

*Blessed are the peacemakers - Being mistaken for the Children of God*

Sermon 10-8-17: Rev. Paul Purdue, Belmont UMC, Nashville, TN

I awoke at 3am, perhaps, because of the New York Times interactive graphic [“477 Days, 521 Mass shootings, Zero Action from Congress”](#) I read before bed. **Unable to return to sleep, I went dusted off a sermon from 2015.** Sadly, it was easy to rework it for another shooting.

I awoke grieving for Las Vegas, Antioch, Boston, Charlottesville, Sandy Hook, Fort Hood, The Pulse, Umpqua Community College, Charlestown, Chattanooga, and 511 other flower draped fence rows.. **I am mourning for America.** Jesus consoles us *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4)* Our humanity demands that we mourn when violence rains down. Today, I am grieving for pastors, priests, imams, and rabbis who presided over unnecessary funerals. I empathize for those without a church family to rally around them, who know no prayers to guide their grief, and hold no faith to ballast their journey. I grieve for those so crushed by grief or anger that they can’t find Sacred space.

Back in 2015, President Obama asked, “are we numb?” His question searches our souls. Are we desensitized to the violence that visits our land and invades our souls?

Violence is as old as humanity. After Genesis’ second creation story, Adam and Eve bring sin into the world. Soon after, murder enters our vocabulary. Genesis 4:5b tells us *“Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, “why are you so angry? ... sin is lurking at the door, its desire is for you, but you must master it.”*

**Do we listen for God’s still small voice?** Do we hear God whisper: *“love your sister, love your brother* (1 John 4), *love your neighbor* (Matthew 22), *love the stranger* (Matthew 25), and if that is not hard enough, Jesus says *“but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven”*, and Paul instructs us to always *“overcome evil with good.”* (Romans 12). So often we choose to ignore God’s centering voice that warns us that unlovely sin lurks at our soul’s door, on our lips, on our fingertips. So often even as we bury bodies, we want God or somebody to rebuke those on the other side. We feel ill-treated or ignored and perpetuate that cycle. The national rhetoric tends towards dehumanization, devaluing and disrespecting.

**God speaks to Cain, about Cain: “why are you so angry?”** If we kneel at the altar rail, looking around at others in judgement we will miss what God longs grow within our souls. What is mastering in your heart? Will we mourn with God and neighbor long enough to hear from God? **Cain focused on Able ignores God’s question “Why are you...?”**

Ignoring God’s call to deal with his own soul, Cain stays angry and kills his brother. The Lord confronts Cain, *“Where is your brother?... What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!”* The Eternal Judge calls Cain to face his actions: *“What have you done? Where is your brother?”*

Our Creator structures the cosmos so that the blood spilt in every police outline calls out for justice from the pavement. **God, who is love, demands justice- an accounting: What have you done, look your brother.....** We do not know the inner sentence, Cain carried in his soul. However, we hear how the Eternal Judge- Witness-Jury-Jailer treats Cain? God does not demand an eye for an eye. The Creator of Justice and Mercy offers mercy to Cain, who previously ignored God’s pleadings.

Some at times long for Old Testament justice. Do you remember what sin drove the Flood narrative? **“Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.” (Genesis 6:11)** Consider the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19. So many think they know that story. Imagine you are sitting in Lot’s den. Listen to the violence, listen to how the residents “came near to the door to break it down” so that they might violently molest strangers in Lot’s care. Violence so deeply troubles the Divine, that God questioned why he made people! **And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6:6)**

Ponder God’s plan to save the world. God sent Moses with the Law, prophets to speak truth to power, priests to make atonement. Finally, God decided to come and live among us. It is a risky plan, coming in the most vulnerable state as a baby born in a stable. How did we greet the newborn Prince of Peace? Persian astrologers came to worship, stirring King Herod’s fears. King Herod, consumed by lurking fear, allowed his inner fear to grow into rage and then slaughter.

“An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, **“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”** (Matthew 2:13) So that night Joseph awoke and fled with Mary and the child as refugees to Egypt. A second King, Pilate, would fail to heed the disquieting voice of God, which surfaced in his wife’s dream, and wash his hands of justice, sending the Prince of Peace to the cross. **It is not the poor, the strangers, the other, or the sinners who crucify Jesus, but the religious folks partnering with the ruling class.**

**How do we respond to our legacy of violence?** Surely, we need better policy, but excellent public policy alone will not heal our land, even if we could agree as to what that policy might be. Our social ills demand more than needed legislation.

Friends, beyond policy solutions, we must offer something to change our hearts, our conversations, and our communities. In Matthew 5:9, Jesus preaches a sermon in one sentence: **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”** **Can that be said of us? Are we peacemakers? Do we end conflicts? Do we bring peace with us when we enter a conversation, a neighborhood, a relationship? Is our church known for offering peace? Do people mistake us for God’s children? Do we radiate an authentic godliness? Do we look long enough to see the Creator’s face in our brothers and sisters, neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies, or do we see something less? Do we worry over our sister’s misdeeds and not hear God’s voice whispering to us alone: “why are you..?”.**

**I fear across the church that we church folks are known more for our quarrels, dissention and division than our hard efforts for peace.** Oh, that we might become peacemakers in a violent, angry, isolating, divided, stewing world. Oh, that we might be mistaken for the peace-giving Children of God.

To bring peace, we must first want peace. We must stop focusing on others’ misdeeds and allow God’s renewing light grow love in our souls. The second step to peace may be found in the wisdom of James.

James takes the starch out of every self-righteous collar.” ***You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” (James 1:19-20)*** We are such terrible listeners. **We reach for our ready-made arguments before the period of mourning is over.**

**How can we say we love our neighbors, when we do not listen long enough to hear the deeper cries, that perhaps our neighbors or enemies never felt safe enough to confess aloud?** Will we make safe spaces for others to weep or cuss so that perhaps they might hear from God and name their own deeply rooted fear? How can we pretend to love our enemies, when we formulate comebacks before others finish a sentence?

I wrote in my 2015 Tullahoma edition of this sermon that *“our society is coming unglued due to a lack of listening. Our political dialogue has descended into eye-rolling, name-calling, point-scoring, sound-biting and come-backing. Do we think we can yell down the other half of the country? Who likes to be yelled at, stereotyped, or put down?”*...

Who do we think we will woo to our point of view with anger or slander? If we want peace we must learn to listen. If we want to be heard then someone needs to break the cycle and start listening! *“You must understand this, my beloved: your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”* Anger feels good for a moment but rarely achieves a lasting good. Anger flashes hot and destroys. Anger builds nothing lasting for God.”

**We will be angry. At times we should be angry. Indeed, Paul counsels us, “Be angry without sinning... Don’t provide an opportunity for the devil.”** (Ephesians 4:26) As a child with a learning disability, being bullied on the playground, might have fueled my drive to graduate with honors. **However, anger carried for long will burn a hole in your soul and cloud your vision.** Violence may light a fire inside us that our better selves must control. **We must “first remove” the stinging sinful splinter** from our eye, before we can see clearly enough to help others. (Matthew 7:5) Anger crouches at the door; we must master it.

Let me confess, my own sinfulness here a little. As a preacher, I found myself directing harder words at certain groups which I perceived to be wrongheaded. I could see their countenance fall when I hot again certain hot button issues. The prophets might teach us that preaching is never to be enjoyable.

However, during my prayers, I thought, “Why am I aiming my preaching at some of my people... who wants that? After all these people give me a job, do a lot of good, and simply disagree with me.” The still-small voice of God resounded: **“love your enemies, and these folks are not even your enemies, Purdue.”** (that was my Dad’s voice for God- Purdue).” **The problem was not with what I was saying, but the inclination of my heart- my self-righteous anger.**

And so in my Thursday edits, I began asking myself, “Why these words? When did I last say this? Is this tending towards love?” I had inner peace in this, but one Sunday in the midst of our last divisive election cycle, one of the crinkly face crowd, came up after a sermon, and said, “Paul, I have been mad at you since July, but then this morning, I realized I am not mad at you, I am mad at Jesus, I need to go home and explore Jesus’ teaching on “welcome the stranger” and perhaps rethink my politics.” We both laughed.

How do we become peacemakers? We listen! Listen to James 3 beginning in verse 2: *“For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder...So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity, is set on fire by hell, untamed, a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.*

(Hear James' beautiful theology, for in speaking evil of another we speak evil of one made in the very image of God) *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?...Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*" (James 3:2-13 & 17-18)

**Has anyone mistaken you as a child of God lately?** Has a stranger, neighbor, or enemy seen the image of God through you? Are we peacemakers? Are we pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and full of good works?

As a sophomore at the University of Kentucky, a sociologist spoke to a student symposium and that night I attended his lecture at the Catholic Newman Center. I was sure I would never forget his name. Although, I have forgotten the professor's name, his message did not leave me. He said, "the great failure of the church in America today is our failure to offer an alternative vision of living to our nation". The professor asserted there is not a measureable difference in the way church folk and secular people live. Christians do not offer an alternate vision of how to live. We do not stand out from the secular. We do not inspire people towards Christ.

**Our society is now sick with a quarrelling violence - will we who follow Christ offer another pattern of living?** Will you and I offer peace? Will we bring peace into our marriages, our families, our friendships, our congregations, our Conferences, and our committees? Will we be mistaken for the children of God? Will we offer a perceptible difference? Let us not quit church or give up on Jesus' bride. We need a community that calls us into peacefulness, gentleness, community, inclusion, and justice. Who else will do this work? The world needs a Christ-like vision to simply survive.

Jesus tells us, "*You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" (Matthew 5:13-16)

There are people dwelling in dark corners of the village desperate for light. I see the light around here. There are lonely people whose countenance has fallen who need your words of encouragement. There are people mourning who need your comfort. There are people giving up on goodness who need to be re-energized by your good works. There are angry voices that need to know that peaceful voices will listen.

I know this sermon is already too long, but I feel I must share the words of Doctor King, from his Christmas Sermon For Peace.

*I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and I've seen hate on the faces of too many sheriffs, too many white citizens' councilors, and too many Klansmen of the South to want to hate, myself; and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say:*

*“We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good, and so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country, and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally and otherwise, for integration, and we’ll still love you. But be assured that we’ll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”*

*If there is to be peace on earth and good will toward men, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations. Something must remind us of this as we once again stand in the Christmas season and think of the Easter season simultaneously, for the two somehow go together. Christ came to show us the way.*

Let us be known by our deep desire for peace. Let us be known for listening long enough to make a safe space for even enemies to be wooed by God’s love. Who knows, as they hear from themselves, God may change hearts. Let us stop seeing what divides us and seek to see the image of God hidden within another. Let us stop bickering. Who wants to sit down and break bread at a table filled with bickering? Let us woo people, love people, hear people and invite other people outside the church to bring their candles, their hands, their stories and join us.

Let there be a measurable difference in us - may other people grasp an alternative vision of living because we are pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good works, and without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy! **Let us live so that we might be mistaken for the children of God! Amen.**

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