

Pentecost 4C 03 July 2022
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus says, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house'" (Luke 10:5)! Let's pray:

If the horrible events of the world leave us heartbroken and weeping, imagine what God must be seeing and feeling; God, the Creator who entrusts us with his creation and with one another's lives. Today the Creator and the created stand together weeping and broken-hearted.

The tragedies that surround us are only the symptoms of a much deeper issue. The deeper issue is the human heart. Whether by a terrorist attack, through prejudice and discrimination, in our political campaigns, or in our personal relationships, the violence and mistreatment we perpetrate on each other arise first from an inner violence that poisons and fragments the human heart. We need a change of heart; we need a heart at peace.

Sadly, we often reject invitations for self-reflection and seek to divert attention away from ourselves by asking, "Where is the peace of God today?"

Let's not project our failings and imperfections onto God, or expect God to fix everything. The problems are ours and the blood of the victims, the tears of the mourners, and the pain of the world are crying and begging for an answer. Let's not use the same, tired old excuses; rather, let's try some new solutions.

Let's number ourselves among the seventy sent to every town and place where Christ himself goes. Let's enter every house, first saying, "Peace to this house." Let's become people with hearts at peace, not at war. We all want peace. But I also think we struggle with what peace means, what it looks like, and how we find and keep it. If the events of today's world offer us anything, it's the opportunity to rethink what peace means and reorient our hearts.

So let me ask you this. What does peace mean to you? What comes to mind when you think of peace?

Now, are you willing to let go of that understanding of peace and consider something else? Are you willing to pay the price for peace? I'm not asking about our willingness to risk the lives of our military personnel or increase the defence budget. I'm asking about our willingness to change our understanding and practice of peace.

I think most of us have an understanding of peace that's too small and too narrow. We limit peace to a particular set of behaviours and they're usually the behaviours we expect from others. We think of peace as an ideal to be attained and more often than not we define it as the absence or elimination of conflict. We've convinced ourselves that peace will come when this person or that group changes or stops doing something. Ultimately, we condition peace on our ability to change or control someone else. We let them determine whether our hearts are at peace or at war. That's both naïve and doesn't work.

The reality is that we don't have the power to change other people. The reason we feel so powerless to do anything about our world's tragedies is because we are powerless to change others. Ultimately, the only person over whom we have any power or ability to change is ourselves. You and I are free to choose to live with a heart at peace or a heart at war.

Jesus didn't send the seventy out to change the towns and places they went to, but to simply offer his peace. How often does Jesus instruct us to go and change other people? He doesn't. That's how we think, but it's not his way. Jesus spends a lot of time teaching us to change ourselves and our way of being toward others. That's the change of heart that's at the core of peace.

The struggle for peace begins within ourselves:

- What if a heart at peace is about loving our neighbour as ourselves (Mark 12:31)? It would mean that the other person, regardless of who she or he is, counts and matters as much as we do. A heart at peace refuses to lump masses of unknown people into the numerous lifeless categories we concoct and make them problems to be dealt with or enemies to be defeated. A heart at peace encounters another as a person, a fellow created in the same image. It looks at another heart and recognises itself.

- What if a heart at peace is about loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27), turning the other cheek, giving our shirt to the one who has taken our coat, and doing to others as we would have them do to us (Luke 6:29-31)? Are we willing to pay the price? Some days my answer is yes and other days, not so much.
- What if a heart at peace means being merciful and not judging (Luke 6:36-37), refusing to throw the first stone [or for that matter any stone] (John 8:7), and taking care of the log in my own eye rather than the speck in the eye of another (Matthew 7:3)?
- What if a heart at peace offers forgiveness not seven times but seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22)? Are we willing to do that?
- What if a heart at peace means feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned (Matthew 26:35-37)? Before we can ever do that, we must first regard the life, needs, and desires of another person as, or even more, important as our own.
- What if a heart at peace means choosing not to become and act like a wolf when we stand in the midst of wolves (Luke 10:3)? It means we must refuse to betray ourselves and refuse to vilify others.

Peace doesn't begin with particular behaviours toward each other but with our whole way of being toward each other. Seeing each other as human beings created in the image and likeness of God; brothers and sisters; family.

This is a matter of the heart; your heart and my heart. If our hearts are at war, it makes no difference how polite or nice we are to each other. Violence lurks just beneath the surface.

Offering the peace of Christ recognises the dignity and value of another person's existence, irrespective of who they are.

When Jesus sent out the seventy, he didn't condition their offers of peace on who the recipients might be, their worthiness, what they'd done, or what their response might be. Neither can we. Some will receive the peace and others won't. Either way, "the kingdom of God has come near" if our hearts are at peace.

The peace of God isn't defined by the absence of conflict. It's a practice to be lived every moment of every day of our lives, a continual setting of our faces toward Jerusalem [Incidentally, Jerusalem means 'city of peace']. That means practising peace with our friends and family. It means practising peace with our enemies. It means practising peace with the stranger, with those who are different to us, and with those who scare us.

As we engage others, we must first be well-grounded in God's peace, the peace that passes all understanding. God's shalom is more than being calm. It's confidence in God's abiding presence so that his creative, regenerative, life-giving and life-affirming presence is shared with others. Remember, it's God's presence that transforms lives and makes them holy.

Practising peace means not treating others as problems to sort out, but as sacred beings to whom we are called to introduce and share God's love. If they reject this peace, Jesus doesn't advise reactivity, scorn or argument. Instead, he reassures his followers that their peace can't be taken away from them: "it will return to you" (Luke 10:6).

When Jesus sent the seventy, they went without a purse, bag, or sandals. They went without carrying personal baggage – feelings, emotions, judgements and so on that would hold them back. They went out with their hearts at peace. The peace of God which surpasses all understanding and brings joy to those who receive it.

As disciples of Jesus, we're called to bring "Peace to this house!"; promoting the gospel by loving our neighbour, and to have confidence that God is with us when he sends us out into the harvest; "The kingdom of God has come near." These two things keep us focused on God's activity in the world, and shield us from heartbreak and despair.

Dear Christians, our chief joy is that God has received and accepted us and that our names are written in heaven. We enjoy fellowship with Jesus and the Father. This is the good news that we have to share! So, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house'", that God may dwell there also. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.