

Revisiting Peace©

Luke 12:49-56

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Do you find this passage to be confusing? This isn't what we usually hear about Jesus and peace is it? This sounds like it is the opposite, right?

We speak so often about peace, don't we? Sometimes we do what we call "passing of the peace." One says: "The Peace of Christ be With you." The response is – "And also with you."

At Christmas, especially, we sing carols that speak of the Prince of Peace. In the hymn "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" we sing the words "It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold. "Peace on the earth, good will to all, from heaven's all gracious King; the world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing."

And in the hymn "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" the words say, "Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth and mercy mild ..." and in the last verse – "Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Light and life to all he brings, Risen with healing in His wings."

Those hymns proclaim what the host of angels sang to the shepherds that night when Christ Jesus was born. So ... maybe it's the angel's fault that we are confused!

But then, we have also heard Jesus' own words where he said, in John 14 – "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Yet, then we come to hear this passage in Luke, where Jesus seems to contradict himself. Now he says "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division."

So ... which is it, Jesus? Peace, or no peace? Peace on earth, or division on earth? Did you change your mind somewhere along the way? Or ... could it be BOTH ... peace AND division?

Maybe the first thing we should do is consider what was happening in Jesus own life. He says, "I have a baptism to undergo and what stress I am under until it is completed."

Can you imagine the stress Jesus was under? Knowing what was coming – a terrible trial, beatings, accusations, crucifixion. Even if he did not know exactly what would happen, he knew it would be ugly and painful and it would end in his death. He talks about his death several times with his disciples so it's safe to assume that knew he would die.

Already he was seeing the division he spoke about – Jews were divided against one another ... those who were following and believing the things Jesus said against those who were determined that the old ways were solid; who believed he was a blasphemer (one who speaks against God in an irreverent way).

The religious leaders were, many of them, against Jesus ... this prophet who was speaking in ways that sounded like he was claiming to be God. They were quite concerned about how people were beginning to turn from their authority to follow Jesus.

But even Jesus' own mother and brothers were concerned at one point. They tried to take him home because he was speaking in ways that made them think he might be having some unstable moments. Mark 3:21 says that when Jesus' family heard how things were getting out of control with the crowds around him, "they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." (NIV)

But when the crowd told Jesus his mother and brothers were outside looking for him, his answer was: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And he looked at the circle of followers sitting around him and he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Who ever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

That didn't mean he had turned against his own mother, whom he loved and who loved him, but he was saying that his family is the Family of God ... those who follow him. And that can mean that even families are bound to be divided over him.

And we know that it was true. People who chose to follow Jesus ... while he was alive, and even more so, after his death ... were persecuted and tortured and killed because of their commitment to follow Him and to worship and preach and teach in his name.

We know that many of the disciples ended up being killed. We don't know what happened to their families or whether or not their families believed, or turned against them.

But looking back over the history of the Christian Church, we know Jesus was right. There was much division and turmoil because of him.

I was listening to Michigan Public Radio the other day when a female reporter was telling about the horrific scenes of violence she had witnessed that day in Cairo, Egypt. There was killing everywhere around her. And, she said that Christians were sought out and gunned down and that churches were being burned.

When I was in Lithuania for a young women's special weekend retreat, there was an older woman there who was one of the adult leaders. She told of how, during the

communist era, no one was allowed to go to the churches to worship, or even have a Bible to read. She hid her Bible and read it every day.

She would call secret worship services in her house, taking a risk of being punished if anyone told the wrong people. Even when I was there, a number of years later, the churches were once again opened for worship, but they were mostly empty. An entire generation had not gone to church. People had been divided, and it was obvious that they had not healed.

I imagine our missionaries who are among us today – Allen and Dee Dee – could tell us stories of people being divided because of Jesus. Am I right?

But what about us, here in this country, where we have freedom of religion? We are free to believe as Christians, if we choose. I define a Christian as a person who is committed to following and serving Christ Jesus. Of course, we are free to believe in other religions, or no religion, as well.

We, who are Christians, certainly don't fear for our lives every time we come to church, do we? You do hear about an occasional incident where someone comes into a house of worship and commits a terrible crime. We are somewhat vulnerable, but that isn't something we worry too much about because it rarely happens.

So do we experience any division as Christians here in the United States? Is your family divided over belief in Jesus? Some are, I know, but the persecution of family members who are Christians probably looks more like poking fun at them, or just criticizing them.

We do see, more and more, a division between Christians – Evangelical Christians and Liberal Christians seem to be polarized over how to interpret Scripture and how we should live our lives from that interpretation and even – and maybe especially – how we look at political issues.

If you take part in any social network like Facebook or Twitter, you know what I'm talking about. You see statements on both sides of the spectrum speaking out for what they really, passionately believe – and it is political but usually it is also religious. Those political beliefs very often come from our religious beliefs.

We, as Christians, are divided. Jesus said, "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand" (Mark 3:24-25). Perhaps our own divisions are weakening the Body of Christ. We may cause our own walls to implode if we don't find some unity soon.

The point is Jesus was so right in saying there would be division because of him. And it appears he was right to say he did not come to bring peace on earth ... because we don't see peace in very many places. Not peace as we think of it – peace meaning the

absence of war, discord, violence. We don't even always have peace among ourselves as his followers.

But let's take a look at that last part of our passage where Jesus says: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens.

You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?'

We are pretty good at predicting the weather. We are especially good at it in this 21st century. But Jesus is talking to people who wanted signs – signs that he was the Son of God, the Messiah, signs that the times were changing and the end of oppression was coming.

But they could not recognize the signs right in front of them – the sign that they were in the midst of a spiritual crisis; that the Messiah had come and was in their view and hearing; that there was a threat of death for him; they could not see the signs of how all this would have eternal consequences for them and for generations to come.

But then, we might wonder if we are good at seeing signs. Are there signs in front of us that we ignore or don't recognize?

Jesus seems to be saying that the very fact that we have division over him – because of following him – that division is a sign that the Kingdom of God is near. We wrestle with the words of Jesus; we try to understand and we strive to be faithful disciples.

As his followers, I think it might be a good thing to ask ourselves ... do I have *enough* division in my life – because of Jesus? Meaning ... do I have the courage to truly follow and do all the things Jesus calls me to do? Am I too complacent in my faith? Too comfortable? Is there something Jesus would ask me to stand up and do that would cause some division in my relationships?

Again, some of how that would look depends on how we interpret what Jesus says. But some of it might just be something else – fear of rocking the boat or causing conflict; or, it might be a lack of commitment ... indifference or apathy.

We give thanks for our freedom of religion but it sometimes comes with a risk – the risk of losing our passion. Those Christians who persevered in the faith; the early church, the woman in Lithuania, were passionate about following Jesus – even if it meant prison or death.

Where are you in all this? Where are we, as a Christian Church full of disciples of Jesus? Is there any division happening because of our faith? Are we living as strong, passionate disciples?

There is one last thing that is important to say. Wherever we are in our journey of faith and our commitment as disciples, we are on the journey. And every step of the way, if we stay on the journey and keep learning and growing, we do become more and more committed and stronger as his disciple.

Even Jesus' closest disciples were not as strong when he left them as they were later on. Yet, even ... then in their weakest moment, when he was leaving them and they were scared out of their wits, that is when he said,

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace.

In this world you have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world.”

We are not perfect in our faith and in our commitment, but he is. And he does give us peace. All who put their trust in him –even a small amount of trust – he will give you peace.

Yes, there is division in the world, and much of it is due to Jesus' own teaching. But it is a good sign that the Kingdom of God has come into our midst because Jesus, God's Son, brought the Kingdom to us. And while the world does not have peace, we – his children – can have it right in the middle of the chaos and conflict.

Whether we are passionate or lukewarm, he loves us. But Christ also calls us to grow and to serve and to be ambassadors of his Good News – the good news that the Prince of Peace is among us; that he has overcome the world in his death and resurrection and that he will return someday and finally all division will be ended and there will be true peace forevermore.

May the peace that passes all understanding dwell within us always, but may our passion for rising up and following Christ be strong, even if division results from that commitment. May we be his faithful servants and friends until he comes again. Amen.