

Maybe you have seen the movie, *Miss Congeniality*. In it there is a scene during the beauty pageant in which contestants are asked what society needs most. And each contestant responds, predictably, "world peace". Then Sandra Bullock's character is asked the same question, but of course she responds differently. She says, "That would be 'harsher punishment for parole violators' ". She smiles, and the crowd looks back quiet and blankly at her. There's a long and awkward silence. She blinks. And then she says, enthusiastically "And world peace." And the crowd goes wild with cheering and applause.

Wishing for world peace is so predictable and overused that it has become genuinely cliché, even the punchline of a joke. And yet just about every human being on the planet genuinely does desire world peace. In fact, people deeply want peace in their hearts, in their lives, as well as in their nation and ultimately the world. The hope for peace expresses a universal desire that lies in the heart of humans, even if we sometimes disagree on exactly how to achieve it. And praying and working for peace here in our nation and world is relevant, I think, to our 4th of July celebration in which we seek as our collect states today to quote, "Maintain our liberties in righteousness and peace."

Mother Theresa spoke a lot about the concept of peace, but she always spoke about peace in a very practical and tangible way. She was interested in the things we can do here and now, the small things that really make a difference in order to achieve peace. Peace was not an abstract idea for her. She once wrote, "peace begins with a smile." And later: "all works of love are works of peace." It's easy to feel as if peace is totally beyond us, though. It's as if peace is merely an abstract ideal, or a pie in the sky, and nothing more than cliché. We may even be tempted to despair for peace in light of the violence we continue to witness in our own nation as well as in the world in places like Ukraine. But Jesus in the gospels encourages to never stop striving for peace. As we read about the 72 missionaries today that Jesus sent out in pairs, we learned that Jesus followers already have the

peace of Christ in their hearts. In fact, this peace is ours the moment that we say yes to Jesus, and it is ours to give and share with others. Notice that Jesus says, whenever you enter a house, extend your peace to all those who live there saying, "Peace be to this house." And if anyone is willing to share in that peace, then he says, "This peace will rest upon them."

This passage like other passages in the Bible urges to offer God's peace to others. Indeed, this is at the heart of our practice. In the liturgy when we pass the peace to one another, we hear echoes of Jesus injunction, when the celebrant says, "The peace of the Lord be always with you." And we respond as people, "And also with you." The passing of the peace is not just a nice and cordial concept for use and worship and liturgy, a little quaint thing to do. No, this is actual practice for taking Christ's peace to the outside world wherever we go. Have you ever tried to bring the peace of the Lord to those you encounter in your day? Just imagine the ways you could begin to practice passing the peace outside a church, perhaps you practice passing the peace by simply smiling as Mother Teresa described. Or by engaging in acts of love and charity, or by saying peace to people as you pass by them, even if it's just a quiet prayer for them under your breath or even on the road.

What if we saw ourselves as missionaries who have been sent like those in our text today and understood our missionary task to include bringing and proclaiming God's peace, wherever we go. How might that change our perspective and our lives as well as the lives of those around us? And notice that according to Jesus, not everyone will be ready to receive this peace or even want it. Jesus says that if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person. But if not, it will return to you. Maybe you've experienced this, you've smiled at somebody, and they simply scowled back. Or you tried to offer a peaceful solution to an argument, but your solution was rejected. Or on a national and global scale, the rejection of peace that we see is actually quite alarming. But according to Jesus, regardless of

whether this peace is accepted or not, we are still called to extend the blessing of peace to those we encounter, knowing it will return to us if rejected. This peace is related to what it means when Jesus then says, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."

Peace is evidence of the kingdom of God in our midst. And the kingdom of God is indeed present here and now. But here's the problem, the peace that God has placed in our hearts can get buried and hidden underneath fear in impatience, shame, resentment, bitterness, and even hatred. In fact, it's not a coincidence that one of the results of the missionary's experience in this passage is discovering they have the power and authority of exorcism, the ability to exorcise evil. Jesus says, quote, "I watched Satan fall from heaven, like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy."

In Jewish tradition, snakes and scorpions were symbols and sources of evil, not literal reptiles and arachnids. So, this passage isn't calling us to engage in snake handling, thanks be to God. I know some have interpreted it that way, but this is a call to exorcising evil whenever and wherever we, as followers of Christ, encounter it. To exorcise the evils of hatred and violence, that which opposes peace. As Christians who have accepted the peace of Christ into our hearts, we have been given the power and authority to exorcise evil, the responsibility to exorcise sin, hatred, violence, and evil from our own hearts and lives is first and foremost though.

Wherever fear or hatred or hostility reign, and threaten to control us, we're called upon to declare the peace of the Lord and to announce the presence of the kingdom of God, which is one very powerful way to dispel evil. We should never forget that God has come near and is with us. From there we can confront evil with the power of Christ's peace, which will naturally lead to acts of justice and love and righteousness.

Sharing Christ's peace really can begin with something as simple and small as a smile. We can choose the smile over the scowl, even when others don't deserve it. It was once confessed by Arthur Bremer, the serial killer who made the decision to commit mass murder followed by suicide one day, that his mind was suddenly changed because when he went to his last meal at a diner quote, "The waitress was friendly and smiled at him." Her smile meant that nobody died that day. Talk about the power of peace dispelling evil. The big audacious idea that's being proposed by Jesus is that peace really does start with us, with the peace of Christ in our own hearts, given to us by God and then extended to others. This peace can carry us out of fear and bitterness and into the blessed calm and sanctuary of God's love and presence, of God's smile on us.

From there we can spread that peace to others, to our family, our neighbors, our nation, and yes, even the world. So how about choosing acts of peace as a way to celebrate Independence Day. We can choose to bring the blessing of peace wherever we go and help to turn the tide against hatred and violence. Thanks be to God.