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Division Before Peace

In chapter 1 of Luke's gospel, it is prophesied that the coming Savior will guide our feet into the way of peace. In chapter 2, the angels proclaim peace on earth with the arrival of the newborn King. When Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection, the very first words out of his mouth are, "Peace be with you." During his Sermon on the Plain, he says to the crowds, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

From the manger to the resurrection, peace is a word that is central to the life and ministry of Jesus—but it seems as if that Jesus is absent in today's gospel lesson. He says, "Do you think that I've come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

These words feel like a bucket of ice-cold water dumped on our heads relative to all the warmth we've been getting from Jesus these last few weeks. What happened? Did he wake up on the wrong side of the bed? Why this change in tone? Surely, he didn't come to make a divided world even more divided. Not exactly.

The clue is in that Beatitude: Blessed are the peacemakers. Notice what Jesus does not say. He doesn't say, "Blessed are the peacekeepers." There is a big difference between keeping the peace and making peace. Often, a peacekeeper is simply keeping a false peace.

Here's a somewhat trivial example. It's the end of the month, and you've got twenty-five dollars left in your food budget. Some friends invite you out to a nice restaurant. You really should say no... but you haven't seen them in a while. So you go. You order a side salad, drink water, tell yourself you'll just say you're on a diet. Meanwhile, your friends order a four-course meal and a couple of bottles of wine. Then the waiter comes and asks how the bill should be split. One of your buddies says, "Just divide it four ways." And in that moment, you really want to speak up. You want to say, "Actually, I'll just pay for what I ordered." But you don't want to rock the boat. You just want to "keep the peace."

That's false peace. Peacekeeping might keep things calm on the outside, but it breeds resentment on the inside.

In the church, we sometimes fall into the trap of thinking our mission is to keep the peace. That instinct isn't bad... but if "keeping the peace" stops the truth of the gospel from breaking into our lives and our communities, then keeping the peace becomes antithetical to the gospel.

Of course, the consequences of false peace aren't just about awkward dinners or small compromises. History shows us keeping a false peace can have serious consequences.

Think back to the Civil Rights Movement. One of the biggest objections from white communities was that desegregation would "disrupt the peace." Many church leaders held this position—even in the Episcopal Church. Even some Black communities wanted to avoid the turbulence required for true peace to break through. But segregation only created a false peace. It bred suspicion, fear, and hatred. "Separate but equal" was a lie we told ourselves to justify injustice. And more than that—segregation runs contrary to the vision of God's Kingdom, where every tribe and race stand together to worship Christ, the One who died for all.

The hard truth Jesus is trying to convey today is that false peace must be disrupted before true peace can be found. And Jesus will not apologize for disrupting false peace with the truth of the gospel. Neither should the Church. Neither should you.

When the ministry of Jesus begins to disrupt the false peace we've made in our lives and in our world, our sinful thoughts and behaviors come to light. Our instincts try to convince us to cover up our sins—by blaming, excusing, or minimizing. But God in Christ gives us the faith to trust that bringing these sins into the light is the first step toward healing.

God wants us as we are, not as we think we should be. God loves us as we are, not as we think we should be. God doesn't want to shame us—God wants to heal us, and free us from the shadows of our fear and shame. Only when our sinful behaviors are brought into the light can Christ transform them. In the light of Christ, God burns away all that makes our soul sick with a love that refuses to let us settle for false peace.

Yes, trusting this truth can feel scary in a world that has burned us one too many times. We may need the help of a trusted friend, a spiritual director, a therapist, or a clergy person, as we learn to let God's love bring healing and hope to the broken places in our souls.

Seeking true peace is hard because it does lead to a radical reordering of our lives. Take going to therapy, for example. Many people avoid it because they don't realize things often get worse before they get better. Therapy forces us to face feelings we've buried. We tell ourselves if we ignore them, they'll go away. But they don't. They sit there, festering, until they leak out in ways that hurt us and the people we love the most.

The same is true with surgery. Nobody looks forward to being cut open with a scalpel. But sometimes the only way to heal is to make an incision, to dig deep, to endure the pain. For this reason, we proclaim the way of the cross as the way of life and peace. Peace is on the other side of the cross.

You can't go under it. You can't go over it. You can't go around it. The only way is through it—and Christ has already gone before us.

As we follow Jesus through the cross toward eternal life, the Holy Spirit burns away everything keeping us from true peace—including our sins and the illusion that false peace can save us from pain. False peace only delays the inevitable and can make things even more painful in the future.

Yes, the way of the cross will disrupt your life. It will change how you see your job. It will change your relationship with money and possessions. It will change how you relate to friends, coworkers, even family. That's why Jesus says members of a household will be divided.

He's not telling you to pick fights with everyone you know. He's simply telling the truth: seeking true peace will reorder your life, and not everyone will be happy about it.

Here's the good news: we don't walk this road alone. We walk with Jesus—the One who, on the cross, was estranged even from members of his own family. We walk with the communion of saints—those who already dwell in eternal peace and cheer us on with their prayers. We walk with the Church—brothers and sisters in Christ who stand with us when the world stands against us. And we walk with the Holy Spirit—whose fire burns away the lie that peacekeeping is enough.

Fourth-century bishop St. Porphyrius once said:

“When people are empty of Christ, a thousand and one other things fill them—jealousy, hatred, boredom, resentment, a worldly outlook, worldly pleasures. Fill your soul with Christ so that it's not empty.”

If we're not careful, the world will empty our souls of Christ—sometimes in the name of “peace.” And when that happens, resentment, hatred, and despair creep in to take his place. But when Christ fills us, resentment cannot stay. When Christ fills us, hatred must go. When Christ fills us, even division cannot destroy our hope because we know that true peace is just over the horizon.

In the words of Jesus from last week's gospel, “Do not be afraid, little flock.” Sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better. But do not lose hope—on the other side of disruption—on the other side of God's surgical intervention—on the other side of the cross—is the true peace of Christ that nothing and no one can take away.

Amen.

