

Matthew 10:24-39

Peace or a Sword?

I once saw an interesting interview with the singer and songwriter John Cougar Mellancamp who was advocating for peace and speaking out against war. It became particularly engaging when the interview suddenly turned theological. Mellancamp started talking about Jesus and said, "Jesus was all about peace." The interviewer apparently knew his Bible and jumped in quoting the verse we just read in today's Gospel lesson saying, "What about when Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace but a sword"? (Or in the literal Greek Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace, but division"). I suddenly felt sorry for Mellancamp as he sat there looking rather stunned and confused and then muttered, "I don't remember Jesus ever saying that." Then he looked out at the audience with some desperation and said, "Do you?" There was awkward silence. And then suddenly he seemed to recover and looked intently at the interviewer and said, "Here's what I remember Jesus saying, 'Turn the other cheek, do good to those who hurt you, don't return violence for violence. That's the Jesus I know.'"

I think that interview was an excellent example of the challenges we all face when we encounter verses like ones we just read in the Gospel of Matthew. Maybe it doesn't sound like the Jesus we know. As Christians we proclaim Jesus to be the Prince of Peace. We recall the prophecies about him in Isaiah where all people are called to turn their swords into plowshares. In fact, there is a bronze statue that stands outside the United Nations building entitled "Let us Beat Swords into Plowshares" with a man hammering a sword into a plowshare. This is the image we tend to have of Jesus as we recall stories in the Gospel such as Jesus' arrest when Peter pulls out his sword to defend him and Jesus chastises him, "Put away your sword: those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Jesus repeatedly talks about peace and non-violence in the Gospels admonishing us not to repay evil with evil, to pray for our enemies, and says, "My peace I give, my peace I leave with you."

So what is Jesus getting at when he says he came to bring division? Does this portion of Scripture negate Jesus' other sayings about peace as the interviewer suggested? Does it call into question Jesus' intentions for peace? Jesus is clearly impassioned in this section of Scripture, perhaps he was simply feeling some pressure at this point in his ministry, knowing that the time he had left to accomplish his mission was quickly running

out. Is Jesus simply being overtaken with zealousness here?

If we take a step back and read this text in context we begin see that the thrust of this passage is about our dedication to God. And it begins with Jesus telling us about God's dedication to us – God is so dedicated to us and loves us so much that even the hairs on our head are counted! And only then Jesus moves into calling us to be dedicated to God in return – being dedicated and willing to acknowledge our faith, even in the face of persecution.

And then Jesus says he came not to bring peace but division (or "sword"). There are certainly different kinds of peace to be had in this world and peace itself can mean very different things to different people. Peace can be temporary and fleeting or it can be lasting and abiding. Peace can be the mere absence of conflict or it can mean a sense of deep harmony. Temporary peace that revolves around avoiding conflict can happen in any relationship or community situation but it is not always the healthiest way forward. Take the example of an abusive relationship. The victim may be highly motivated to remain silent and never confront the abuser in order to "keep the peace." But we know that eventually something is going to happen that will cause the abuser to erupt. This kind of peace is not actually helping anyone...in fact, silence, submission and avoiding the very real confrontation that exposes of the truth simply enables abuse to continue in the long run. When a victim finally does challenge the abuser or starts to tell the truth, chaos, upset, and perhaps even violence are the immediate result. This is anything but peaceful: those who want to keep the peace find this extremely difficult. However, a temporary disruption of the peace is often necessary in order for anyone to find and attain any lasting peace. There must be division then, in order to get through to the other side of the wrongs being committed in order to find true peace.

And so standing up for the truth, standing up for righteousness, standing up for one's faith in the Name of Jesus will inevitably cause division and fragmentation. Anyone who dedicates their lives solely to the cause of Christ is going to experience this. This text is absolutely not advocating violence but predicting and explaining what will be. And we know from history that Jesus' prediction came true. To fully dedicate one's life to God is to find oneself standing for holiness in the face of hostility, and the result is almost always one of division. All the Church's great martyrs are examples of this truth. There are also countless stories of saints and other dedicated Christians being estranged from their

families when they radically dedicated their lives to God. And yet, while there may be divisions, the possibility for lasting peace is only possible when we ground ourselves in truth.

And let's take the example of the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists were a group that developed out of the Radical Reformation, many later became known as Mennonites. The Anabaptists taught a concept they called "yieldedness." Yieldedness is the idea that Christians are called to completely and totally yield their lives and will to that of God's. The teaching finds expression every time we say the Lord's prayer, "Thy will be done." But they taught that in doing so, they would become advocates of peace and knew they would likely experience the same kind of violence that Jesus experienced...that of suffering and death. In fact, throughout Europe during the Reformation, the Anabaptists were indeed martyred and their lives evidenced the irony that Jesus was speaking to in the Gospels: those who most passionately stand for peace and truth are often the most brutally persecuted.

Jesus is not the cause of the division, sin is. And whenever truth challenges lies, whenever love challenges hate, and whenever justice challenges evil, division is sure to be the result initially. We cannot and should not expect that peace is cheap or easy when we set out to follow Jesus. But in an ultimate sense, standing for righteousness and following in the footsteps of Christ are indeed always a means toward lasting peace, both for the individual as well as for society. You and I are called to work towards lasting transformation with the hope and goal of peace, because indeed, Jesus is the way to true peace.

AMEN.