

Matthew 4:12-23 2017

Costly, Marvelous Peace

“There is a hymn, number 661 in our hymnal, “They Cast Their Nets in Galilee” that was written by the Mississippi poet/planter/lawyer, William Alexander Percy. The last line says, “The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.”

It leaves us to ask ourselves, “Can this be right? Peace is no peace? What could that mean? Closed in the sod sounds like burial. Does this sound like Good News to you?”

Well, Percy knew a thing or two about unrest. As the First World War raged in Europe, he worked for the Commission for Relief in Belgium, which sought to feed the starving millions cut off from food supplies by the war. When America entered the war, he served in the infantry and rose to the rank of Captain, earning the French Croix de Guerre and a silver star in the process.

Percy returned to Mississippi and joined his father, a U.S. Senator in opposing the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in their own town of Greenville. It was during this time that he wrote the poem “His Peace^[1]” which gave the text for the hymn I quoted. The decorated war hero, Will Percy, who saw himself as an idealist, was dismissed as nothing more than a sissy.^[2] In the process of fighting oppression, violence and bigotry, living as he felt the gospel demanded, Percy saw his share of strife closed in the sod.

For Simon and Andrew, James and John, that strife lies ahead of them. The fishermen’s nets were full—if not literally, at least figuratively—when Jesus called them. Simon and Andrew, James and John didn’t follow Jesus because fishing was not working out for them. All four were assured a decent living if they remained as fishermen. They left their nets to follow Jesus in search of something more.

They did, of course, find much more. It must have been a wild ride to travel with Jesus from the shores of Lake Galilee that day to be present for most every significant event in his ministry. The amazing teaching, the astounding miracles, and standing up to the powerful on behalf of the oppressed.

Those four fishermen got everything they bargained for and more. In the words of that old hymn, the peace of God filled their hearts “brimful--- but it broke them too.”

Jesus’ followers died to everything they had been or wanted to be in order to be born anew as followers of Jesus—the ones Jesus sent out into the world with the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

Following Jesus’ resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the disciples set out to turn the world upside down. The apostles made a big splash in those early years of what would come to be called Christianity and in the process all but John were put to death for

their faith. John was tortured and exiled. As Saint Teresa of Avila said famously, “God, if that’s how you treat your friends, it’s no wonder you have so few!”

If nothing else, the Bible is a very honest book and it pulls no punches in letting everyone know that following God is not easy. But it is better, infinitely better, than being disconnected from the God who made you. But it was not easy for Jesus and his followers to live as God intends and it is not easy for us either.

I told you the story several weeks ago about the man, who upon first learning about the Gospel was sorry for all who had not heard it, but later, after fully understanding the deep demands and the true nature of the love and sacrifice it required, said he wished the gospel had never come to him.

So convicted of the love he found in Jesus’ call, he was no longer free in his heart to hate without reason, to fear without claiming courage, or to act selfishly against others for his own gain or hardness of heart.

“My life would be easier if I had never heard the gospel.” What a painful utterance.

The German theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968), described God as bringing a point of crisis into our lives. Once you know of the Gospel of Jesus, you reach a point of decision, the point of crisis. Jesus is God’s “yes” to us that we just have to accept. When you come to the point of decision, you say yes to God’s yes in Jesus.

God is not an object to be studied. God is personal and can be encountered. When we come to realize this, we can pray to God, not in formal prayers to dazzle God with our brilliance, but informally, as the one who knows us completely.*

Each of us must come to decide whether or not we believe that Jesus’ life and teaching demonstrates the true nature of God and then move into that understanding into a new life. Once we do believe that Jesus is the way, that his way of being in the world is how God hopes we will be in the world, then our sacred stories suggests that our hearts and minds will respond differently because of our relationship with God.

For the four fishermen in today’s Gospel, Jesus’ call on the shore that day changed everything about their lives. Following Jesus meant a complete break with the past as they moved into an unknown future.

For most of us, coming to faith is not that dramatic. And yet, the faith we have is meant to transform us over time. As I said last week, God’s transformation does not annihilate who you are to replace you with some sanitized version of yourself. God leaves us as we are at our best and gives us the eyes to see the world as God sees it. God can break our hearts by giving us a heart for others.

Just as Simon and Andrew, James and John were transformed from simple fishermen into fishers of people’s souls, we too are to be transformed.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us we only get a heart to love all others by seeing first how all others are as loved by God as we are.

I think that is why that little line from 1 John 4:20 is so devastating---the one that says, “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

And Jesus’ life shows us that if we allow others to suffer from hate and violence while we keep silent, we are just as responsible.

That’s why learning about Jesus is a crisis. Because once we know, we become *responsible* for what we know. Meaning everyone in this room is either at the point of crisis or has been through it already.

We all have heard of Jesus, the Christ, and we have to decide the vast implications for how we live our lives day to day.

The good news of Jesus and what it demands of us as followers is nothing less than what Israel expected their messiah to do, i.e., to establish the *shalom or peace* of God. Shalom is much more than this notion of personal salvation and God’s peace is not about the mere absence of conflict.³

To be peace bringers, to live God’s shalom calls us to initiate peace, integrity, community, harmony, and justice.

The goal of our Gospel is to expand the Kingdom of God. For God’s kingdom to come into fullness means that all creation will be redeemed. The goal is that when we go fishing for people, we catch them all, especially the fishy smelling ones.

We will never know the fullness of God’s shalom, God’s peace, or well-being, wholeness for ourselves until everyone else has it too. Jesus taught us with his very life what it looks like to go to hated enemies like the Samaritans, to forgive and love beyond our personal fears and wounds, he demonstrated how to crush the pain of bigotry and own up to our own pain and suffering without projecting it on to others.

And making it more immediate, the people who never use their blinkers are loved by God. The people who take the parking space you’ve been waiting for are loved by God. The person at work who drives you crazy is loved by God. The boy who sits next to you in homeroom that annoys everyone is loved God. The person who gossiped about you, and everyone believed them rather than the truth, is loved by God. The republican or democrat that feels like an enemy is loved by God.

³ Fran Logue: this and other excerpts, workshop notes

All of the above may not yet live out of this love, they may not yet trust this love enough to respond to its radical demands, and they may go to their grave hating more than loving and never know God's sweet and saving shalom for themselves; but our call is to extend God's peace.

What is it that those who have this kind of faith have that the rest of us don't have? I promise you they don't have better lives, or cooler cars and nicer houses. They don't have easier lives, more fulfilling jobs, and perfect children or parents. They don't even have all the peace they long for.

What they DO have is a love for God that convinces them that some way somehow, if we can find the grace and courage to live it, the love of God, given through even our broken little lives, can make the world a better place---one life at a time.

What people who allow their hearts to be broken by God's love have is the knowledge that everything we now see and experience is not all there is. What they have is hope. Hope.

The peace of God may not make our lives all nice and rosy with no bumps in the road. But the peace of God can give us the hope we need to rise up from the places of fractured hopelessness in which we often find ourselves.

We all live in a world of hurt. Each one of us comes into contact with people every day who don't know how they are going to make it through this one day, much less this week. We meet people who protect themselves by hate and ugliness---their hearts are broken too.

All we have to do is pray that God will give us the eyes to see the world the way God sees it and that we can also see that our own heart is both fractured broken too. Somehow we must continue to find a way to demonstrate to that hurt man, woman or child the hope that is within us.

The peace of God is no mere peace. The peace of God will not clear all the problems out of our lives and make everything perfect. The peace of God is the shalom, the health, wholeness and well being God into which God is calling the world----and it will take all of us. So let us pray for but one thing, that peace which is no peace, the marvelous peace of God. *Amen.*

^[1] William Alexander Percy (1885-1942) "His Peace," from *Enzio's Kingdom and Other Poems*, Published in 1924 by Yale University Press.

^[2] This idealist/sissy saying comes from Percy's autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee* as quoted on the PBS website.