



God of Love, Prince of Peace

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Second Sunday after Pentecost~June 3, 2018*

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Psalm 81:1-10

- 1 Sing with joy to God our strength *
and raise a loud shout to the God of Jacob.
- 2 Raise a song and sound the timbrel, *
the merry harp, and the lyre.
- 3 Blow the ram's-horn at the new moon, *
and at the full moon, the day of our feast.
- 4 For this is a statute for Israel, *
a law of the God of Jacob.
- 5 God laid it as a solemn charge upon Joseph, *
when he came out of the land of Egypt.
- 6 I heard an unfamiliar voice saying *
"I eased Israel's shoulder from the burden;
their hands were set free from bearing the load."
- 7 You called on me in trouble, and I saved you; *
I answered you from the secret place of thunder
and tested you at the waters of Meribah.
- 8 Hear, O my people, and I will admonish you: *
O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
- 9 There shall be no strange god among you; *
you shall not worship a foreign god.
- 10 I am your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt and said, *
"Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it."

II Corinthians 4:5-12

We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Mark 2:23—3:6

One sabbath Jesus and his disciples were going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the

withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

I'm going to go a little rogue today and preach on texts that we didn't hear, because today, a day focusing on gun violence, I want to preach about violence and about Jesus' death—a story I am guessing you each know. A story with a cast of characters: Judas, Peter, Mary, Caiaphas, Annas, Pilate, Herod, the blood-thirsty crowd. Each acting from different motives and only one good guy in the whole bunch. On some level, we connect to all the roles these characters play; the betrayer, the denier, the accuser, the enabler, because we carry each of them within us—we may not like to admit it, but we know it to be true. This story of Jesus' dying, then, is not just Jesus' story, it is our story—a story that continues as Jesus dies daily to open to us a different way.

Bible scholar Walter Wink in his book *Engaging the Powers* writes about what he calls the myth of redemptive violence—a myth as old as humanity. We see it in the ancient Babylonian creation story in which the world was created when Marduk, the god of Babylon, killed his mother Tiamat, the goddess of the ocean. Marduk created the cosmos from her dead body, and the King of Babylon became Marduk's representative on earth. The King was entrusted with keeping the peace which he did by imitating Marduk and violently crushing anyone who rebelled or got in his way. Violence was the divine right of the king—it was how the world was created out of chaos, and it was how chaos was kept under control. Now we may recoil in horror at this story, but if we take an honest look around, it seems much closer to an accurate “foundation story” for how our culture operates than that found in Genesis or in Jesus. We organize our lives around the idea that violence can be redemptive—that the way for the good guys to keep order is to perpetrate violence against the bad guys. Think about the myriad movies and TV shows from *Star Wars*, to *Superman*, to *Law & Order* that teach us over and over that violence is OK when the right people are doing it. The assumption is that, if God is involved in all this violence at all, it is to cheer on those doing violence in the Holy Name and to forgive those who commit acts of violence if they are doing so for a good cause.

This myth of redemptive violence is writ large in Jesus' messy end. Caiaphas and Annas were good guys who were only doing what was expedient, and in order to preserve the peace, maintain good relations with Rome, and make sure that religion was kept pure; they decided it was good for this one man to die in order to save others. Herod and Pilate were only doing what was in the common good. They were squashing the makings of a rebellion and ensuring that Jerusalem remained calm and peaceful—making sure no one else got any idea of taking on Rome and unleashing chaos. I mean you can't let one man and his followers upend an entire political system, a whole Empire, can you? It seems the only ones who had any sort of affection for Jesus were the poor and the powerless who had been following him around in hopes that he would lead them in a violent rebellion, overthrowing Rome and the religious fat-cats and installing them in positions of power. When it became clear that Jesus had another idea that he couldn't completely describe but which definitely did not involve armed rebellion, they had no real use for him either. Barabbas by comparison looked like a better bet—at least he could be counted on to grab a weapon and fight back. They might all die, but they would go down in a blaze of glory fighting, killing and being killed for the good. The prevailing principles in all of this are “violence done by good guys is good” and, “kill the troublemaker and the problem will go away”. And we have ordered our lives around these principles.

And so some spank their children to teach them that fighting on the school play ground is wrong, we kill those who have killed to teach everyone that killing is wrong, and people argue that good guys and bad guys are easy to spot, as if anything to do with humans is that cut and dry. We have a unique and grotesque problem with guns, we are up to the gills in guns, and one of the arguments for them is they are a way of keeping the peace. And, as almost 40,000 people a year die in gun violence, as our children are now routinely slaughtered in their schools, our elected officials offer nothing but thoughts and prayers—the very people who could actually effect change, offer nothing but words, or expect God to sweep in and clean up this horror show we have created and that breaks God's heart. We are seemingly helpless in the grip of this national dis-ease, a disease that affects black and brown people in disproportionate numbers, a disease that is, like so much else in this country, rooted in racism. This weekend we join with other Christians, other people throughout this nation in focusing on gun violence and committing to finding a solution—a solution that seems unreachable. Yes, it seems right now that we are stuck, but we, we people of faith, we people who know the end of the story, we who believe that God is moving in this world, in each of us, we need to stick with it and keep working. Keep praying, keep calling our elected officials, keep showing up at demonstrations, keep supporting families affected by violence through organizations such as Mothers in Charge, keep working to dismantle systemic racism. We who are the hands and feet of Christ in this world can do no less, because our siblings in Christ are suffering and dying—we are suffering and dying. And even those of us not directly affected by gun violence, those of us lucky enough not to have had someone we love die in the carnage, we all experience the moral and spiritual rot that is part and parcel of a culture steeped in, accustomed to, enthralled by violence.

And the hard to deal with truth is that we are all, on some level, complicit. Because when push comes to shove somewhere deep down we believe in fighting fire with fire—despite the fact that we are standing in a scorched and barren field.

And the backdrop to all of this is a broken man hanging on a cross. A man who refused to fight fire with fire. Who would not fight back to teach anything, but instead died to open to us the way of love. Whose way of dealing with our violent tendencies was to wrap his body around them—using himself to absorb the blows. Abused he chose not to abuse. Condemned he chose not to condemn but to forgive. Abandoned he refused to abandon. He died to protect us from ourselves. The cross stands as a stark reminder that our capacity for violence and revenge is bottomless. The ugly irony of the cross is that our violence, our belief that violence can be used for good, led us to crucify, to mercilessly execute God incarnate. In an effort to keep the peace, to do what was considered by almost all present to be right we killed the One who was peace and compassion.

The cross stands as a repudiation of violence—the symbol of the emptiness, the dead end, to which violence leads. But though we killed Jesus, we did not take the life out of him, for that belonged and belongs to God. To the God who sent him to open to us another way to live. Our call is to follow in Jesus' footsteps, not Marduk's, not Caiaphas', nor Annas, not Pilate's, or Judas' or Peter's. It is to fight back by not fighting at all- to replace the myth of redemptive violence with the truth of extravagant, indestructible love. It is to fight back not by killing off troublemakers but by dying to violence, once and for all. In the Gospels, Jesus' died a spectacular failure—caught up in the violence of the world and killed by it. But we know the deeper truth, we know what happens in the end. And you and I, those he calls friends, we are called to follow in his footsteps, to follow the path of peace, and to preach the Gospel of love—the truth of a Love that ultimately ends all violence and holds the world in an eternal embrace.

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