

Sermon by the Rev. Bob Morrison at the Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC on June 15, 2008, the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6, Year A)
Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7); Psalm 116:1, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

*Since we are justified by faith, we have
peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ....
(Romans 5:1)*

Our Lord is among us saying, “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. I need some help, and I’m nominating you!” Thus Barbara Brown Taylor imagines him, praying over us, commissioning us for what only he has heretofore done, and calling us each by name, “Jerry and Sam, you take Castle Hayne. John and Nancy, how about you heading over to Northside. Sally and Janet, you’ve got Monkey Junction.... Now here’s what I want you to do: Preach the kingdom, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the outcasts, cast out demons. You all have a good time. I can’t wait to hear the stories you bring back. Now get out of here! Go, go, go!” ¹

As you imagine our response, how does stunned silence sound? Oh sure, *welcoming* is a wonderful thing, and Church of the Servant excels at that. So is *inviting*, at which I hope you also excel. But *making cold calls to preach and heal and cast out demons and raise the dead*, and without a license? Now that’s something else!

Well, maybe Jesus is not asking us to do exactly that. Maybe he’s calling us to a mission of which the particular journey in Matthew’s gospel is but one example. And maybe this morning St. Paul provides the essential clue as to the purpose of all our mission endeavors. And further, maybe what Paul says will prove to be even more frightening to contemplate than going door to door as the Mormons do.

“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,” says Paul, who goes on to speak of hope, hope rooted in the peace that passes all understanding. This peace-based hope, this hope-infused peace, is the basic blessing Christ brings and bestows, says Paul. And why would we find such hopeful peace unsettling? Why would this wonderful spiritual reality, given so graciously as free gift, alarm us? Well, beware! Read the warning label before you take the cure!

Warning number one: What we receive, we share. Although not just like in Matthew, at “the end of every service, while the last word of the last hymn is ringing in the air, (the voice at the door says) ‘Go forth! Go forth in the name of Christ! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord! (Go) forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!’ Those are not words for consumers of God’s love. Those are words for the providers,” ² says Taylor. And we know that being the providers is necessary for our souls’ health. Like the Dead Sea receives fresh water from the Jordan but keeps it all, thereby rendering it unfit for marine habitation, a freely given gift stagnates when not passed on. So, warning one: What we receive, we share. The Lord’s great commission still pertains.

Warning two is that God's peace is on God's terms, not ours. On one's own terms, everyone wants peace. "Even the villains of the 20th century," the "bloodiest in history," "wanted peace," says former Duke Chaplain, current United Methodist Bishop and preacher extraordinaire Will Willimon. "Stalin, Hitler, the Khmer Rouge, Saddam Hussein, and Slobodon Milosovic all wanted peace." To Willimon's list we can add 21st century peace lovers: George Bush, John McCain, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, you and me – all knowing that "hammering out our terms of peace often takes the tools of war." But in "fairness to us," says Willimon, "what else is there for us to do? We have few other means of making peace on our terms. Our nation suffers a horrendous assault from terrorists, (so we) mobilize the troops, we send ships to sea, rockets through the air toward Afghanistan. (And we do this for) peace. If we can just eliminate enough of the bad people, just destroy enough of the terrorists' camps, just get a good enough government in Afghanistan, then we shall have peace." (Willimon wrote this before Iraq!)

So, what are we to do? As apartheid in South Africa was ending, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu was a participant and eloquent spokesman for a wonderful attempt at peaceful, hopeful reconciliation. And good for him and them! The mission worked wonders. Yet "even he, during the dark days of apartheid, said 'Why not war? Indeed, we have no choice.'" ³

Because all people want peace on their own terms, it is no surprise, says Willimon, that people of biblical times "were impatient with Jesus. He had charisma.... He knew how to hold an audience and sway a crowd. Put a sword in his hand, and you would have a real leader (whom people would follow anywhere). But, he did not take up a sword. He took up a cross, and for those who wanted peace on their terms, Jesus was a stunning disappointment." ⁴ To me, not a complete and thoroughgoing pacifist, he gives considerable pause, as he intends. So warning one: What we receive, we must share. And warning two: God's peace is on God's terms.

A third warning follows: The peacemaker's work is never done. Heaven on earth has never been realized, at least not yet. This past week South Africa was back in the news; the peace for which Tutu and others worked is proving imperfect and fragile. The peacemaker's work is never done, so we keep at it. "Preach the gospel always; when necessary, use words."

A fourth warning, this from St. Paul, is that peacemaking often involves suffering – more, perhaps, than stares from locals who won't like our house-to-house evangelism. That's because evil is real and clearly not amenable to peace on God's terms.

To this warning, add a fifth, the famous quote from that comic strip character of yore, Pogo, who said: "We has met the enemy and he is us!" As Alexander Solzhenitzen came to realize in the Gulag, "the real fault line ran not between the guards and the prisoners but within each human soul." ⁵ To be at all effective in the ministry of reconciliation, I need to know that this applies to me. If I assume I'm

completely right and the other completely wrong, I'm avoiding both soul searching and peacemaking.

Five warnings, therefore: The peace we receive, peace yearning to be shared, is peace on God's terms. Such peacemaking requires ongoing commitment and often suffering, including the suffering of a contrite heart.

But warnings notwithstanding, please remember, "the main thing is to make the main thing the main thing." The main thing is that God loves you, and me, and anyone we would call enemy – loves us all just the way we are, loves us too much to let us stay that way, loves us too much to ever let us go. Divine, unconditional love for each and every creature of God is our peace. And when we suffer to share this love, our suffering produces endurance that builds character and strengthens hope, the love-and-peace-based hope of God that does not disappoint.

So a concluding thought, again in part from Willimon: The "peace that comes on God's terms ...is a peace that comes through the love of Jesus ..., the *shalom* (of allowing our) shattered lives (to be) held together by his life. (This peace) sets aside anger, resentment, self-righteousness, sometimes even justice, all for the sake of forgiveness and love. (This peace) begins (and ends) with faith in the one who won the battle by giving up his life for us, while we were (and are) still sinners. Any other peace we may seek is tentative and costly. Any other peace is limited and vain. (So if you would work for peace), wage a peace that is rooted in Christ." ⁶

I would only add: Don't laugh. Or do! For this day the Holy Spirit is pouring peace and love into us. And there is nothing too wonderful for the Lord! ⁷

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, "Heaven at Hand" in *Bread of Angels*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, 1997, pp 151-152.

² *ibid.*

³ as quoted in Willimon, Will, "Waging Peace" in *Pulpit Resource*, Logos Productions, for June 16, 2002 using Proper 6, Year A Revised Common Lectionary readings, which are also appointed for this Sunday, June 18, 2008

⁴ Willimon, *op. cit*

⁵ as quoted in Johnson, George Sim, "Paradise Lost, Again and Again," a review of Jacobs, Alan, *Original Sin: a Cultural History*, HarperOne (2008) published on page A13 of the June 13, 2008 print edition of *The Wall Street Journal*

⁶ Willimon, *op. cit*

⁷ Genesis 18:14 (in today's Old Testament reading)