

Unity and Peace

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Most people value unity and most people want peace. Unity and peace are therefore great talking points for leaders in our world today. As Christians we should agree. In a world torn apart by violence and war, especially in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and Haiti, there are urgent needs for both unity and peace.

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes the striking comment, "do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." This doesn't sound like Jesus. In fact, it sounds like Satan. How can Jesus, who prayed 'that all may be one as he and his Father are one' and constantly said 'peace be with you,' sound so contradictory in today's Gospel?

I think one of the major concerns of Jesus on the issues of unity and peace is that people would use these words as a way of maintaining the status quo. When used in this way, unity and peace really mean: 'just accept that this is the way life is,' 'keep quiet,' or 'things will be better for you in heaven.' To this mindset, Jesus says, "I have come to set the earth on fire." Fire is the opposite of the status quo. Fire brings about change. He then proceeded to attack one of the most cherished institutions at the

time, the family. For Jesus, the family needed to be changed, redefined, and broader if it truly wanted to become the family of God.

In our own times, Archbishop Oscar Romero was a saint who challenged a version of unity and peace that tried to simply maintain the status quo. In his country of El Salvador, the leaders were calling for unity and peace as a way of really protecting their own unity and peace among themselves while the rest of the country suffered immensely. As a Catholic archbishop, he was welcomed into their company, but refused. He even split with his own fellow bishops (and the Vatican) and sided with the people. Like Jeremiah the prophet, he was thrown into the mud for this stance. In one of his homilies, he explained what peace is not. He said,

Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.

In other words, Archbishop Romero believed that peace in El Salvador was not going to be achieved by hiding the conflict and pretending that everything was fine. Peace was not going to be found through the leaders using the military to get the people back in line through a harsh law and order policy. Peace was not accepting that this was just how life had to be. The status quo needed to be set on fire in order to bring about change. Divisions

had to occur. Families had to be split. The archbishop had to be martyred.

Unity and peace aren't meant to maintain the current state of affairs, but to change the earth for the betterment of all.

When have the calls for unity and peace from leaders sounded too superficial or hollow? How can division be used as a legitimate tactic to move us to a truer unity and peace for all?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray for true unity and peace in our world where all may be one as Jesus and his Father are one. Let us pray for Christ to say to us over and over again, 'Peace be with you.' Until these words mean what they are supposed to mean in the kingdom of heaven, let us be willing to deal with the fire.