
Is peace peaceful?
Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 8:27-38

So - if we turned today's gospel reading into a play, would anyone here want to play Peter? Just picture the scene. Jesus is surrounded by his disciples - who are not only his friends, but are also the group that has been following Jesus around and presumably knows Jesus as well as anyone. Imagine being a part of that group. Imagine hearing those same questions.

The first question is pretty easy - Jesus asks, "who do *other people* say that I am?" That's simple enough - the disciples would have interacted with the local people as they traveled around and they would have heard what the local people had to say. The answer requires only that the disciples report what they have heard in their travels.

The second question is a lot harder - Jesus asks, "but who do *you* say that I am?" Wow. That does not just require listening to people - it requires thought, insight. It requires risk. And Peter takes the risk of declaring that he believes that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. And Jesus seems to accept that label. But then, Jesus describes that that label means to him, and it means a life of service, suffering, rejection, and even death.

And that's where the fur starts to fly - because Peter starts to correct Jesus and at that point, Jesus essentially calls Peter the devil. What is going on here? Early on in our story Peter says that Jesus is the messiah and 4 verses later, Jesus calls Peter the devil.

In the translation I used - Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan". Does that phrase sound familiar to you? That same phrase is used near the very beginning of the gospels, when Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil 3 times. And after resisting temptation 3 times, Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan".

So perhaps Jesus said those same words to Peter because Peter was tempting Jesus, and perhaps Jesus really felt the temptation. And Jesus had to resist. And what was that temptation? What image of messiah was Peter offering that Jesus reacted so strongly to? If Jesus was a saviour, what sort of saviour was he, and what sort of saviour was he tempted to be?

I would like to quote from one of the non-canonical gospels. Non-canonical gospels are stories about Jesus that didn't make it into the Bible for various reasons. This particular gospel missed being included in the Canon by almost 1600 years. This is the Gospel according to Tim Rice, sometimes known as the Rock Opera "Jesus Christ Superstar". This reading is from the scene where a group of people are dancing and singing praises to Jesus, and Simon proposes a "better" strategy to Jesus. This scene combines a common view of the Jewish messiah found in the Old Testament with a New Testament understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth was - with some really cool dance moves and a driving rock beat. I won't sing or dance it - but here's the text: First, the crowds are singing:

- Christ you know I love you. Did you see, I waved. I believe in you and God so tell me that I'm saved.
- Jesus, I am with you. Touch me, touch me, Jesus. Jesus I am on your side. Kiss me, kiss me, Jesus.

Then, Simon starts explaining his plan to Jesus. Simon starts with an observation and then gives his advice to Jesus on how Jesus' ministry should proceed:

- Christ, what more do you need to convince you that you've made it and are easily as strong as the filth from Rome who rape our country and who've terrorized our people for so long.
- There must be over 50,000, screaming love and more for you. And every one of 50,000, would do whatever you asked them to.
- Keep them yelling their devotion, but add a touch of hate at Rome. You will rise to greater power, we will win ourselves a home. You'll get the power and the glory, forever and ever and ever.

Then, the music and the dancing stops, and Jesus responds with this:

- Neither you Simon, nor the 50,000, nor the Romans, nor the Jews nor Judas, nor the twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes nor doomed Jerusalem itself.
- Understand what power is. Understand what glory is. Understand at all.
- If you knew, all that I knew, my poor Jerusalem you'd see the truth, but you close your eyes.
- While you live, your troubles are many, poor Jerusalem.
- To conquer death you only have to die. You only have to die.

Simon's reaction is to simply stare blankly at Jesus. He was probably still a fan, but he was very confused.

At the time of Jesus, many people, including Jewish people, were living under Roman rule. It is only natural that those people should want to live under their own rule. It is only natural to think that the way to achieve that freedom is through military means - through force and through victory. Simon is making the very rational, logical suggestion that Jesus had enough followers to attempt a military overthrow of the Roman forces occupying Palestine at the time. The missing ingredient - according to Simon - was for Jesus to inject some hatred of Rome into his teachings - to get Jesus's fans all fired up for a military conflict with Rome. Preaching love was not going to bring the changes that Simon wanted to see.

Simon was logical. He was rational. But he did not understand that hate and love are different messages. And in the gospel according to Tim Rice, Jesus tells Simon bluntly that he has missed the point.

If Simon thinks that more hate is the answer then I suspect he has the wrong question. I think the confusion is actually caused by the word - "peace". Who here thinks that peace is a good thing? Many groups - including the Romans - desired peace. But most groups - including the Romans - have tried to secure that peace using force. That force is often military force, but it can also be economic, ideological, or religious force. But the gospels - all of them, not just the gospel of Tim Rice - tell us that Jesus' vision of peace involves peace that is created through love and justice, service and sacrifice, not through force.

Many people expected The Messiah to come as a military messiah. Many people believe that Christ will return to bring justice to the earth using force. Others believe and hope for a messiah of justice who comes in love, not force. And yet, given how popular Jesus was, it is entirely possible that Jesus *was in fact tempted* by the image of the military messiah. That would at least explain why Jesus has such a strong reaction to Peter in our reading. My reading of the gospels tells me that Jesus rejected that temptation, and instead embraced the model of peace through justice and love.

Later this week, on September 21, we will celebrate the "International Day of Peace". This day was established in 1981 by a U.N. Resolution. Discussion leading up to the resolution said, "Peace Day should be devoted to commemorating and strengthening the ideals of peace

both within and among all nations and people ... This day will serve as a reminder to all peoples that our organization, with all its limitations, is a living instrument in the service of peace and should serve all of us here within the organization as a constantly pealing bell reminding us that our permanent commitment, above all interests or differences of any kind, is to peace.”¹

It's almost as if someone at the U.N. had been reading the gospels!

There is a famous quote - attributed to many people, that says that “peace is more than the absence of war”. But I believe that peace must always include *at least* the absence of war, and that only then, can other elements of peace - like justice – grow.

The Dalai Lama commented on the subject of peace this week too. On Monday he updated his facebook status to read, “All the world's major religions, with their emphasis on love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness can and do promote inner values. But the reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. This is why I am increasingly convinced that the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics beyond religion altogether.”²

Powerful words. Challenging words. Perhaps true words.

And what would that look like here? What would it look like to embrace love, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness, and to embrace our own faith - while at the same time imagining that religion - by itself - is not adequate for the task of creating world peace?

I close with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. “Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal”.

This week, let us live peace. *Amen.*

1 <http://www.internationaldayofpeace.org/>

2 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/yourcommunity/2012/09/dalai-lama-tells-facebook-fans-religion-is-no-longer-adequate.html>