



“Waiting in Peace”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Micah 5: 2-5a; Matthew 5: 1-11

December 20, 2020

So, this sermon began with that image of the shepherds in the field. Going about their business, they are suddenly overcome by this heavenly choir announcing the birth of the Christ-child. It's the moment of the shepherds, in that classic language, being 'greatly afraid,' as though this was some majestic basking in the glow of the angelic chorus. They weren't greatly afraid, they were terrified! This scared the 'bejesus' out of them. But, it's directly in the face of that momentary terror that choir proclaims, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." That's where this started – with the angelic proclamation of peace, and the particular blessing that we know in God's peace, especially in those times of heightened waiting in our lives.

The problem was, that wasn't working for me. Much of our focus over this 'waiting' theme of Advent has been on that of the blessings and gifts we receive, from God, amidst our waiting. It's been about the joy that is ours...the love that is ours...the hope that is ours as we wait. And that's where I was going with peace. I was thinking about John 14 and Jesus' words of, "My peace I give to you," and I was considering the familiar but important reminders of being held in the peace of God even in the middle of our moments of angst or strife. But, at this moment of our lives...and this moment of societal strife and discord pelting us from so many directions...I simply wasn't ok leaving it there. And then, last Sunday, I drove to Alexian Village.

Now, last Sunday, I threw Sharon under the bus as I joked about her snooping for presents over the years. Today, I throw myself under the bus, as I remind us all that, just like everyone watching and hearing today, I have my moments too! I was west-bound on Brown Deer Rd, headed to preach at the 2pm chapel service at Alexian. All of a sudden, I found myself nearly bumper to bumper with the car in front of me. They had suddenly hit their brakes and slowed down by a good 15mph. A second later they sped up...then the slowed again...then they started to fade from one lane into the next...you all get the picture. So, I changed lanes, began to work my way around the car just to be clear of the situation and, sure enough, there was the 20-something driver doing this... (*actively texting on her cell phone while driving*). I immediately proceeded to lay into my horn. I gave her that side-eye dad-glare that my children love to mimic, and as I pulled off onto 76th to head towards Alexian, she shared a visible response of her own that I won't replicate.

Not my best moment, by far. Yes, what she was doing was dangerous and irresponsible, but my engagement in that manner was one of frustration and anger – not one of helpfulness, and most certainly not one of peace. And, it was in that moment, as I merged onto northbound 76th street last Sunday, that this sermon on waiting in peace became clear.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus says, “for they will be called children of God.” There’s a subtle shift that takes place in the Beatitudes that I think we sometimes overlook. The first half of the Beatitudes follows much along the lines of the manner in which we have approached the first three weeks of our Advent theme. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” These are promises of the manner in which God’s love will be manifest in our lives. These are blessings that we know – gifts that we receive – in and of God. Waiting in hope...in love...in joy...it’s that same underlying theme – blessings that we know in and of God as we wait.

As the Beatitudes proceed in verse 7, however, there is a clear and unmistakable shift in the focus of Jesus’ words. “7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” I think it is worthy of our attention to note that when Jesus gets to the concept of peace in the Beatitudes, his focus is no longer on the blessings that rain down from God, his focus is on the acts and purposes of the people of God. After those profound and uplifting promises of God’s care and concern in the lives of his children – the things that allow us to wait in peace – Jesus shift the attention to the question of HOW we are waiting in peace.

While, clearly, they had a distinct context of their own, those words from Elie Wiesel, that Julie shared at the outset of worship this morning, reflect this principle so clearly. “Mankind must remember that peace is not God’s gift to his creatures; peace is our gift to each other.” Now, I would likely reframe that to say that peace is not solely God’s gift to his creatures but also our gift to each other, but the sentiment is the same. The core conviction of our faith is that we wait...we live...we rest... in that blessed peace of God that is a gift to his children. We also, however, must wait as we live out that peace in the lives that we live with one another. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

As you read on in chapter 5 of Matthew’s gospel, you quickly see that Jesus begins to put a clearer face on what this all might mean in the life of a disciple. After reminding us all of our active faith-driven role as the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and the city on the hill, Jesus soon goes on to articulate the manifestation of the life of a peacemaker.

“21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5: 21-24)

Jesus instructs those coming to worship God with sacrifice that they must make peace with one other before they come to be at peace with God. Our peace with God, Jesus explains, can't find its fullest expression until it is first manifest in our peace with one another! Our search for peace starts and ends with God, but it must find its fulfillment with one another along the way.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5: 38-42)

There is no revenge. There is no retaliation. There is no vengeance for the wronged. The peacemaker sets aside their thirst for retribution as they allow forgiveness and reconciliation to win the day.

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matthew 5: 43-45)

And here, we close the loop. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God...Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven."

What I was reminded of in my own moment of shortcoming as I drove to Alexian Village last week, is that every moment of discord and dissention comes with the choice to do one of three things. We can be a part of the problem, we can ignore the problem, or we can choose to be an agent of resolution – we can choose to be a peacemaker. We can choose to be one who helps to bring the light of God's love and grace into a circumstance riddled with human frailty and relational strife. That, in its very simplest and admittedly reductionist form is the other side of what it means to wait in peace.

It's worth taking a look at what happened next with those shepherds in that field that night. In the wake of that angelic chorus – as they emerged from the shock and fear of the moment – they didn't just stay there. They didn't sit in the field gazing with veneration upon gilded skies above. They didn't lie down and rest in the peace that had just been conferred upon them. No. They got up, they ran to Jesus, they proclaimed the message that they had heard, and they became a part of the unfolding of that peace that the angels had pronounced to them.

There is no question that we have the unparalleled gift of waiting in God's peace. As we look at the hope, the love and the joy that we've explored throughout these weeks of Advent, it's clear to see that we have an invitation to wait with peaceful anticipation for the next unfolding of God's work in our lives. It's worth noting, however, that Jesus uses the Beatitudes to put our consideration of peace on the other side of that coin. It's worth noting that Jesus doesn't say,

‘Blessed are the children of God, for they will know peace.’ No, Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

In our moments of frustration with our spouses...on those rare occasions where our children manage to push our buttons...with that co-worker who just says the most obnoxious things...with our cousin who thinks that about this politician...with that person on the road who has decided that the text on the phone is THAT important... I could go on all day, and we face this choice so much more often than I think we realize, but the fundamental choice is always the same. We can be a part of the problem...we can ignore it...or we can be a part of breathing God’s love and grace into it.

There is an unparalleled gift we have in which we are able to wait, with so many blessings, in the peace of God. There is also an unparalleled responsibility, however, to live out that peace in every moment of our waiting. Each time we come upon it, we have those three choices. But, each time we come upon it, Jesus’ answer is crystal clear. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”