
Peace be with/in/through you
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
September 27, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37

I remember being a bright young student at the University of Saskatchewan in the 1980s. I was studying physics, but I participated in a lot of student activities too. I remember being part of a group called the SCM - the Student Christian Movement.

[slide: SCM]

The SCM put on programs around social justice issues from a Christian perspective. I was always active in the church of course, but that was a place to eat, sing and meet girls. And yes, Marjorie and I met in a choir at a church in Saskatoon. But the SCM challenged me to look beyond the church doors to the much wider world of social justice.

The SCM provided my first window into understanding how the world works. Or to be more accurate - how the world does not really work for majority of human beings on the planet. Through the SCM I learned a great deal about the economy, politics, indigenous issues, global hunger, the environment, greed, wealth, and racism. Most of those issues were quite well understood in the 80's, and had solutions that were practical and doable.

I remember thinking I'm glad I learned about these problems before they were all solved! It was obvious to me that the world would solve those important social issues in less than 10 years. I mean - think about it. The social justice issues were important. They were unjust. We knew how to solve them. We had the resources to solve them. Obviously, the problems will soon be resolved, right? I was actually worried that by the 1990's, churches would have nothing left to work on. The social gospel would fail because there would not be any social problems left.

I'm perhaps just a bit more wise now. And now, 35+ years later, I think I understand what was wrong with my assumptions in the 1980's. Firstly, I had obviously overestimated the speed at which societies evolves. Secondly, I had assumed that social change would always mean social progress. But more importantly, I had assumed that

people want to live in peace. Nobody will live in peace until we all live in justice. That's obvious. But I assumed that everyone - except for a small number of power mongers - wanted to live in peace. But I'm no longer sure that's true.

Consider this: Can anyone here name a story in the Bible that describes people living in peace? I can't think of any. We have stories where someone says how great it will be to live in peace later. And later usually means after we go kill some other people. But I can't think of a story in the Bible of people just living peaceful lives. Why is that?

Consider this: Think of what you see when you visit a museum. Artifacts in museums are rarely items that were used by normal people living normal lives. Artifacts are either military hardware, or royal jewels, or expensive items. Museums do a good job presenting the lifestyles of the rich and famous. They represent military combat - which was the main hobby of the rich and famous. But museums generally do not depict the peaceful lives of normal people. There are perhaps 2 reasons for that.

One reason is that rich people had items made of metal and jewels that survive over the centuries. Normal people usually owned items made from wood and cloth, items that simply don't last very long. That is true but I think that's only part of the story.

I think there is a larger truth behind why we don't have stories of normal people living in peace in the Bible or in museums. The much simpler truth is that those stories would be extremely boring! Living a normal, peaceful life might be wonderful, but reading about someone else doing it is worse than watching grass grow.

I was reminded of that by a CBC article from Hamilton this week. The title was, "Amid questions and confusion, these families impressed by educators' back-to-school efforts"¹. The article discussed triumphs and struggles of families getting back to school. The families were, on the whole, impressed by the educators. I couldn't even read the whole article. It was so boring. It's much more exciting to read an article that criticizes the government, or the teachers, or the World Health Organization. An article that drives COVID fear into my own heart would at least be stimulating. An article that described normal people going with the flow is not a page-turner.

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/amid-questions-and-confusion-these-families-impressed-by-educators-back-to-school-efforts-1.5727843>

Living a peaceful would be fine if it wasn't so boring! And from all this, I have decided that on balance, people do not want to live in peace. Or perhaps they want to live in peace - but only on their terms. Which means they do not want to live in peace.

I want to consider our words from the gospel of Mark this morning. And I want to start with a question. Do you ever wonder - as I do from time to time - whether it's possible to really be a Christian? I'm not quibbling about the underlying basis for baptism and membership in global Christian community. I'm talking about Jesus's statement we read today that those who want to be first need to be last. Is that a requirement of a Christian life? Really? Is the "bar" of Christian discipleship perhaps higher than any of us care to achieve?

Let's do a test right now. And since you are at home, you can be honest with yourself. Who here wants to be last. Hands up all of us who want to be last. See? Even if you did just put your hand up, you've just failed because you are bragging about being last, which means you still want to be first! In the world that I know, the only time that anyone wants to be last is when they want to have the last word in an argument. That's why the words of Jesus are so startling ... that's why the words are so powerful.

And so far, I've been gentle anyway. The requirement - according to Jesus - is not just to be last, but rather, to support and help "the least". To take seriously that the best expression of faith requires caring for the least in our community. The powerless, the vulnerable, people with fractured lives. If by "community" we mean Brantford, then "the least" are perhaps unemployed or disadvantaged people. Maybe we can handle that. And I'd love to discuss how to do that better here and now. But if "community" means the global community, then "the least" includes all kinds of people. It includes refugees. Particularly refugees without money, or papers, no other forms of support.

Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany has taken a lot of heat over the past few years for proposing that Germany should absorb 800,000 refugees. That's equivalent to 1% of the German population. Merkel's opponents have been pushing back saying that would alter the German culture significantly. And around the world, people (or at least the media) are saying that absorbing refugees would have an impact on national identity and culture. North Americans are particularly concerned about non-Christian refugees, Or

- let's be honest - with Muslim refugees.

I believe our continuing refugee crisis raises a huge dilemma for Christians. Because if we agree with Jesus that we should support “the least”, what exactly are we to do? Some say that if Canada absorbs too many non-Christians we will lose our identity. Some people say we will lose our Christian identity. But I say that if we do not absorb enough refugees - many more than what will be comfortable - then we are throwing our Christian values away ourselves. We must support “the least” or we need to stop saying that we are Christian.

[slide: colbert]

Humorist Stephen Colbert summarized this well saying, “If [America] is going to be a Christian nation that doesn’t help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we’ve got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don’t want to do it.”²

Another way to look at the refugee crisis is to realize that many refugees are products of war and conflict. The independent media is full of examples of how consumer-focused, power-based regimes like our own contribute to global conflict. Perhaps we should stop creating so many refugees in the first place by doing what it takes to end all war and create peace. Sept 21 was the United Nations International Day of Peace, which is why we are talking about world peace today.

[slide: UN world peace]

What do we think of world peace anyway? Some of us think that world peace is just a dream. Paul Chappel³, a graduate of West Point and military veteran says that If human beings are naturally violent, then war is inevitable, and the idea of world peace is a joke. But if human beings are not naturally violent, then world peace is possible. For him, the important question today is, “are human beings naturally violent”. And perhaps in 2020, the assumed answer is yes.

² “Quote by Stephen Colbert: ‘if this is going to be a Christian nation that ...’” <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/327220-if-this-is-going-to-be-a-christian-nation-that>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpGTMjYGUcI>

But consider this: 300 years ago, women could not vote in any country. Over the past 300 years, and mainly in very recent history, in most countries now, women can vote. The main reason why women could not vote was the belief that women were intellectually inferior. Science and common sense have both proven that women are not inferior, that was just a myth that society accepted with absolutely no proof. But 300 years ago, it was a working assumption. Now, women's rights are still restricted and we do not have equality yet. But the myth of women being inferior (which never had any basis anyway) is no longer assumed. Society has and is moving forward.

Today, in 2020, it may be a working assumption that human beings are violent. But perhaps in our future, people will look back and wonder how we could have been so stupid to believe such an idiotic myth without any proof. The myth already seems wrong to many of us. Children naturally get along with each other regardless of colour, culture, religion, when they are young. Children get along with each other right up to the time when adults start telling them to hate each other.

[slide: world peace]

And what is peace? Some people think peace is simply the absence of war. But I think that peace is the environment in which there will be no desire for war. Nobel peace laureate Jody Williams said, "Peace is not singing Kum Bah Yah. Peace is sustainable peace with justice and equality, in which the majority of people on this planet have enough resources to lead dignified lives. Where people have access to education and health care so they can live in freedom from want and fear. This is called human security."

And yet, we rarely talk about human security. We usually talk about national security. National security means spending money on military infrastructure because of another myth. The myth that war makes us safe. Our leaders choose whether to spend on human security or on national security, and they seem to always favour national security. The cruel irony is that spending on human security reduces the need for national security in the first place. As one example, in 2015 the estimated cost to solve world hunger was \$30 billion. Too expensive, right? But that year, the US had no problem spending \$737 billion on its military. These estimates are likely not accurate, but there is no doubt that

we spend FAR more on “national security” than we spend on “human security”. Or to put it in the terms that Jesus used, we spend FAR more making sure we are first, and much much less on “the least”.

[slide: peace]

We cannot create world peace in one day. But even in one day - perhaps even this day - we can start or continue to build peace. Let’s start right here in our own community. Peace be with you. Peace be in you. Peace be through you. Peace is for you - to give and to receive.

I would like to close with a poem - or perhaps it’s a meditation - entitled “Easter is Breaking” by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

EASTER IS BREAKING

Somewhere across the world, Easter is breaking. Not the Easter we may think of, with arms upraised and “he is risen” echoing from canyons. But a much quieter, less dramatic Easter.

Somewhere in the world - perhaps not this day, but some day soon, a woman and a man rise from their beds, shake the sleep from their eyes, and find their children already awake and preparing for their morning prayers. There has been no gunfire, no drug wars, no yelling or shouting or screaming, only the quiet of the night and the peace of silence around them.

And somewhere in the world, perhaps not this morning, but soon, very soon, a soldier is packing her duffle bag, has emptied out all her bullets, is changing into civilian clothes, and is coming home. For peace has long been established, and there is no need for her presence.

And somewhere in the world, Easter dawn breaks over the earth, not only on this day, but every day, and the familiar pulse in our veins throbs of “peace, peace, peace.”

Amen.