

## **Peace**

Mark 10:35-45

October 21, 2012

Some sermons should come with a warning label: "Listen at your own risk!" This would be one of them.

Actually, most of what Jesus said should come with the same warning label: "Listen at your own risk!" Because if we take Jesus seriously, if we don't merely find him fascinating or admirable or compelling, but if we actually try to do what he says, it will not be easy. Jesus himself warned us ...

*The gate to hell is wide and the road that leads to it is easy and there are many who travel it.*

If you want to take the easy route and have lots of company doing it, you know where to go!

*But the gate to life is narrow, Jesus said, and the way that leads to it is hard.*

So, if you do want to take Jesus seriously, be prepared. Listen at your own risk! His way can be lonely and hard. It is not the way everybody else is going. His way is a different way.

Paul makes the same point in his letter to the Galatians when he talks about the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. These are fruits of the Spirit, virtues produced in us by the working of God's Spirit in us. We do not come by these virtues naturally, but they are God's gift to us. There is one way, the easy way, the way of human nature, and there is a different way, God's way, the way of the Spirit. The way of the Spirit is a different way.

Humility is a different way: not having to constantly measure myself against everybody else, but willingly putting myself last, willingly being the servant of all, because I already know I matter to God.

Faithfulness is a different way: going against the flow of whimsical, changeable, unreliable human nature to be willing to make and to keep promises.

Goodness is a different way: not just being generous with those who deserve it or appreciate it or those who can return the favor, not just being generous with those I like, but being generous with all because God is generous with all.

And peace is a different way. Peace is a way, not just a destination, and that already marks a major difference between the way of the Spirit and the way of human nature, because for most of us, peace is a destination. Most of us want peace, most of us long for peace, most of us are looking for peace, but what we are looking for is the way to peace, not the way of peace.

It is natural, it is easy, it is common, for us to look for a way to peace and the peace we are looking for is usually one of two things. Either it is peace of mind, freedom from worry or anxiety or stress; peace is a state of quiet serenity. Or it is security, freedom from threat or conflict or distress; peace is feeling safe, feeling protected, feeling unthreatened.

But notice that in both senses, we conceive of peace primarily in negative terms. Peace is freedom from worry. Peace is the absence of conflict. Peace is freedom from threat.

And, in both cases, peace is primarily a personal experience. Peace is about me, about my state of mind, about my feeling of well-being. Peace is about feeling content and happy, at peace, with myself, by myself.

But the way of peace, the way of the Spirit, is a different way. It is not a state we arrive at, but a virtue we practice. We don't have peace, we do peace.

And this peace is not conceived in negative terms, as the absence of worry or conflict, and not in purely personal terms, as an individual experience. Rather this peace is the presence of something positive, the presence of a real and harmonious relationship between two different people or two different groups of people. Peace is reconciliation.

In Colossians, Paul writes:

*Through the Son God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's blood on the cross and so brought back to himself all things.*

And again in Ephesians:

*Christ himself has brought us peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people. With his own body he broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies.*

Peace is reconciliation: bringing people back together, bringing enemies back together, bringing people and God back together. It is what Christ does, and as followers of Jesus Christ, it is what we do.

But how? What is the way of peace? By the way, this is when you might want to heed my warning! Listen at your own risk!

When we have enemies, when we are threatened, when we are attacked, physically or otherwise, what comes naturally to us? What is the easy thing, the natural thing, to do? The natural thing to do when we are threatened or attacked is to defend ourselves.

Several weeks ago, I asked the members of our Thursday night Bible study class: "When is violence justified?" The first and most common answer will not surprise you. Violence is justified when you are defending yourself. Because the natural thing to do when we are threatened or attacked is to defend ourselves.

Did Jesus defend himself?

When Jesus was falsely accused, unjustly arrested, unfairly condemned, when he was slandered and beaten and led away to be executed, did he defend himself?

Why do you think his disciples were filled with alarm as they started toward Jerusalem? They surely had a good idea of what would happen once they arrived there and a good idea too of how Jesus would respond! They were filled with alarm and those who followed behind were afraid, but Jesus went to Jerusalem anyway. Why? To make peace!

And this is how he made peace: not by building protective walls, but by tearing them down, not by defending himself, but by offering himself. With his own body, Paul says, he broke down the wall that separated Jews from Gentiles. With his own body, he destroyed the enmity that sets people against people and people against God. By his sacrifice, we are reconciled.

His cup of suffering was our cup of salvation. His baptism of death was our baptism of life. Jesus asked James and John: "Can you drink the cup of suffering I must drink? Can you be baptized in the way I must be baptized?" They said: "Yes, we can," and he said: "Yes, you will!"

Jesus' way is a different way. The way of peace is a different way. It is a way that flies in the face of what comes most naturally to us. It is the hard way, the narrow way, the uncommon way ... that leads to life!

A story is told about Telemachus, a Christian monk, who in the early fifth century stepped between two gladiators in a Roman stadium to stop them from fighting each other. The bloodthirsty spectators were so incensed that he was

trying to take away their entertainment that they stoned him to death on the spot. The reigning emperor at the time, Honorius, who was interestingly a Christian, was so impressed by his act and his sacrifice that he issued an order thereafter banning gladiatorial combat. With his own body, he brought peace.

This is what comes naturally: defending, protecting, building strong walls, retreating into safe spaces.

This is Jesus' way, the way of the Spirit: reconciling, sacrificing, taking risks, putting your own self on the line for the sake of peace.

Which way will you choose?