

The Ripe Stuff sermon series
#6 – Peace – Isaiah 2:1-4
Feb. 10, 2019
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There are a lot of things people can get arrested for, but I've always that one of the most peculiar ones was disturbing the peace. Did you know the official name for that charge is "a breach of the peace"? Someone gets a little bit tipsy and starts a kerfuffle – or worse yet, a hubbub – or a music aficionado decides to blast their Celine Dion album a bit too loud on a Saturday night, and before you know it the police are at the door issuing a citation or, if the Celine Dion music is way too loud, making an arrest for "disturbing the peace."

If causing a breach in the peace is truly a crime, we probably all should be arrested, because, at some point in our lives, we've fractured the peace that surrounds us. A harsh word, a judgmental look, a snarky retort, a door slammed a bit too hard out of frustration, and we've disturbed the peace. Are those crimes? Maybe not egregious enough to send us to the pokey, but certainly enough of an infraction to warrant a disapproving look or a sternly worded email.

But here's my question: Can someone really be guilty of disturbing the peace when there is no peace? In our current sermon series, we're looking at the fruit of the Spirit as Paul lists them in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. By living out these fruit, Paul says, we exhibit the Spirit's presence within us and transform the world around us.

Like with most of these words, peace has several different definitions in scripture. One definition is inward-focused, as when Jesus tells us not to worry but to cast our cares on him. Another definition is upward-focused, like when Paul tells us in Philippians to let the peace of God, which surpasses all of our understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Both of those definitions of peace are supremely important and should be something we talk and pray about, but as one preacher said, "Different scripture, different sermon."

What I want to focus on today is peace that is outward-focused, the kind Isaiah promises in our passage today. How do we follow Paul's advice in Romans when he says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"? Really, Paul? Everyone? Why couldn't Paul have said, "Live at peace with people you like," or "Live at peace with people who play their Celine Dion albums at normal volume." But everyone? That may have been feasible in Paul's time, but I'd venture to say it's pretty much impossible today.

Which makes Isaiah's prophecy seem desirable, yet so foreign to us. The prophet describes a world directly opposite of ours, a world that is peaceful because of the fairness and righteousness of the ruler, a world in which all creatures live in harmony. He talks about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and nations not going to war with other nations. That sounds so far-fetched for us that it comes across as naïve, or more like fantasy than reality. Can such a peace ever exist?

I have my doubts, and you probably do, too. One of the reasons is because our culture is saturated with a motif that we see over and over again. Theologian Walter Wink calls it the myth of redemptive violence, which tells us that violence saves, war can bring peace, and might always makes right. It's a myth because it only works half the time. One side always loses. I would guess that about 99% of movies today that feature any kind of conflict perpetuate the idea of redemptive violence the good guys using violence to defeat the bad. I remember in high school watching the Clint Eastwood western "Pale Rider." Eastwood plays a preacher who

defends a small town from land-grabbers, and at the end of the movie the preacher shoots and kills all the bad guys. And I remember thinking, “Preachers can DO that? I want to be a preacher!” The myth of redemptive violence is all around us.

Our culture bombards us with so much violence that we have become numb to its presence. And I’m not just talking about the violence on TV shows or the evening news, although both of these contribute significantly to the problem. Think about how violence is in our everyday language. If we’re being efficient, we are killing two birds with one stone. Someone who wants to ride in the passenger seat doesn’t say, “I get the passenger seat!” She calls, “Shotgun!” We tell actors to “break a leg” and someone who pulls a fast one “gets away with murder.” If we’re trying to do something new, it may be a “shot in the dark” but we’ll “take a stab at it.” If it doesn’t work, I’ll “bite the bullet” and “roll with the punches,” even if it means I’ll “take a beating” or don’t get a “bang for my buck.” These may seem trivial, but their effect is cumulative, and it gives you an idea of how pervasive the concept of violence is in our culture.

So, how do we bridge the gap between where we are and where Isaiah calls us to be? How in the world can we live out the peace to which Paul calls us in a society that teaches us that even superheroes use violence to win and nobody watches reality shows where everybody gets along and is nice to each other? How do we break the cycle of violence in our lives and in our language and in our relationships and in our political system in order to bring transformation to a world that only knows swords and spears?

It starts by remembering that peace is a fundamental part of what it means to be a Christian. Paul says in Romans, “Make every effort to do what leads to peace.” Peter says in his first letter, “Whoever would love life and see good days must pursue peace.” I like these passages because they honor the fact that peace is elusive, that it takes an effort and we must actively go after in order to catch and claim it. If we sit around and grumble at how the world has gone to Hades in a handbasket but we’re not out there actively pursuing something different, then we’re part of the problem.

We worship the Prince of Peace, who calls us to live peaceably with others. But we’ve let the myth of redemptive violence supersede our faith and we’ve moved the pursuit of peace to the background. Here’s a good example. Most major faiths have as part of their lexicon a greeting which bestows peace upon the receiver. The Muslim greeting “Asalamu Alakum” and the Jewish greeting “Shalom” both mean, “Peace be with you.” But we Christians don’t do that. We have “Hello” and “What’s up?” We have the saying “Peace be with you,” but when I encouraged us to use it here a few years ago, people didn’t like it. “I don’t like being told what to say. It’s too Catholic.” Fair enough. But if we’re going to bear the fruit of peace in our lives, the word “peace” needs to be a regular part of our vocabulary, a blessing we bestow upon each other.

We also need to find what Walter Wink calls the “third way.” This the middle ground between fight and flight, between meeting violence with violence or passively standing by while peace is disturbed. Dr. Martin Luther King lived this third way in his non-violent resistance to racism during the Civil Rights Movement. Trish demonstrates this each time she prays for those serving in our armed forces and then prays for a day when they are no longer needed to serve in that capacity. She’s not praying that someone wins and someone loses. She’s praying for a world where nobody loses because nobody needs to win.

This is where it gets tricky. The myth of redemptive violence and the pursuit of peace clash against each other in some really messy ways. The death penalty. Our government’s spending on the military. Gun ownership. I can’t tell you what to believe about these issues, because we each must decide for ourselves. And in this case, the Bible only makes things worse.

After all, David didn't invite Goliath over for a cup of chamomile tea and a heart-to-heart talk. He killed him with a stone to the temple. And our savior didn't die of old age, but in a brutal and bloody fashion at the hands of the Roman armed forces. So, we have to do the hard work of pursuing peace in a world that tells us it's more important to draw lines than live love.

It's hard to pursue peace when we feel fearful and threatened. It's hard to pursue the third way when we'd rather lash out or hide away. But the Bible is clear: "Make every effort to do what leads to peace." And we can do that precisely because Jesus died on the cross. He has shown us what God's peace looks like, a non-violent resistance to the domination systems in our world. He didn't fight back, but he also didn't lie down. He called out those who perpetrated the violence, and in their shame, it was easier for them to silence him than look in the mirror. He responded to their hate, not with more hate, but with love.

So, it's our turn. It's our turn to combat evil without becoming evil. It's our turn to stand up against violence without becoming violent. When the next school shooting happens – and we know it's going to happen – let's not only offer our thoughts and prayers, let's offer our voices let's offer our compassion, let's offer the sacrificial love we have received from Jesus Christ to stop this cycle of violence. Let's follow Jesus' example of being less concerned about power and more concerned about peace. Wouldn't it be great if we could get arrested for disturbing the violence?

Like I said, I know this is a difficult fruit to live out and you may not agree with everything I've said. That's cool. So, let me close by letting someone else take the bullet for me – ah, there's another one of those phrases! A wise man once said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." That's radical, isn't it? So radical that we nailed him to a cross rather than give up our swords and spears. Jesus didn't have much to say about protecting our individual freedoms, but he had a lot to say about feeding the poor and taking care of the vulnerable. So, let's commit to figuring out what that looks like in our lives, remembering that "whoever would love life and see good days must seek peace and pursue it." And, as you do so, may the peace of Christ be with you.