

Sermon 8-11-19
Paul Purdue preaching

During my Monday morning devotional time: El Paso, Dayton, Charlestown, Boston, Antioch kept clouding my prayers. Most Mondays, I dive into the week's Scriptures. This Monday, nothing seemed to happen. The news haunted my holy space. After conversation with Kate, Heather, Darren and Gayle I knew this lament was not just my own.

Lament is an appropriate response to traumatic events. Jesus lamented the violence of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37) and on the cross prayed a Psalm of lament. "My God! My God, why have you left me all alone? My God, I cry out, but you do not answer! Why are you so far from saving me— so far from my anguished groans? I'm poured out like water. My heart is like wax. My strength is dried up like a piece of broken pottery. You've set me down in the dirt. A pack of evil people surround me like lions. They divvy up my garments among themselves; they cast lots for my clothes. But you, Lord! Don't be far away! You are my strength! Come quick and help me! Deliver me from the sword." (Psalm 22)

Consider how the Beatitudes proclaim a blessedness amid our grief: "Happy are you, who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is yours. Blessed are you, who grieve, because you will be made glad."

God never asks us to fake it. Jesus never pretended "everything was fine". Authentic communities do not demand that we pretend to be happy. In the midst of our fears, Jesus comes to whispering: "Peace be with you, do not be afraid". (John 14:27) God comes to us right where we are. We can weep, fuss, and yell as we "carry each others burdens." Galatians 6:2. We need a community to properly grieve. In moments, when clouds obscure my hope, Heather may see more clearly. When I am weary, Kate may direct me to Living Water. We need each other. We are all stronger when we hold each other. Heart-felt empathy brings healing. Shared lamentations help heal us.

However, lament is not enough when evil endures. Our series has considered "Warning Signs". During the clamor of Holy Week, Jesus holds up a warning sign that we often ignore. As Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas, who just shared the Last Supper, arrives flanked by a mob carrying torches, swords, and clubs. It is a confusing scene: angry people, glowing torches, dead of night. What exactly happened? Someone cuts off a member of the high priest's security details' ear with a sword. Mark names a bystander. John blames Peter. Luke tells us, seeing what is about to go down, the disciples ask Jesus "Lord, should we fight with our swords?" Trying to protect Jesus, someone attacks the lynch mob. Jesus yells, "Stop! No more of this!" Luke tells us Jesus heals the severed ear. Imagine that scene, Jesus healing the officers' ear as the agents of injustice put him in cuffs. Amid all that action, it is easy to miss Jesus' prophetic warning sign, "Put your swords up. All those who use the sword will die by the sword."(Matthew 26:52) Blessed are the peacemakers, they are God's children. Jesus, social scientists, and the headlines call out to us today: Put your guns away. Your gun culture is killing us. Will we heed Jesus' sign as we seek to heal our nation? Are we shaped by our US Constitutional Amendments or Christ's prophetic call and command?

What does faith add to our lament, our empathy, our lobby, our calls to legislators, our vigils and our protests? Matthew 5-7 concentrates Jesus' core teachings. The Sermon on the Mount was often memorized by the early Christians. Hear Christ's call and promise: "Blessed are the people who make peace, they will be called God's children." Are we people striving to bring peace? Is peacemaking a core principle guiding our lives? Do people say of us, there goes a force for peace?

If you have never tried to make peace, you may think being a peacemaker is a sign of weakness or an easy way out. Lacking holy imagination, some understand making peace as a sign of resignation. But truly, lashing out, hitting back harder, requires no self-control or moral strength. Peace-making comes as harder work. Peacemaking carries the cross, facing the howling mob with truth-telling and forgiveness. During the rise of German Nationalism in the late 1930's Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared, it is itself the great venture and can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to want to protect oneself. Peace means giving oneself completely to God's commandment..." Jesus' call to peacemaking demands from us: deep truth-telling, courage, and self-control.

Peacemaking must not be mistaken for passive inactivity. Peacemaking may employ various strategies and tactics, and deeply disturb the status quo. Jesus flipped over the exchange tables, opened the sheep pens, and shut down Jerusalem's commerce. Peacemaking resides in the heart, purpose, and hopes of an action. Peacemaking flows from the heart. Jesus offers at least three principles to make peace.

First, You can find other passages to justify your angry responses "...but, I say to you that everyone who is angry with a child of God is in danger of God's judgment. Don't even say, 'You idiot,' or 'You fool.'" (Matthew 5:22 adapted.) Christians do not label the tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free "an invasion" or "infestation." God will judge our words. (Matthew 12:37) Words can call up our highest ideals or conjure our worst demons. We can start a huge fire with a single tweet. Our words matter! So how do we understand the fact that Jesus called out people in authority? "You whitewashed tombs" is a clever ancient barb.(Matthew 23) Peacemaking demands truth-telling. Mark 3&10 tell us Jesus grew angry and directly addressed hardhearted cruelty. Truth-telling and name-calling are not the same thing. Jesus holds the caution sign- "be so very careful with your angry words". Holding and harboring our anger clouds our vision, misidentifies enemies, and blinds us to solutions. Anger at gun violence, may blind us to a shared fear that drives some people to buy more guns, in order to feel safer. If we demonize the gun owner, who may be more afraid of gun violence than we are, then we may not find solutions to the violence that plagues us all. Let us listen for our common fears.

Second, "You have heard Bible verses that teach, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well." (Matthew 5:38 adapted) Here, Jesus is speaking about insults, not assault. Still, if you believe peacemaking is easy or weak, try to silently absorb the slightest insult. It is hard to look your harasser squarely in the eye, without hanging your head, or backing down, and then responding with truth and love. In Jesus and the Disinherited, Howard Thurman, a

black Bible scholar in Jim Crow America, wrote: "A person's conviction that they are God's child automatically shifts our relationships with everyone. When we know that God counts the freckles on our cheek and hairs on our head, we come to know that our deepest selves are personalized gifts of God. Once we know our belovedness, we recognize that to fear another person, whatever power they hold over us is a basic denial of the integrity of our very own life. One who fears is literally delivered to destruction. But the child of God gets a new scale of values. These Christ-shaped scales measure life differently; they measure "true significance" by the way we treat others. As a child of God, we realize the climax of human history comes in Matthew 25, where the inner significance of each of our deeds is revealed to us. We see how our lives impacted all of God's other children. We fear God alone... (Matthew 10)"

Third and Finally, You can find passages and pundits who will preach, "You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy". But Jesus commands us, "love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of Our Creator who is in heaven. If you love only those who love you, what is special about that?" Therefore, just as your heavenly Creator shows love to everyone, so also you must strive for to show love for all. Be whole as God is holy." (Matthew 5:43 adapted) Love alone ends hate and fear. Hate only adds to hate. Anger only fuels anger.

So how might we help heal our nation?

1. We lament our common loss.
2. We hold out close Jesus' warning: Stop- put away the guns and violence that is killing us!
3. We end our angry name calling and listen for our common fears.
4. We repudiate the politics and practises of payback. An eye for an eye, leaves us all blind.
5. We act in love, seeking redemptive goodwill for all people: allies, opponents, and enemies.
6. With our hearts renewed- we engage in resistance to evil and active peacemaking.

In 1957, when Doctor King and others began the "Southern Christian Leadership Conference" they choose the motto: "to save the soul of America." They did not want to limit their vision. America needs saving. Will it be said of us that we were peacemakers? Peacemaking is a daunting task. Peace comes one conversation, one unspent word, one turned cheek, one protest, one lament, and one truth at a time. Peace, love and justice grow slowly.

After a wildfire we walked through a burn over forest. Along our path, we passed a mountain stream. The woods near the streambed stood in stark contrast to the blackened tree remains around it. Living water saved the trees. The creek's grove stayed green and lush. A seedbed for future. Deep into the burnzone, we came to a clearing. Nothing remained but embers, dirt, ash, and the grooves of Forest Service vehicles. Leaving the burnover clearing we stepped into a lush untouched forest, where the fire found no purchase. In that clearing, the Forest Service broke the fire. Firefighting is not safe. The firefighters removed dead trees and brush with a bulldozer. Given a favorable wind, they used back burning. It is easy to spark a fire, anyone can do it. A single tweet may leave lasting scars. Peacemaking like firefighting is much tougher work. Let us drink deeply of the Living water and cut away all that leads to

death within us. Rehydrated by God and community, let us carry healing waters to others who are parched. Then let us stand in resistance to evil daring to wage peace. Amen.