, fearlessness, determination, and emotional toughness were blended into characters that served freedom rather than tyranny.

Most Canadians have supported most of the wars we have fought since, believing that kind of vision and those kinds of values were and are at stake. They have, in essence, been fighting for freedom over tyranny. And, as I pointed out in the insert for this week's sermon text, our Presbyterian tradition supports that decision.

War may be a necessary, albeit sinful, means, but it must serve a higher and broader end. And it must come only after all other avenues of reconciliation have been exhausted.

Hear these words from our contemporary statement of belief, *Living Faith*:

*But the tragic evil that comes with war,
the slaughter of men, women, and children
must rouse us to work for peace. ...
We affirm that God is at work when people are
ashamed of the inhumanity of war
and work for peace with justice.*

Wars, and the reasons for wars, are complex and complicated things. When human beings reach the stages of fear and rage that lead to war, the compassionate parts of our consciousness are shut down and drowned out by our bellicose reactions of fear and aggression.

It happens on all sides in a conflict and escalates as the conflict expands. We all get caught up in "the tragic evil that comes with war." Peace really does seem outside of our understanding.

That takes us to our text this morning. It is from John's account of Jesus' meeting with his closest friends and disciples following his resurrection. After he proves to them that it really is him and they finally rejoice, after a time of great anxiety and grief,

he delivers his message of peace.
Jesus, in essence, assures them that his peace and its unique power is in them
through the work of the Holy Spirit,
and, knowing that they are filled with that knowledge and energy,
he sends them off into the world as the Father had sent him.
“Here is the gift of my peace, a peace that only I can give,” says Jesus.
“With it comes the obligation, really the opportunity,
to take it into the world with deep gratitude.”

We talked about what the Spirit had taught us about what peace means
on Friday at Bible Study.

Here are the key ideas that emerged around the table:
freedom, safety, contentment and joy, calmness,
the divine strength to deal with whatever comes, and
an umbrella term under which all the gifts of the Spirit gather,
like the Biblical idea of *Shalom* or well-being.

There is much to do in the world to which God sends us
to contribute to the creation of kind quality of relationships,
be it in our homes, our workplaces, or our broader communities.
“Witness to and work for the peace that comes from Jesus Christ.”

That’s the gift and the call.

“Here’s my peace,” says Jesus.

“Now go and spread it around.

Fertilize the circles of influence I have given you
with the freedom, safety, and joy that flows from my peace.”

It is easy to get caught up in the fervent hatred that leads to war.

You dehumanize and demonize the enemy.

Now you can try and eliminate them with an easy conscience,
regardless of the costs and losses.

But that is not what Jesus challenges us to do in this text.

That is not how you take peace into the world,
sent by God to do so.

But how do we, in obedience to this to this call, make peace?
How do we provide leadership in creating a culture of freedom, safety, and joy?

That’s the question that continues to provoke me
after spending a week with this text.

And that’s the question we will explore further this coming week,
as we memorize and ponder another of Jesus’ challenges
regarding how to best serve the purpose and power of peace in our day.

We can be assured that the Holy Spirit will guide our reflections.