

Power and Peace, ORE

a sermon preached by the Rev. Linda Kuhn, supply preacher 2/20/2011

First Presbyterian Church, Oregon, WI

scripture readings: Isaiah 11:1-9; Matthew 5: 38-48

intro to OT: First reading from OT, is a vision of the prophet Isaiah of God's yearning of creation, a cosmic reordering and reorganization of creation often titled "the peaceful kingdom." It was written to the people of Israel at a time when their nation-state was facing siege and probable annihilation by the advancing Assyrian empire. It was meant to give them reassurance and hope about God's yearning, God's intention. Listen for the word of God:

intro to NT: The New Testament passage is from a section in the gospel according to Matthew called the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of sayings by Jesus that were quite revolutionary in thinking and theology, turning upside down what people had been led to believe was God's intention and expectation. This section is an excerpt from a longer section, where Jesus repeats a pattern, saying – you have heard it said of old . . . but I say to you – by which he raises a different standard of behavior for his followers to abide by. Listen for the word of God. . .

(children's message: community graphic of people in circle reaching out to each other. Cut into pieces and give one piece to each child. What would happen if we kept back or hid our piece? Could we finish the picture? What would happen if one of us crumpled up our piece and threw it away? We need all the pieces of the puzzle to make it work, all people to work together because everyone's piece/contribution is important to the whole picture.)

I remember when I first read this gospel passage and struggled with it – this turn the other cheek, go the second mile. I was a middle-school confirmation student, a teenager growing up in the turbulent 1960's. And I thought in this passage Jesus was telling his followers that in order to be faithful they needed to be wimps. Roll over in the face of injustice. Be doormats before those in power. Play the victim. Let the bullies of the world get their way. As a young person of faith, that didn't jive with what was happening around me with protests against the Viet Nam War, the rallies for Earth Day, civil rights marches, the resurgence of the feminist movement and the ERA, and the movement for the nuclear arms freeze. I knew from other parts of the Bible that we were called as people of faith to stand up against injustice and to work for a peace that meant something different than just keeping quiet.

So I struggled with this passage, was suspicious of it and what Jesus was asking of me. I did go on and confirm my faith, but felt unsettled about it, until I revisited this passage again years later. I then understood Jesus to be saying something quite different. We need to know the backdrop to Jesus and his time and what the people of Israel were dealing with. Their land was under Roman military occupation, the Roman Empire being one of a succession of Empires that had taken over this little nation state through the centuries. The Roman Empire, with their army, were a constant presence, whose aim was not to seek the good will of the people, but submission and compliance with taxes, rules and regulations, and a competing religion of emperor worship, the worship of power. Jesus and the Hebrew people were subject to all kinds of indignities and injustice and personal threat as a daily reality. In this situation, people of faith were wondering, what does God expect of us?

There were 5 different groups and movements if you will, each with competing views on how to live under Roman occupation. The Zealots advocated insurgency, terrorism, nationalism, armed conflict to overthrow the heathen Romans. The Sadducees advocated compliance and compromise so that the soldiers would at least leave the Temple zone and religious ritual alone. The Pharisees advocated opting out of politics and instead concentrating on personal piety and private morality, getting one's

act right with God and to hell with the rest of the world. The Essenes gave it all up as a lost cause and retreated out to the wilderness away from the center of power in Jerusalem where they could live a secluded life and wait for God's heavenly intervention. Jesus – Jesus, however, spoke of a different way of dealing with the Romans and those with power over you. It was not a way of passivity, but creative resistance that gave witness to a God of mercy and grace and peace.

(turn again to pew Bibles) Jesus begins by quoting from the Older Testament, “you have heard it said: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” This verse is quoted to this day as a standard to measure out justice and punishment, to try to keep this sense of an equal balance between wrong that is experienced and retribution to be rendered. Actually, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, which is a quote from the Old Testament, was radical in its day as a way to *limit* violence and retaliation, in a culture when revenge and retaliation often escalated out of proportion. The Israelites had their equivalents to the proverbial Hatfields and McCoy's or the Sopranos who perpetuated long-standing tribal and family feuds with vicious retaliation over issues of honor. The Older Testament determined that for the loss of an eye, you can justify taking *only* another eye and no more. But now Jesus blows apart this equation with a new ethic that says: give up your efforts at retaliation.

We read that Jesus says “do not resist an evildoer.” This is an unfortunate mistranslation. Jesus was always resisting evil and calling upon his followers to do the same. What he speaks against here is violent resistance, responding to violence with violence. This changes nothing and is no witness to the gospel message. Instead he challenged his followers to come up with creative alternatives in resisting dominating power and abusive authority by using kingdom values and strategies, if you will.

He sets up three scenarios: “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also.” Jesus is not asking his followers to be defenseless in the face of assault. Based on Middle Eastern culture and tradition, especially in ancient days, the logistics are such that to be struck on the right cheek by another actually implies a backhanded slap. This strike or slap is a provocation, more an insult than injury here, a blow intended to humiliate. To turn the other cheek is not an order to let someone bully and abuse you. It's a way of saying, instead, stand your ground and stand up to them and don't allow them to diminish you. Dare them to treat you as an equal. You do not have to be goaded into submission or retaliation – you can *choose* how you will react. You can be a bigger person, a better person than they will think twice before they would do it again. Now we know this tactic can be risky – it may not work, but Jesus proposes that this way has a better chance in the long run to fundamentally change the power dynamic of this relationship than anything else could.

Scenario 2: If someone wants to sue you for your coat, give them your cloak as well. The scene Jesus painted here is a courtroom – specifically debtor's court. Landless, poor peasants were always being taken advantage of by the richer class. Jesus acknowledged that this was unjust. “Coat” here would have meant inner shirt tunic, “cloak” would have been outer garment. Someone in this scenario is being sued literally for the shirt off their back, and the set up is that this is an outrageous abuse of power taking advantage of someone who has little to nothing to give. It was legal in that day for someone to sue for payment that would involve someone's clothing, *but not* their outer garment, which would be needed to wrap up into for nighttime and some shelter if you were so poor you were homeless. Jesus' creative response to this unjust situation is to not only give up your inner garment but to freely give up your outer one as well, which would essentially render you naked in the court of law. This is the stuff of nightmares for many of us, to be seen naked in a public place, but in Jesus' day, it was not shameful to *be* naked – it was more shameful to *see* someone naked. In other words, Jesus' response was to urge his followers to “expose” injustice (pardon the pun!) for all to see, expose those whose greed and ability to dominate was going unchecked. This was again a creative, non-violent way to resist injustice and violation and embarrass the oppressor into re-thinking how far beyond human decency they had dropped.

Scenario 3: If anyone (read: of the occupation forces, a soldier) forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. It was legal for a Roman soldier to force anyone to carry their pack, their gear, for a mile. But only one mile. Any more was a violation of military code and could get them in trouble with their Roman superiors. Again, Jesus' instruction to his followers was to meet this challenge head on with their own sense of personal power and freedom by volunteering to go more, as if to say you really can't *make* me carry this for you. I will not cower in the face of your unjust power and dominating authority; I am choosing to do this of my own free will. That is the opposite of being a push-over in the face of abusive authority and power domination.

Jesus goes on: "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." In Jesus' day, one who was reduced to begging was someone quite desperate, no other options left, no safety net, whose very survival was at stake. The command to allow for borrowing reminded folks that there are social obligations and commitments to one another in community that we cannot ignore. I think he was saying, look out for your own people. Forego self-interest at the expense of others, do not resort to everyone being out for themselves. Instead develop that kind of community where the needs of the needy are addressed. Build a social fabric that is strong and resilient and can't be threatened by the Romans.

Jesus then proposes this outrageous idea of loving and praying for our enemies. Jesus and his people had a clearly identified enemy in the form of the Romans. Do we have enemies? Do you have an enemy? We think of terrorists; we have enemies that our government sometimes identifies for us. In many ways, a potential enemy is anyone who has power over us. Anyone who has the ability to affect our lives and livelihoods in negative ways. In these days in America, that could be viewed as the government – president, governor, Congress, state legislature. Or it could be boss, supervisor, you name it. Anyone with power over us, who is or could be perceived as a threat.

Jesus says, love your enemies and pray for them. Perhaps there is no other saying of Jesus this blunt, this counter-intuitive, this challenging, this hard for us to put into practice. **And there is probably no other practice with the potential of changing us and changing the world and changing our relationships with God, each other, and the whole of creation than this command to love one's enemies, those who have abused power and violated your dignity, your life, your family, your faith, your nation.**

Remember that Jesus is not commanding his followers to cower in the face of injustice. He does not tell us to refrain from rocking the proverbial social or political boat and just give in. He does not ask us to give up our personal power or allow abuse – but he does command us to not demonize the other, the identified enemy. We cannot justify any actions that in turn resort to violence, abuse, and dehumanizing the other. In essence, Jesus is saying, "To change the world, change the way you pray. Pray for your enemy as a child of God. And that acknowledgement is going to change you."

We tried it at Peace Presbyterian Church last week, when we gathered to talk and pray together one evening in response to the call by the president of the Wisconsin Teacher's Union who asked people around the state to come to the capitol if they could to rally against Governor Walker's budget repair bill, especially about the elimination of the right to collectively bargain. If they couldn't come to the capitol, she said, go to your place or worship and pray. And so in Mauston we gathered one evening to talk and pray, for those on all sides of the issues. It was indeed a powerful experience.

When we bring love out of the abstract and instead pray for our enemies – that's when real change can happen. We can't pray for our enemies while demonizing them. We have to treat them as human beings, worthy of God's attention. When we pray for our enemies in this way, we find ourselves

changed. Mahatma Gandhi, who had a huge impact as a change-agent in the world once said, “Become the change you seek. “

Let’s quickly turn to the passage from Isaiah, that vision of the Peaceable Kingdom offered a re-organizing of the world based on God’s intent and yearning for creation. The word we translate as *peace* is actually the Hebrew word *shalom*, a rich and full-bodied concept that goes beyond just the cessation or absence of violence to involve wholeness, wellness for all of life, justice, the righting of wrongs, cosmic harmony, the state of being in right relationship with God and all of creation. The image of wolves and lambs, leopards and goat kids, predator and prey getting along and children being able to safely play over a snake pit – is outlandish and surrealistic in some ways. I don’t think Isaiah was painting this kind of picture to be literal fact but rather to stretch the imagination and enlarge the thinking and hope of his people. This vision begged them – and us as people of faith in these days -- to not give in to cynicism and hopelessness or desperation about the state of affairs. It compels us to not to settle for the status quo and what is. **It means not even settling for what we think is realistic or humanly possible, but to dream big, dream outlandishly about what is possible with God’s help. I think if we are not challenged to dream this big, we will settle for something less and never keep pushing ourselves, our nation, and our world to think differently in the way of justice and peace-making.**

If we have power and use it and abuse it and lord it over others just because we can, then we are not a part of God’s kingdom, pure and simple. If all we are doing is protesting, opposing what is, and have no dream of a different way to offer based on justice and mutual well-being -- *shalom*, then we are liable to be left only with anger and self-interest, game-playing and power plays. But if we can imagine a different way, another way that is based on hope and harmony and justice and peace, then we’ll have the vision and hope and motivation to work for its possibility. That’s the purpose – both the social psychology and theology -- of this passage from Isaiah and how it functioned for the people of Israel in his day and how it can function for us in our day.

These are days and of ferment and foment – internationally, nationally, locally --, times that call upon us as people of faith to model a different way of doing business and politics. A different way of dealing with power and identified enemies. A different set of strategies and tactics about how to deal with injustice and indignities. A different vision, possible only with God’s help -- – even a vision of Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and progressives, employers and employees all coming together and working together for the common good.

(conclude) We are not called as Christians to be victims in this world. Nor are we called to act as if we are powerless. We should not let injustice, bullying, and abuses of power to go unchecked. But neither should we stoop to violence in any form, retaliation, revenge, or hatred. We cannot justify these in the name of God. These passages call us to use the power we have to creatively shift the balance toward justice and peace and kingdom values. The vision of the kingdom of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, gives us an imagination and hope, along with tactics and tools that we can take to the streets and into the voting booth. God can do great things within us and among us and in this world. Peace in the scriptures is not personal salvation in a vacuum. It is a call for us as believers to make a difference in this world of ours in the cause for *shalom*, using the revolutionary tactics of this Jesus who calls us to follow. Amen..