

June 27, 2010
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 10:1-11

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Peace by Piece

During Advent last year when Charlie and I first started attending worship services here, I was struck by the emphasis on peace throughout the service. In the ensuing six months, I have wondered what this means. At a recent cabinet meeting someone said in an offhand manner, “Well, we’re known as a peace church.” I have felt myself prodded again to think more about peace in the past week.

It’s a nice word but it suffers terribly from overuse. Say any word enough and it loses its meaning; I fear “peace” might be so threatened. Peace is a nice concept and I think we’re apt to use the word to ensure its presence. If we think calming thoughts, do we feel peaceful? Is peace just the absence of conflict? What does it mean to be a peace church? Surely it is more than praying for peace every Sunday. I certainly don’t want to discourage this, but I need a more tangible grip on peace, or, perhaps, peace needs a firmer grip on me.

Then along comes this passage from Luke’s gospel where Jesus commissions the 70 to go out into the world with a clear set of instructions, the first of which is to say, “Peace to this house” whenever they enter a dwelling. But he doesn’t stop at that; he tells them exactly what to do and what not to do. That’s what I need, a kind of how-to-peace manual because if there is one thing I know about peace, it’s that wishing does not make it so. In no way do I mean to suggest that praying for peace is useless—no prayer is ever useless, ever—but I tend toward the practical and want to know how to do, to make, to live peace.

With allowance for historical and cultural reality checks, let’s look at Jesus’ instructions. It behooves us when reading the Bible to remember the world to which its authors spoke. There are those who hold that the scriptures are to be taken literally and some have used this approach to both inform their own lives and condemn those of

others. For instance, were I to read Leviticus literally, I should not be allowed to preach because I wear glasses and this dress is woven from different cloths and, gracious, first and foremost, I'm a woman.

So when Jesus says to take no bag, no sandals, I think what he's suggesting is that we travel light in this world. Too many belongings can weigh us down and hamper our progress. Those who fly frequently know this well; if your suitcase is too big, you will have to check it, pay for it and then pray that it actually ends up with you at your destination. I suspect that many of us here wish we had fewer things to care for and keep track of and, increasingly, misplace.

Several years ago when Charlie and I were visiting a school in Kenya with which we have an affiliation, my backpack, my only luggage, arrived 10 days late, right before we were to come home. I never even unpacked it. I wore the same clothes every day and at siesta time, I washed them, hung them out to dry in the hot savannah sun and put them on again for the afternoon and evening. It was so liberating, but the best part was that it wasn't my fault that I looked markedly less than chic; I was a victim of circumstance. If we are intent on lessening our load, we don't need an airline to blame, we have Jesus. It's the kind of responsibility he'd love to claim.

The next thing Jesus says is to "remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide." Though a seemingly minor injunction, it is consequential and runs, I think, against our current practices. It has become standard practice, when having people over to dinner, that we ask in advance if they have any food allergies/loathings/preferences. It is a considerate thing to do but one that can prove challenging. Several years ago we had two couples to dinner; one was vegan but ate soy, the other was vegan and ate no soy. Less accustomed to such restrictions than I am now, by the time the guests arrived and I had prepared several main courses and countless sides to accommodate their tastes, I was choking down acrid spittle resentment for our treasured friends.

By telling the 70 to eat what is put before them, Jesus is basically saying once again, "Don't lose your focus on what is important. Don't create barriers and impede

relationships when the goal is peace and the spreading of the gospel.” There’s also an underlying suggestion that gratitude and appreciation are ways of being in the world that are essential.

His next direction is to stay a while wherever they go. This seems strange at first because we might assume that he’d want them to visit as many houses as possible. Again, the focus is on grace and relationships. Be with your hosts in a calm and loving way; don’t convey the sense that you have some place else to go that might be more important. This is an early-day plug for mindfulness and being in the present.

Mindfulness is hot these days. You can attend any number of retreats and workshops that will teach you how to shut off your planning mode, your tendency to look at what’s coming instead of what is at hand. A symptom of this is our inclination to say, “When this or that is over, then, I will relax or calm down or things will get better. Dear God, let me just get past the next hurdle.” I think Jesus is saying that no matter how uncomfortable you are with someone, no matter how distasteful the offering before you, be gracious and fully present to what is at hand, even if you find yourself in a thorn bush attacked by bees.

What these apparently simple suggestions have in common is that they establish relationship, affirm connection and bind us together. Isn’t this a crucial part of the path to peace?

I’ve been thinking of a plumb line and how gently and quietly it lines up straight, plumb, on the axis. This is one of the images of peace that I carry, that when we feel aligned with what grounds us in our lives, with our feet steadily planted on the earth and at the same time with our souls, spirits and hearts straight with God, we quiver not, but rest in peace as a non-anxious presence. And no matter what storms assail us, we can feel the pull to center, the grounding feeling of a life square with God. Peace then is not the absence of conflict but calm in the midst of the storm. If ever you have been in crisis, you know what a balm it is when someone comes to you and is calm and non-anxious and simply is, quietly, peacefully with you. Our commitment to being together, supporting

one another in times of trial and struggle is a measure of our dedication to peace, whether we are individuals, churches or nations.

This past week with my peace glasses on, a couple of encounters have jumped out at me that have helped me understand the nature, work and gift of peace.

The first concerned a young woman with two small children who is in the midst of separating from her husband. The separation has been going on and off, the way they often do, for almost 2 years. Her husband suffers from addiction and the road they have traveled together has been rocky and sometimes ugly. Exasperated, weeping out of frustration and the lost hope of what might have been, she clutched the hands of her twin three year-old girls and said, "I just wish he could find some peace."

And in a flash it was so clear to me that we don't find peace; we don't overturn a rock or open a closet door and discover it. We make peace by living gracefully, appreciatively, respectfully, lovingly, and calmly. As with the familiar phrase, "Think globally, act locally," so too with peace. If we want peace in the world, we must start with peace in our own hearts and actions, small though they may be. Peace is made piece by piece just as Jesus was suggesting to those whom he sent out into the world.

The second thing that happened this week is pretty personal and I beg your indulgence for its interjection. My mother-in-law, Charlie's mom, died on Wednesday night in Northfield at Charlie's sister's house. She was a remarkable person, strong, determined, inspiring and eternally optimistic. She lived in Massachusetts on a horse farm and essentially invented the idea of using horses as therapeutic tools, thus establishing riding for the disabled more than 60 years ago. She was a paralympic judge, a teacher and mentor for many, many students both abled and disabled. Last March, at the age of 85, she was bucked off her horse when a snappy dog nipped at her horse's heels. She fractured numerous bones, including her pelvis and many ribs. When the various scans came back, they revealed that aside from her immediate injuries, the breast cancer that had been in remission for 15 years had returned and was rampant throughout her body. Pretty much everyone thought she had only a few months to live. That was more than 16 months ago. She was so in love with life that she refused to acknowledge that

there was anything wrong with her; her denial was exasperating at times, especially when she would remark that she wasn't as fit as she used to be and needed to get moving, or when she wondered why she felt tired. Through the long course of her dying, particularly in the last three months, no one dared mention to her what was really happening. She clearly did not want to think that her time was up. Just last week she talked of taking a family vacation next year with all her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. This as she lay in a hospital bed, all 80 pounds of her, in my sister-in-law's living room with full hospice care around. I suspect that she didn't want to die because she loved so many people and didn't want to leave them but also because she was apprehensive about what lay ahead.

In her final days, until the last few minutes of her life, she struggled to breath. But as she relaxed and was assured by her children that they would be all right, she drifted off and at the exact moment that she died, her face broke into a wide and radiant smile.

For all the working for peace we can do, for all the living consciously, carefully and intentionally, for all the grace we may try to express, peace ultimately is pure gift. We don't find peace, peace finds us, God finds us. This is not only true in our dying but in our living as well. So perhaps peace is fostered, nurtured, engendered every time we feel ourselves open to God. The key is also to recognize that God is present in the lives of every person in the world, and, I would hold, in every creature, leaf and stream. And God doesn't find us now and then; God has found us once and for all and set a plumb line to us through Christ.

In gratitude may we live peacefully, make peace, work for peace and share the peace of Christ in some way every day. May we strive to bring to the faces of those we encounter a radiant smile of recognition and joy.

Amen.