

The Way of Peace (Mark 9:38-50)

Be at peace with each other. You know, in all the times I've read through this passage, that never really caught my attention. Perhaps I've just assumed that to be the case—or assumed that it would eventually happen and I would welcome it. Maybe I read it more like, "Now just settle down and quit your bickering," because the disciples had earlier been bickering about who among them was the greatest. Maybe I just overlooked it because the earlier parts of this passage seemed more weighty. Or perhaps I ignored it because it makes demands on me. You see, be at peace means do something to bring it about, make some effort to that end, and sometimes it's easier to live with a measure of conflict, especially when you think you're right or justified.

But, I think we'd agree that Jesus is serious about this—he did also say "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." Note that he said peacemakers rather than peace lovers. Most folks would gladly identify as peace lovers, but not many sign on to be peacemakers. Later in his life, in fact just prior to his death, he offered his own peace to the disciples—my peace I give you. So I don't think this is a negotiable value in the way of Jesus. It sounds like a cardinal virtue for him and those who are learning from him. Paul taught peace as part of the Spirit's fruit in the life of the Christ follower: love, joy, peace, and the rest. In Ephesians 4, he also exhorted us to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. One of the titles assigned to Christ is the Prince of Peace. It's pretty clear that this is important to Jesus, and if it matters to him it must matter to us.

Be at peace with each other isn't simply be at peace with yourself. You can be at peace with yourself and still be caught up in conflict. We hinted at that a moment ago—when you think you're in the right you can be at peace with yourself—the problems generating conflict are, in your view, somebody else's issue or mistaken idea. Of course, as Paul also points out, there are going to be cases when you have done all you can do to bring about peace, but others will not consent for whatever reason. That's why Paul in Romans 12 said "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Paul assumed our legitimate effort towards peace.

Be at peace with each other—it's a tall order, but we ignore it at our own peril. Failing to pursue it can find us undermining the very work Christ came to do, and in the process we are deprived of the blessing God intends for the whole of humankind, not to mention the havoc conflict wreaks in the body of Christ. It's a tall order because peace is counter cultural to the way of the world. Peace with God, peace between persons, peace with creation was one of the initial casualties of our first parents' sin. All of those relationships became conflicted and human history since then has been the story of conflict between people, races, tribes, kingdoms, countries, religions, and nature itself. When our focus was bent inwards towards ourselves, preservation, protection, and power became our inclinations. When threatened, our impulse is to strike and retreat, or sometimes to strike and keep on striking until the threat is eliminated. Peace, when it does exist, often comes, as they say, at the point of a sword.

Some of the impediments to peace are found right in this passage and the verses immediately preceding. Being at peace is a tall order because we're so conditioned to its opposite—we're almost unaware of how we're squandering peace because we easily slip into the behaviors and inclinations we inherit from our culture and surroundings. Take for instance the situation of the disciples in the verses before our passage arguing on the road about who among them was the greatest. This comes straight from the elementary school playground. And it gets refined as we grow older primarily because we live in a culture that measures productivity and assigns value to those who increase standing, prestige or value to the group of whom you're a part. Our culture handsomely rewards those who produce which nurtures a competitive spirit that extends into every aspect of life. Children are encouraged to excel at sports in the hope of gaining a university scholarship. High schoolers feel enormous pressure to take higher level courses and excel within them for a chance at academic scholarship. Job applicants vie for open positions and are tempted to pad resumes in the hope of standing out among the pool. Corner offices—when we used to work in office buildings—are given to the

great ones. Universities hire professors on the basis of how their published research or accomplishments will add to the prestige of the institution. Companies promote employees who will sacrifice time with family to advance objectives and hit production targets. All of this contributes to a societal environment comprised of winners and losers—there have to be losers in that kind of equation, and the sad truth is that in such a setting there are far more losers than winners which then sets the stage for cottage industries that promise to improve one's standing, one's ability, one's appearance, one's advantages. We size people up and make snap decisions about where we stand compared to others in the room.

But the way of Jesus sets a different standard that has nothing to do with accomplishment or appearance—it focuses rather on disposition and self-awareness that finds its reward apart from pecking order as it seeks to promote the well-being of others. Which doesn't mean that folks who are accomplished or are acclaimed according to worldly standards don't qualify—it simply means that they recognize their true value elsewhere, in quiet, unassuming service to others. Greatness isn't measured by how well one is served, but how well one serves. Jesus underscored this value by taking a little child in his arms—one who in that day had no status or standing, whose needs were secondary—and saying those who welcome one of these, that is, attending to the well-being and needs of those ignored or marginalized, actually welcome, that is attend to the well-being of Jesus himself. You'll recall that peace, in biblical language, doesn't merely describe the cessation of aggression, but additionally pursues and works towards the delivery of what is necessary for flourishing, for life and well-being of another.

Another impediment to peace crops up in John's report that heads up our passage. Perhaps under the guise of preserving the integrity of ministry, the disciples stumbled into divisive exclusion by forbidding someone from casting out demons in Jesus' name solely for the fact that he wasn't one of them, he wasn't part of the approved and selected group. This fails on a couple of fronts—one is simply the obvious practical one. Earlier the disciples themselves had failed to cast out a demon from the son of a man who came for their help on the basis of Christ's reputation for doing just that. They were themselves unsuccessful, but had the audacity to forbid someone else from successfully doing what they could not. They should have been glad for the outcome; they excluded him instead. Conflict—you're not one of us—cease and desist. But Jesus had a different take. Mark's gospel clearly pictures Jesus as a healer and liberator confronting the demonic, death-dealing powers that be. What that person did was aligned with Jesus' very purpose in coming to earth. Recognizing this, Jesus took an inclusive posture, he welcomed the effort and noted that those not against us are for us in the sense that they are pursuing the same ends, though perhaps from different motive for the moment. Beyond that Jesus said that anyone who does something even relatively small in service to the larger mission of Christ will obtain divine blessing and favor. How much conflict in our world, even among communities of Christians, could be defused in favor of peace were we to adopt Christ's posture of inclusion instead of our default response to exclusion? We saw this earlier this year in our own congregation when we took up the cause of working against racism in ourselves and in our culture. In a talk I gave on the subject, I mentioned Black Lives Matter as a phrase that succinctly captured the essence of the current flashpoint of racial conflict. Many of you jumped into the fray learning from what we offered about the history and expression of racist oppression—you are still learning and developing responses that will allow us to promote peace among races. But some loaded up my inbox with caustic notes detailing the background of the founders of the Black Lives Matters movement informing me of their socialist roots and training while accusing me of a secretive agenda to promote anti-American ideas and policies. The less caustic notes simply branded me as naive, a pawn being manipulated by a seditious cause. The question I asked my conversation partners in response was always, are the BLM folks wrong? Do Black Lives not matter or matter less than others? Can we not learn from their experience and find ways to participate in the larger work of racial peace by offering, in the name of Jesus, sensible remedies to long-standing and pervasive deprecation of persons on the basis of race?

Which brings us to the final impediment to peace in our passage for today—the need for self-examination and self-discipline for the sake of being instruments of peace. This section that records Jesus' teaching on self-maiming for the sake of life is an example of hyperbole to profile the seriousness of the issue. Jesus set this against the idea of modeling or example—what legacy are we creating for those coming after us or those new to the way of Jesus? Are we simply baptizing worldly values creating a spiritual veneer to cover over humankind's deepest flaws? The root of the problem, according to Jesus, is not with others, but with ourselves. Conflict requires participants who engage in it, and a means for promoting peace is to disengage or refuse to engage in conflict. But this takes effort—not the effort to duck or protect in the moment, but the prior effort that removes the impulse towards conflict to begin with. Jesus elsewhere said that the heart is the source of all manner of evil—it's there that attitudes are held and where inclinations are nurtured. The heart is where decisions are made and from where actions are generated. When the heart is set right, the rest of one's self follows. When you receive the peace of Christ and allow this to rule your heart, the sources for conflict die off for lack of nourishment. We don't have to buy into pecking orders, we don't have to measure ourselves against others for value. We don't have to exclude others pursuing the same ends as Christ even if they're not part of our group. We can welcome the efforts of others, we can join in those efforts with the resources of Christ at our disposal. We can celebrate progress, we can rejoice in others flourishing, we can leave a legacy of humble service that decries personal acclaim in favor of God's blessing. We can model what it means to be peacemakers so that the world can learn of alternative postures and approaches to defuse conflict that invite efforts towards reconciliation and well-being. Friends, the way of peace is wrapped up in the ways of Jesus—and we who claim to know him and love him are those who are best prepared to promote it, if we'll do the work.

Be at peace with each other. AMEN