

Peace is No Accident

April 1, 2007 Dr. June Goudey

Luke 19:28-40; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

The Psalms have a way of telling it like it is! At their best they praise God: “Give thanks to God whose mercy endures forever”; at their worst they reveal the violence that reigns when the peace of God is absent. Today’s Psalm holds both positions in tension. The passages that are traditionally read on Palm Sunday omit the description of God smiting the Psalmist’s enemies in battle as well as these words, “The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.” The backdrop for this psalm is the festal procession of a King complete with palm branches entering the gates of Jerusalem to praise God for his victory over his enemies. The same backdrop shapes Luke’s description of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem—the crowd echoes the psalmist’s words “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” with its own words: “Blessed is the King who comes.”

We know that many people looked to Jesus as Kingly material; he would restore Jerusalem to its place of prominence and drive out the Roman occupiers. Ironically, Jesus enters Jerusalem not on a horse fit for a king but on a colt, a donkey. As he looks over the city, Luke records this experience: As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”

Palm Sunday so often devoted to the celebrations of the festal palm procession or the Passion story- the retelling of the betrayal and death of Jesus- also deserves to be called Peace Sunday. Jesus entered Roman occupied Jerusalem as a peace-maker and peace-bringer—his focus was on what brings peace. In Jesus’ understanding of God’s realm peace is the fruit of love and compassion.

The Romans believed otherwise! If you attended any of the *Saving Jesus* presentations you would have heard John Dominic Crossan contrast Jesus’ understanding of peace with *Pax Romana*—Roman peace: first victory, then peace. Without war you will not have peace. In the face of this ideology, Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers, they are children of God, and as children they have access to God’s realm. In Jesus’ teaching war cannot create a path to peace. Only love and compassion can and most importantly love and compassion towards those once considered your enemies. In God’s realm there are no enemies—that is the distinction Jesus made and makes still.

It’s difficult to hear these words and meditate on their meaning when our own country is at war. Some would say we did not choose this path, 9/11 chose it for us; but that way of thinking is delusional. Our government in our name chose to bring democracy to Iraq. The decision by this administration is no different than the language of *Pax Romana* – first war then peace. I know there are people who hold different views on this war; who see a higher purpose to our actions in the Middle East. In all honesty, I find that way of

thinking difficult if not offensive. To follow Jesus is not to walk the path of war, but the path of peace. Jesus walked the path of non-violence; but when the imperial Church, the church that emerged from Constantine's reorganization of the Christian message in the 3rd century, looked back on Jesus' last days it fashioned a path far different than Jesus would condone.

Traditional celebrations of Holy Week, the week that lies before us, have done great harm to Jesus' message of peace. In truth, Holy Week has taken on an unholy tone. Over the years, Passion Plays, like the brutal images of Mel Gibson's recent film, *The Passion*, have convinced us that there is nobility to Jesus' death. Crucifixion in the minds of many Christians plays a central role in human salvation—Jesus died for our sins. In that way of thinking *Pax Romana* wins. Because Jesus suffered and died for us, suffering is seen as a pathway to peace. We can live in peace, knowing that heaven is our reward.

This view of peace is no peace at all... it presents an ideology that condones suffering as a path to peace that uses violence to have its way. I reject this pathway... and I invite you to reject it as well. I refuse to speak of Jesus' death as divinely programmed. Jesus was executed on a cross; he was not crucified according to God's game plan for humanity.

My sermon today is not a history lesson to make you more learned Christians. The way we speak of Jesus' death is critical to the way you and I are called to live today, in this time, in this moment.

In the words of – Confucius: “To put the world in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must cultivate our personal life; and to cultivate our personal life, we must first set our hearts right.”

Setting our hearts right means hearing Jesus message: “If you, even you, knew on this day what would bring you peace.”

Christine Robinson has re-envisioned Psalm 118 for her own life. Hear her words:

I called on God in my distress
 God answered my prayers
 God is with me—therefore I am not afraid
 Whatever happens will happen
 God will be at my side
 I will be strong.
 People are fickle, Society not very helpful
 God is always present.
 And all my fears and foolishness that buzz
 and swarm in me like bees—
 With God's help I will calm them
 for God is my strength and my song,
 and my salvation.
 Listen! Songs of Joy!

Once again...

all my fears and foolishness that buzz
and swarm in me like bees—
With God's help I will calm them
for God is my strength and my song,
and my salvation.

This truth is at the heart of our calling to follow Jesus: God's presence calms us.

In his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ* The Buddhist Monk: Thich Naht Hanh writes that the highest form of prayer for a Buddhist is *practicing the teaching* of Buddha, he suggests the same is true of those who would follow Jesus.

“The Buddha said: If someone is standing on one shore and wants to reach the other shore, he has to either use a boat or swim across. He cannot just pray, ‘Oh, other shore, please come over here for me to step across!’”

To those who worshiped him as Lord, Jesus said “why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not do what I tell you?” He might well have said, do not bother to call me Lord or savior instead practice love and compassion and the world will know your heart is one with my heart.

Our prayers for peace will fall flat unless we practice what we pray. As you walk through these days of Holy Week, I encourage you to think about the ways that you practice peace in your own life...can you see your love as compassion in action? Do you nurse grudges or practice forgiveness?

Later this morning we will come as individuals and as a community to practice the way of peace at this table of welcome. In preparation I invite you to listen to the wisdom of others who have walked this path before us:

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said

“Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.”

The excommunicated Jewish philosopher, Spinoza, wrote:

“Peace is not the absence of war; it is a virtue; a state of mind; a disposition for benevolence; confidence; and justice”

Mahatma Gandhi taught that “nonviolence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being.”

Albert Einstein wrote: “We must be prepared to make heroic sacrifices for the cause of peace that we make ungrudgingly for the cause of war. There is no task that is more important or closer to my heart.”

1987 Nobel Peace Laureate Dr. Óscar Arias Sánchez reminds us “Peace is not the product of a victory or a command. It has no finishing line, no final deadline, no fixed definition of achievement. Peace is a never-ending process, the work of many decisions.”

The message of Jesus that I believe Holy Week must lift up is this. **Peace is not an accident...it requires the labors of wisdom—the work of many decisions—and the heart of compassion!**

The late Christian Mystic Thomas Merton who was heavily influenced in his later years by Buddhism reminds us that the practice of peace begins in our own hearts: "Instead of loving what you think is peace, love other [people] and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed - *but hate these things in yourself.*" (Italics mine)

I say again: Peace is not an accident...it remains the highest form of prayer for those who would follow Jesus to the cross and then on to resurrection. May this peace be our hope and our legacy. Amen.