

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

The Reverend Margie Baker

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“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Right now I could use some comfort. I could use some good news. This does not feel like good news. In fact, my gut reaction is that it doesn't even sound like Jesus. Jesus loves peace! Blessed are the peacemakers.¹ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.² As with most of my negative gut reactions to something Jesus says, however: just because I don't find it comforting doesn't mean it isn't true. “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.” My work as a Christian, and as a preacher, is to sit with the discomfort long enough to learn from it. What difficult lesson does God offer me at this moment, in 2020?

I begin with the sword, because this is particularly concrete and jarring. Jesus brings a sword? Jesus who told his friends not an eye for an eye, but if someone hits you on one cheek, offer them the other? Jesus who told Peter to put down his sword? Jesus who went calmly to the cross rather than running away or fighting back?

The sword is a metaphor to symbolize division as well as violence. I come not to bring peace but division, discord. While I would still prefer that Jesus bring peace, this makes perfect sense with what follows, with parents set against children and families divided. “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.” If sword has a special meaning here, I wonder if peace does as well. Plenty of other times, Jesus speaks of peace, of God's peace, of peacemakers. Jesus speaks *peace*. Peace in this passage, I think, *must* be distinguished from that *other* peace, the peace of God that passes all understanding, the peace that comes from living a life in Christ. No, this peace seems different, the sort of temporary peace that is simply the absence of open disagreement. Surface-level peace, the peace of well-behaved people. People who don't make waves.

¹ Matthew 5:9 NRSV

² John 14:27 NRSV

We find this kind of peace in many of our families or workplaces, the ones where we walk on eggshells and avoid painful truths, creating a surface-level “peace” not based on truth, flourishing, and trust but on an often unspoken agreement to not talk about the hard parts. This happens around Thanksgiving tables around the country. It’s the reigning myth in some families. Let’s not talk about it. Let’s not argue. *If* this is peace, it’s certainly not God’s peace. Just think back to the prophets. They were not afraid to bring shock and division in the service of proclaiming God’s truth. I have come not to bring peace but a sword. It is not easy to follow Jesus, and all those who choose to follow him must abandon the siren-song of “getting along” for the much harder work of speaking truth in love and working for God’s Kingdom *right here*.

This is how I hear Jesus’ proclamation that he has come not to bring peace but a sword. I hear Jesus warning his followers that to take up the cross will not make them likeable. If you think peace looks like the absence of disagreement, or an acceptance of the status quo either from the Roman Empire or from the religious elites, Jesus says, have I got news for you: I bring division, because I bring truth. Jesus doesn’t care a whit about the status quo; instead, his life, ministry, and death all demonstrate his allegiance to God’s kingdom, the antithesis of the kingdoms of this world.

Division and disagreement are uncomfortable for most of us, which is part of why the world is the way it is. I think back on times when something has been said that was unkind, or hurtful, and I let it go. Even if it was untrue. Even if it could cause harm to another person. Perhaps not physical harm, but harm nonetheless. That sort of so-called peace, the holding of the tongue instead of speaking truth in love, does not further God’s call to love God or neighbor. That sort of peace accepts, promotes and condones the myth that it’s better to get along than to fix the problems of our broken world.

Jesus doesn’t worry about making people uncomfortable by speaking hard truth and disrupting the status quo. Think about how revolutionary it was to heal on the sabbath! Or to touch a leper! Or to defend a woman accused of adultery! Or to eat with known sinners! Jesus lives out the gospel proclamation of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and helping the oppressed, and he does so in a way that causes conversation

—a stir, shock, disagreement. Jesus wouldn't be Jesus if he always did the socially acceptable thing. Remember that.

This sort of shock-inducing, radical adherence to the gospel message is apocalyptic in the literal sense. Apocalyptic means “uncovering,” and that's what today's gospel passage is about. Jesus says: “nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” Uncovering the things that need to be uncovered is not peaceful. It's much easier to leave the skeletons in the closet, to ignore the elephant in the room. Uncovering the things that need to be uncovered will absolutely set families against one another, mother against daughter, father against son. Uncovering things, naming things, takes work. And Jesus tells his disciples—and us—that the work of uncovering, of shining light in the darkness, of bringing this world a little closer to God's dream, is our work too. He's sending them out with a warning, and that warning echos through the centuries to us, to you and me.

Jesus seeks to upend the status quo, to do the work of God. And what is the work of God? The work of God is justice. Micah 6:8 says, “what does the Lord ask of you, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?” You may say, but God is love! I'm supposed to love my neighbor. Yes, absolutely. But as Dr. Cornel West so eloquently puts it, “justice is what love looks like in public.” Let me say that again: Justice is what love looks like in public. Isn't that what Jesus' life and death demonstrate?

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”³ Jesus reads that and then announces, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”⁴

Justice is what love looks like in public. Love and justice are inextricably linked. God loves us, and our primary duty is to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Next duty: Love your neighbor as yourself. Scripture spells out love of neighbor: it's

³ Luke 4:18-19 NRSV

⁴ Luke 4:20b NRSV

about sharing one's plenty with those who have less, liberating those who are oppressed, helping those who need help, and all because God made us and loves us, and freed the Hebrew people when they were enslaved in Egypt. Jewish faith, and therefore Christian faith, is rooted in God's redemption—God's liberation—of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt.

Justice is what love looks like in public. This love of God and most importantly this love of neighbor isn't about feelings! The love we are called to is a set of actions based on the fact that everything good comes from God, our very lives, our hopes, it *all* comes from God and in recognition of that fact, we spend our lives sharing that goodness, sharing God's love and God's bounty, with others. In this light, *of course* Jesus calls out family ties, because family and tribe and race and creed can hobble us and keep us from our duty—love of God and neighbor.

When I look at my children, I see my heart living outside of my body. It hurts to see them in pain. I would do anything to ease their suffering. In this gospel reading I hear a call to take that visceral, overpowering feeling of love, that "my heart aches for their well-being" and practice feeling *that* for all children. And everyone is someone's child. So who do you love like that? Perhaps it's a parent, or a sibling, or a spouse or partner. Perhaps it's a friend who is your soulmate, who understands you and loves you. That kind of love is the love we owe our neighbor. And everyone is our neighbor. That kind of love is a fraction of the love God has for each of us—*each* of us, individually, as discrete, complete, human beings. In this same uncomfortable, apocalyptic passage, Jesus also says "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." What comforting words. Jesus is saying, *you matter. You are valued and known.* Pair this with the difficult truth that division is coming: you are loved, you matter, *and* it's not going to be easy.

You matter to God. I matter to God. And you and I matter not because we are good, or smart, or rich, or any other adjective you want to try. You and I matter, each of us matters, because God made us and called us good. Empowered by our belovedness,

we are called to go out and sow truth, to be laborers in God's vineyard, to uncover what needs to be uncovered, to proclaim aloud the whispered truths in our hearts. Because we are beloved, we are called to live our baptismal covenant: We strive for justice and peace among people, we respect the dignity of every human being, and we seek and serve Christ in all persons. Amen.