

Reconnecting with Peacemaking
Romans 12.9-21, Psalm 15, Matthew 5.1-12
Pentecost +7A

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I bring you greetings this morning from your sisters and brothers at the First Emanuel Baptist Church. It was an honor to be invited to join them in worship this morning before meeting with you here. Thank you to Pastor Charles Southall, who extended such gracious hospitality to me and welcomed me into that historic pulpit today. He and Judge Sandra Jenkins, also a minister in that church, have invited me into friendship and collaboration in recent months, the remarkable welcome of that congregation was like nothing I have experienced in any church before.

I said to them this morning: We need each other to fulfill the work of the church. We need each other to effect change in this world. We need each other if we are to model for our world what wholeness and healing and love look like. And I thanked them for welcoming me into holy friendships that can change the world for good, in Jesus' name. These gestures of hospitality and welcome are practices of peacemaking, and that's where I'd like for us to dig deep this morning. What does it mean to partner together as the people of God for the work of making peace in the world in the ways God imagines?

Turn back in your pew bibles to the words of the apostle Paul to the church at Rome—words outlining peacemaking, transformational relationships:

Before all things, be sincere in your love for others. As I have prepared and reflected on Paul's words in recent days, I paid attention to how they are categorized in various translations. Rarely do I spend much time on the subtitles inserted to scripture by interpreters, but these words from Romans 12 are designated in the NRSV as "Marks of the True Christian," in the Contemporary English Version as "Rules for Christian Living," and in the New International Version as "Love in Action." The church is a school for living. The church is a training ground for love in action. We are gathering here to prepare for a certain kind of deliberate activity in the world that honors both the great hopes of God and the image of God given to every person at the beginning of all things. I am concerned that we stepped away from that calling, particularly in my tradition over the past century as church work became the work of professionals and church goers became the observers. That set up an entertainment consumer model

that will rapidly die over the next 25 years, and it set up some tremendous problems of the church looking a whole lot like every other organization in the country.

I have become increasingly disquieted in my spirit over the past year as people of Christian faith disagree fiercely over what it means to follow the Jesus Way. Some seem to believe the Jesus Way is one of power and exclusion and dominance while others like me think the Jesus Way is wide and high and deep and abundant reaching those who are low before reaching those who are up high. Some of my colleagues in the U.S. think my loving welcome is too broad and my understanding of God's embrace is too expansive. And I have criticized these brothers and sisters as having forgotten the Rules of True Christian Living as being Love in Action. Particularly among white clergy and white evangelical Christians, I have witnessed a grasping for power and fear of neighbors that does not match the words of scripture, and righteous anger burns within me saying *this is not the love of Christ*. I suppose it's fair to say we're standing at an absolute cross-roads in the life of the Church in the United States. But I believe my dissenting voice is tethered to the voices of the prophets and the commandment of Jesus who spoke in John 15.10-12, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. **11** I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. **12** 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'"

Over the past year, in particular, I've become decidedly fixated on what it means to follow the Jesus Way not just as a preacher and leader and teacher in the Church but as one who feels the call to be a peacemaker in our nation and in our world. And the Way of Christ Jesus is necessarily about the work of peace because the Way of Christ is rooted and established in love. We cannot love our neighbors as ourselves without seeking their welfare and working for their flourishing. That's surely why Jesus said the greatest commandment is, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang everything." As I see it, there is no case to be made for any other kind of being as church, and the actions of people rooted in this Jesus Way established in love must be loving actions.

"Be sincere in your love for others," the apostle Paul writes. "Love each other as brothers and sisters and honor others more than you do yourself. Never give up." There are times over the past year when I have wanted to do just that. Walking this loving Jesus Way, particularly as it compels me to be a peace-maker, sometimes feels nearly impossible in the face of a church in bed with power. And as I have read and re-read the words of Jesus who shows us and tells us what love in action looks like, then I

have started to get myself in some trouble. Or, as Rep. John Lewis calls it, I've started to get myself into some *good* trouble. Because Jesus tells us that love in action looks like feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting those in prison, welcoming the stranger.

We're called to this work because we are called to follow Christ, the prince of peace. What is the peace of Christ but the great *shalom* of God? Making *shalom* is not creating quiet and stillness or removing conflict. Making peace is working for the comprehensive flourishing of all things and all people. And the necessary questions of making peace require we feed our neighbor and then ask, "Why is she hungry?" We give clean water to one who has none (and not just far away in Malawi but right here in the U.S. in Flint, Michigan) then we ask, "Why is the water dirty in the first place?" We visit those in prison and must ask, "Why in this wealthy, developed nation do we have so many people locked up in prisons and for abusive sentences that do not fit the crime?" When we welcome the stranger, we must ask to hear their stories to find out why the strangers (documented or undocumented) have fled home and culture and everything they have known to make a life here in our midst. And then, as if that isn't enough already, we must ask (particularly in my white church tradition) in what ways am I contributing to the hunger and the thirst and the imprisonment and the unwelcome of the stranger who is my brother and who is my sister. In his book *The Rebirthing of God*, John Philip Newell writes, "This [process of asking questions], of course, is the role of the prophet, in both word and action—to raise questions about how we view ourselves and about the assumptions by which we live and act."¹

I can't quite put my finger on when it started or why it was me and not the kid sitting next to me, but at some very early age I determined that the words of Jesus were true. And to be trusted. And to be embodied. Because if God so loved the world that God became embodied in the life and way of Jesus, then my life and my ways must matter, too. So I was a rather serious kid with some big thoughts about life and love and changing the world. I've tried off-and-on for a long time to just go along and stay quiet and fly below the radar, but it doesn't seem to be how God shaped me for this world. And so not only do I want to embody the words and ways of Christ, I can't help but speak out and invite others to join me. And if I'm doing it anything like right, then I'm going to get into some good trouble because that's exactly what Jesus did, too.

So I called my friend George earlier this year (when I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by it all) because I knew he had recent experience speaking truth when it's personally inconvenient..speaking truth for the good of others even with the cost to career and

¹ John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, p. 76

self might be high...speaking truth even if your voice shakes. After the election in November, I said some things that became something of a line in the sand, though I spoke them with the intention of a wide invitation and passionate call to action. Folks hear me as being too political or terribly impolite; talking about things in public that are better left unsaid. Well, my friend George has likely had worse said about him. He and the majority of his congregation made some decisions about welcoming people who aren't welcomed in all churches. And when he and his large, Dallas congregation agreed to fully open their doors and membership and ritual blessings in 2016 to welcome and affirm ALL people, some 250 people walked away from the community. So I called my friend George to talk about pastoring in these times when there is a cost to most every statement we make weighed against the personal and private cost of compromising the essence of one's spirit by remaining silent and, therefore, complicit. And in that conversation he says, "Elizabeth, you have to remember always that Jesus calls us to be peacemakers and not peacekeepers. And peace like that must be waged like war."

In the months since, I have held to those words.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

This is the Jesus Way. This is love in action. This is the calling on each and every one of our lives if we say we are giving ourselves to the path of Christ. And the work of waging peace is often decidedly political because politics is the way we organize ourselves as a people to work together for the common good. We must reconnect with the peacemaking work of Jesus in all churches and communities of faith. And our peacemaking work must cross all of the lines that divide us if we have any hope of doing "on earth as it is in heaven" kind of work.

Maybe it looks something like this. I spent most of my day yesterday preparing for and presiding over the memorial service of Sydney Langford Goldfinch, Jr. I knew Lanny in his later years and learned of his political action from friends and family who proudly told his story. I knew he was arrested in 1960 at McCrory's lunch counter alongside Jerome Smith and Dodie Smith-Simmons, both of whom spoke yesterday of a series of sit-ins organized by the Congress of Racial Equality. They violated the Louisiana Criminal Mischief Statute with their refusal to leave a business when ordered to do so. (Criminal mischief must surely be a way of describing good trouble.) I knew their case

made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court in 1963 where justices ruled in their favor. It was an honor to spend a Saturday afternoon telling stories and celebrating the life of a man who said “no” to the status quo and “yes” to the radical call of love and peace as demonstrated in the life of Jesus. We know the stories of sit-ins from all over the South in the 1960s.

What I had never heard told with the same level of impact before were the stories of the kneel-ins that Lanny and his friends facilitated around town. Black and white Christians walked into white congregations all over town and knelt together in prayer. In church after church, they knelt to pray for the sin of racial segregation and the sin of white supremacy. They knelt to pray for sacred space to welcome them on equal ground as brothers and sisters made in the image of God. They knelt to pray because together because it was a radical act to do so and disrupted the power structures that had been sanctioned by a perversion of scripture. In fact, one prominent, white, Baptist congregation did not honor their act and instead escorted them out for the disruption. They knelt to pray because scripture implores us not to give up. Instead, “Let your hope make you glad. Be patient in time of trouble and never stop praying... Don’t let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good.”

J.P. Newell writes, “Prayer [is] not unrelated to political engagement. Spirituality [is] not separate from peacemaking.” The way of Christ calls us to particular ways of speaking out and moving into the needs and cries of our world. But the way of Christ must first speak out and move into our beings through a cultivated practice of prayer. The times of disquiet and injustice are not behind us, as you well know. The stories may be different and the work may not be quite the same, but the work of waging peace is very much alive. And we need each other in this work. We need each other when we are tempted to give up. We need each other as we pray against the evil that surrounds us. We need each other as we live in the ways of love as Jesus commanded all of his followers. And one of the very first things we must do together before we organize, before we step out in resistance, before we stand against the great injustices of our world, is pray.

You know that Mahatma Gandhi has been called “the modern world’s greatest prophet of nonviolence” as he led “a thirty-year struggle to free India, nonviolently, from British domination. But did you know that, though he was Hindu, “the only picture he had in his room at the Sabarmati Ashram...showed Jesus with an inscription below that read ‘He is our peace.’ Gandhi called Jesus the great ‘Asian prophet,’ a reminder to the West that our central figure of religious belief was not a Westerner at all. As Gandhi used to say, if Christians had actually done what Jesus taught us to do—namely, love our enemy—the world would long ago have been transformed.” It was the Hindu

peacemaker Gandhi who lamented the disfigurement of Christianity “when it went to the West” because “It became the religion of kings” and no longer a radical practice of following Jesus.² He went on to teach that the great soul-force of our lives—the source of “strength to live nonviolently in our lives and world—comes to us in prayer. “As food is necessary for the body, prayer is necessary for the soul,” he wrote. Or as Dr. King put it, “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

We pray not as an end but a beginning. We pray that the words of our prayers will be lived out in through our words and actions. We pray that the peace and love of God might become our own. This way of praying is not calling out to God like a genie in a bottle but drawing ourselves into God’s story, aligning ourselves more fully with the unfolding path of God.

² J.P. Newell, p. 80