

PEACE BEGINS AT HOME

Psalm 146
Mark 10:2-16, NT p. 46
Peacemaking and World Communion Sunday

October 4, 2009
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Jesus came to church last Sunday. That wasn't his name, of course, but he was here. He came in late, and he was welcomed. But he had some problems that we had some problems dealing with. In the coming weeks, we're going to try to learn what Jesus tried to teach us last Sunday, and together we will plan how to do better, and how to love with the love of Christ.

Jesus came because we live in a broken world. We live in a broken nation, in broken communities. The poor and hungry and homeless and desperate among us are mostly invisible. We don't see them or their problems, which means we are part of the problem, for whenever we ignore those in need, we make that need worse. That is true on a local level and also in the larger world. We are intertwined in systems that are unjust. We have invested in companies that lobby for their own bottom line, regardless of the consequences. Our actions encourage environmental destruction, mostly in poor neighborhoods and poor countries. Our choices can make life more desperate for people we'll never meet, as well as for those who live in our own homes. We live in a broken world. We are separated from one another, from our own good intentions, from God.

It's not that we don't know better – we do. We are the beneficiaries of a long line of justice-seekers and peace makers who heard the call for justice and announced the word of the Lord. Abraham, Moses, the judges and the prophets called Israel's leaders to account for their actions. The hymn-writers brought the call for justice into worship. Psalm 146 is one

example. The God of Israel, Lord of all the earth, keeps faith forever. The Lord gives justice, and the Psalm proceeds to describe what justice looks like. When we hear the word “justice,” we tend to think of someone being convicted of crime of which they were certainly guilty and for which they deserve to be punished. The word is much broader than that. “Justice” means what is right. In the world of the Bible, justice means that the limited food supply is distributed evenly. Workers are paid reasonable wages in a reasonable time. Land belongs to families, not to whoever can pay the most for it. (In the time of Jesus, three families owned half the farmland in Galilee.) Justice means that people who owe money are not thrown in prison. Strangers and widows and orphans – and there were many – would be cared for. That is the positive side of justice. The word of the Lord says that every person deserves to be treated justly, because every person is valuable in the sight of God. Justice is achieved when all people in the community have what is necessary for life. That is called *shalom* – peace.

If you look at the Psalm as it’s printed in the bulletin, you’ll see that “the Lord loves the righteous” occurs in the middle of the list of what God does. In those days, it was the people of God who tried to live rightly who suffered and were taken advantage of. They were the ones who needed food and rescue from prison and healing. It wasn’t some moral judgment that the well-to-do got to make, but a statement of God’s intentions for all the people of Israel.

“The Lord keeps faith forever” the Psalmist sang, but we are not faithful. Throughout the history of the world, both Biblical and beyond, the strong have taken advantage of the vulnerable. The rich have exploited the labor of the poor. The literate have cheated the vast majority who could neither read nor count. Those who think only of today have damaged

parts of God's earth nearly beyond repair, in the backyards of those whose voices were drowned out by the roar of progress. The world has never been as God intended. We live in a broken world.

Jesus came into our broken world. In him, God became part of our world in a very real way, to heal and restore. We think we have health care problems – well, in the first century, matters were horrible. Here are some statistics I learned on study leave a couple of weeks ago. These are from the population of cities in the Roman Empire. Rural life spans were slightly better, probably because of a little better nutrition and closer family ties. In their first year of life, about 30% of babies died. Of the remaining 70%, about one-third died by age 6. By age 16, 60% had died. By age 25, 75% had died. I'll repeat that one. Three-fourths of the population did not live past 25! Childbirth, accidents, disease and infections were all more dangerous because of poor nutrition. Even if Jesus was only in his thirties, he would have been considered an elder, and his mother was truly long-lived, because 90% of the people did not live past 45. Only about 3% lived to age 60. The tomb of the high priest Caiaphas has been discovered. This was an elite family in Jerusalem. Of the 64 people buried there, 40 had died by age 12. That's almost two-thirds. Life was tentative, at best.

We heard the story of Jesus welcoming children. When people, probably the women, brought their little children to Jesus to be blessed, those babies were not the round, rosy-cheeked toddlers we see in Bible story book pictures. Many were probably sick already, and all were in danger of early death. The disciples had the traditional attitude about babies in that culture – they weren't worth taking time for. But these desperate women loved their children. The touch of Jesus meant the possibility of life. He took them in his arms and

blessed them.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, he pointed them to God's best intention for families, which means protection for the most vulnerable. A woman newly arriving in a city had about a six-month life expectancy if she came alone. Divorce meant an earlier death, probably for both the woman and her daughters. What is God's plan for the family?

Responsibility to one another, protection for children, and strong community support. Family issues are matters of justice and peace.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness month. I plan to participate in the Women's Resource Center's vigil, which is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, October 27, at 5 pm at the county courthouse. (That's a change from the date the local papers will print this week.) I hope some of you will be at that domestic violence awareness vigil as well.

I like the word "awareness." Justice and peacemaking begin with awareness. The next time you're in a grocery store, be aware of the people around you. Notice someone who seems far removed from your life experience – that young person with piercings and tattoos; a man whose hard life shows on his face; a woman who seems afraid of her shadow; a child who is whining for attention from an exhausted mom; the well-dressed businessman whose worries are buried deep within. These are real people, each with their own hopes and struggles. These are the people of our community, and yet we are separated from one another. We might not intend to be disrespectful, but sometimes we are. We have a hard time seeing things from another's point of view. We are part of a broken world.

I'm glad that Peacemaking Sunday comes around every year, because we need to be reminded of two things – first, that we are not at peace, and second, that God is our peace. By

God's grace, Jesus Christ welcomes us to this table. We do not come because we are worthy, because we have it all together and are at peace with everyone. If we think that's the case, we're fooling ourselves. We come, not because we are worthy, but because Jesus invites us, as he invited the outcasts and sinners of his day. The Lord's Supper provides a time and place for us to examine our own hearts, to discover what we have done and what we have failed to do. This is a place to repent and to receive God's forgiveness and grace. At this table we know once more that we are included in God's family, and here we recommit ourselves to the way of Christ. In this broken world, Christ is our peace. May we join in his work of peacemaking.

Let us pray. Lord, as we live in the peace you give to us, make us instruments of your peace in the world. Amen.