

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on June 21, 2020 (Proper 7A)**

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Hard words for a hard time. Words that don’t sound much like the Jesus we’ve come to know and love and worship. Words that feel incongruous coming from the Prince of Peace. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

This is not the warm and cuddly Jesus we learned about in Sunday School. This is not the domesticated Jesus who never offends or stirs up controversy or, God forbid, talks about politics. This is not the Jesus made in our own image, the one we’ve created to meet our needs.

This is the unvarnished Jesus, the one made in *God’s* image rather than our own. The one who entered the world in human form to fulfill God’s plan of salvation for *all* people; the one empowered to embody God’s hopes and desires for humanity, for God’s creation, for all the children of God.

And so, the Jesus we encounter this morning is the Jesus who confronts us in this very moment. The Jesus who marches in the streets; the Jesus who holds up a Black Lives Matter sign; the Jesus who lives and moves and has his being among the marginalized and the oppressed; the Jesus who cries out with the voiceless and the unheard. This is the Jesus who is beckoning us to bind up the wounds of the brokenhearted; to be repairers of the breach; to lift up those who have been cast down.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” But this sword that Jesus wields is used not as a tool of violence or destruction. The Prince of Peace brandishes a sword of righteousness to slice away the bonds of injustice; to cut out the sin of prejudice and racism; and to prick our own hearts into acting with compassion and love.

In this passage full of hard words, we hear Jesus speaking to his disciples about what it will mean to truly follow him. And it won’t be easy. It’s almost like Jesus is reading the fine print on a medicine bottle. You know, the part where you have to kind of peel away the label. But instead of minimizing the side effects of following him, he’s highlighting them. Loudly proclaiming the worst case scenarios; putting them out there for all the world to see. “Whoever loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me.” For “those who find their life will lose it.”

And at one level, this is a refreshing truth-in-advertising approach to discipleship. To follow Jesus is to invite rejection and suffering and even death. You’ll upset people, you’ll end up with some broken relationships, your family may turn against you. Jesus is just putting it all out there.

And maybe we should start doing that a bit more than we do. So often we want to minimize what it means to be a Christian. Or at least what it means to be a member of a particular community of faith. In more normal times, anyway, we talk about coffee hour and the really nice people in the congregation and the great nursery care and Sunday School activities and the inspiring music. And it’s all true; it’s all valuable; it’s all part of what makes this community so special.

But we don’t always highlight the cost of following Jesus. We don’t lead with the bit about taking up your cross and denying yourself. We don’t put sacrificial giving and dying to self in the welcome packet. But maybe we should. Because unless there is true commitment, genuine transformation will remain elusive. We can’t be faithful Christians while remaining in our comfort zones. That’s just not how this works.

And that is hard. But Christianity is not a religion of the status quo. Oh, it's been that way for a long time in many contexts. But faith cannot be a self-perpetuating institution more concerned with stability and endowments than the very transformation of mind, body, and soul into the mind of Christ. That's what we strive for; that's what we set our hope upon.

The irony is that even as we are called to be peacemakers, conflict is often the result. Why? Because peace so often stands in opposition to the status quo. It is revolutionary to fight for equality in a world built on inequality; it is revolutionary to fight for the dignity of every human being, in a world built on systemic racism; it is revolutionary to fight for economic justice in a world built on the power of wealth and privilege; it is revolutionary to fight for peace in a world built on the premise that might makes right.

These are uncomfortable truths for many of us. But just as Jesus reads the fine print on that bottle of discipleship, we may as well also just put them out there.

Because we are in a moment when we must decide whether the church is more institution or movement. In many ways, this pandemic has served as a powerful reminder that as much as we love our buildings and miss the sacred space where generations of prayers have been lifted up to God, the real work of the church, of the body of Christ that is you and me, is out in the world. I like to say that while the church is God's house, God is not under house arrest. There's no ankle bracelet keeping God confined to the four walls of this place. God is out in the world with you. Sustaining and comforting and strengthening you to share God's love with others.

And in this moment, we are being called, we are being urged, we are being challenged to share that love with communities that have been torn down by racism, communities that have borne the burden of this pandemic in ways that most of us can't even imagine. That's where God is. That's where the work of the church needs to be right now.

Oh, it would be easy for well-resourced white communities like ours to ride out this moment. To exercise caution and tap the brakes. To wait for things to settle down and get back to normal, even a "new normal." But a normal where people of color still know their place. And still allow us to get on with our lives without exacting any real change in our behavior or lifestyle. But we can't do that. Or at least we can't if we are to be fervent and faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Which is why we are creating a task-force at St. John's to examine ways that we can actually make a difference in dismantling racism within the church. Here at St. John's but also as a parish of the Diocese of Massachusetts. To paraphrase my friend Laura Everett of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, if the only churches to emerge from this pandemic are wealthy, white ones, while under-resourced congregations in communities of color go under, we'll all have a lot to answer for.

I'm not sure exactly what this will entail or where God is leading us in this moment. But I do know that if, out of an abundance of caution and self-preservation, we fail to act, boldly and creatively and decisively and financially, to heed the cries of our black brothers and sisters while they are being beaten down both metaphorically and quite literally, we will have failed Jesus. And, I don't know about you, but for me that is simply not an option.

So I invite you, despite the risks, to be a peacemaker in this moment. To walk with the Jesus who inevitably leads leads us into conflict with the ways of the world. To be a peacemaker is to encounter the sometimes violent reactions of the comfortable. To be a peacemaker is to trouble the waters of the status quo. To be a peacemaker is to challenge the way we've always done things.

And when those ways uphold the dominant culture, uphold the powerful, uphold the white privileged class of which I am very much a part, well, look out. Because the sword of righteousness slices through it all. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."