

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Peace and Divisions?

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I saw a bumper sticker the other day...now hold on! Not all theological bumper stickers are bad...just most of them! Why? Because theology needs to address the complexities of life, death, love, loss, ethics, and all sorts of other things; and that complexity is nigh impossible to fit on a tiny little sticker. But there are a few bumper stickers that I have found to succinctly express some profound and complex theological thoughts; and this one did that for me. It's been rattling around in my brain for a few days now and it sure seems to fit perfectly with our Gospel text for today.

The bumper stick reads: If you want peace, work for justice. It's actually the title of a papal message from Pope Paul VI,¹ known for his work in pursuing the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. And it really is a good theological bumper sticker, partly because it cheats by using two really simple, yet complex and abstract terms: peace and justice. That's usually what allows for good bumper sticker theology, using abstract and complex shorthand terms like peace, justice, grace, mercy, love, faith, etc. But that then requires us to think more intentionally about these shorthand terms for complex, abstract ideas.

Both peace and justice are mentioned in the teachings of Christ. Justice is typically mentioned as necessary for all people.² And Jesus makes it clear that justice will be served for those experiencing injustice, even if it requires the persistent calling-out of powerful people and broken systems.³ Jesus also teaches against those who twist and pervert justice for their own gain,⁴ warning them that they will face true justice eventually. But what is the justice that Jesus proclaims?

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19711208_v-world-day-for-peace.html

² cf Matthew 12:18 (NRSV)

³ cf Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV)

⁴ cf Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42 (NRSV)

Our typical definition of justice is that it's an ideal or principal of "right action."⁵ In the *koine* Greek of scripture however, it has a strong connotation of vindication, or the righting of wrongs.⁶ If we look at the mission statement Jesus gives for his teaching and preaching we'll get a good idea of what justice looks like in the kingdom of God, what "right actions" are for followers of the Way, and what wrongs of humanity need correction. For Jesus (in Luke) the kingdom of God is where there is the proclamation and experience of "good news to the poor...release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind...to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."⁷

Or how about the other Gospels' mission statements? In John we are told, right at the start, that Jesus is God's Word incarnated so that "we have all received, grace upon grace"⁸ and that he came to give "grace and truth."⁹ In Mark, Jesus came to proclaim that "the kingdom of God has come near" and people should "repent, and believe in the good news."¹⁰ And in Matthew we read that Jesus is the light seen by "the people who sat in darkness" and "those who sat in the region and shadow of death."¹¹ So the kingdom of God, and the justice of God, is grace and truth, good news, and light to those in darkness. These all sound like the way things should be...right actions and right systems. Justice, according to the teachings of Christ, is about pursuing the values of God and righting wrongs based on God's will and word.

The evidence of scripture (and human history) suggests that pursuing this sort of justice leads to divisions and strife. Jesus' own pursuit of the kingdom of God put him in direct conflict with the religious, political, and economic systems of his time, and how did the leaders of those systems respond? They nailed him to the cross in order to shut him up; just as we generally prefer to silence our own prophets who seek the justice of God's kingdom, prophets like: Martin Luther King Junior, Óscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and numerous others.

Here we find the divisions Jesus is talking about in our text today. Following the Way of Christ will likely lead us into division and conflict, even within our

⁵ Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Justice definition & meaning*. Merriam-Webster. Retrieved August 13, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/justice>

⁶ Strong's greek: 1557. ἐκδίκησις (ekdikésis) -- vengeance, vindication. (n.d.). Retrieved August 13, 2022, from <https://biblehub.com/greek/1557.htm>

⁷ Luke 4:18-19 (NRSV)

⁸ John 1:16b (NRSV)

⁹ John 1:17b (NRSV)

¹⁰ Mark 1:15b (NRSV)

¹¹ Matthew 4:16 (NRSV)

families. But the question is, what is at the heart of the conflict? Is it pursuing the values of God's kingdom? Or something else? This text invites us to mirror work again! We are being called to reflect on why and how we follow Christ, and we are being warned about what it might cost us. It can cost us familial relationships, it can cost us comfort, it can cost us our ability to turn a blind eye to injustice and oppression, and it can even cost us our very lives.

So, if pursuing the justice of God leads us into conflict with others, what about that peace element? After all, Jesus preaches on that too. And if pursuing God's justice leads to conflict, are they mutually exclusive? Once again, we need to explore that complex, abstract, theological shorthand term, peace.

Peace is mentioned two dozen times in the four Gospels. But what is fascinating about how this term is used is that, unlike justice, it is occasionally used negatively, as in our text for today. Jesus states he is **not** bringing peace, but Jesus teaches elsewhere that peace **is** coming. But the peace that will come is only assured for followers of the Way of Christ;¹² because Jesus links peace with faith. The peace Jesus is talking about then, is different from the sort of peace we often envision. It is not the peace of civility and quiet, rather it is the peace that stems from right action...from righteousness... from justice. Here is the meaning behind MLK's quote, which is simply a summation of Christ's own teachings: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."¹³

In the teachings of Christ, in the kingdom of God, and in the Way of Christ, we see that peace has more to do with justice than comfort. It is more about living in faith and the righteousness of Christ and less about avoiding tense discussions and uncomfortable realities. It is about seeing to the needs of all people and not protecting "what's mine." It is radically different from the peace we are often told to pursue by our systems.

The peace that our systems want is the peace of the status quo, the peace that allows 11.2 million children to live with food insecurity in the US alone.¹⁴ It's the peace that results in racial disparities that mean "in 99% of neighborhoods in the United States, black boys earn less in adulthood than

¹² cf Mark 5:34, Luke 1:79, John 14:27, Matthew 5:9 (NRSV)

¹³ King, M. L., & Mitchell, R. (1964). *A Martin Luther King Treasury: A photographic diary*. Educational heritage Inc.

¹⁴ Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh, Household Security in the United States in 2018, ERR 270, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2019, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/94849/err-270.pdf?v=963.1>

white boys who grow up in families with comparable income.”¹⁵ It’s the peace that wants to gloss over the history of slavery in America, or deny the existence of trans people. It’s FALSE peace, devoid of true justice. It is not the peace we are called to pursue.

The peace we are called to pursue on the Way of Christ is the peace that will likely put us in opposition to our broken systems. It is the peace that calls for the hungry to be fed, the naked to be clothed, the sick to be cared for, the homeless to be housed, the oppressed to be freed, the outcast to be welcomed, the weak to be defended, and the mission of Christ to be pursued above all else. That’s the peace Christ promises. That’s the peace we find on the Way. That’s the peace that exposes the shallow and broken peace of the world. The peace of Christ that allows for true freedom, deep healing, and complete wholeness...*shalom*. The peace that results from our pursuit of God’s justice, God’s will, God’s kingdom. I guess I need to order that bumper sticker now...

Amen.

¹⁵ Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An intergenerational perspective. Opportunity Insights. (2021, January 15). Retrieved August 13, 2022, from <https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/race/>