

**The Spirit of War...and Peace**  
**(Matthew 10: 34)**

“Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth.” What I want to do is take that mind-bending, spirit-shaking verse and relate it to today’s similarly amazing reading by John Shelby Spong. In words that are some of the most succinct, stunning expressions of how I understand Jesus Spong wrote: “Jesus has to become not the Divine Invader, but the human face of what God looks like in human form. That is because, when you look at Jesus he lives fully. Nothing diminished his life. He never diminished anybody else’s life. People betrayed him and he responded by loving them. People denied him and he responded by loving them. People forsook him and he responded by loving them. People tormented him and he responded by loving them. People killed him and he responded by loving them.

How else could he communicate to people like you and me that there is nothing we can ever do, there is nothing we can ever be that will place us outside the boundaries of the love of God. It is not that we are some worthless inadequate person that God has to come in and rescue, it is that God’s love is so abundant and so overwhelming that this love calls us to live, and to love, and to be all that we can be so that God can live in us and through us. That is a very different way to think about God.” If this is true, and I think it is, how do we reconcile it with today’s text? OK. Get out of the pool. Turn off the TV. Turn off the computer and ponder!

“Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth.” Ah come on Jesus. Stop making me crazy. If you aren’t the Prince of Peace, who is? What are we going to do with all those hymns? What are we going to do with all those Peace/Peace/Peace Christmas cards? What are we going to do

at Peace Camp? What are we going to do with the peace sign, peace marches, peace tee shirts? So there you are, the heart of all my anti-war arguments, the heart of my plea for non-violent solutions and you say: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth.” What are you talking about?

What he is talking about is false peace. What he is talking about is saying peace with your lips while signing the contract for arms shipments with your hands. What he is talking about is peace gained in a family at the expense of the souls of those around the table. What he is talking about is the “peace” in a marriage maintained as a cordial but tense truce. What he is talking about, from a psychological viewpoint, is that kind of “peace” that is peace in name only, the kind of peace that leads, eventually, to some kind of explosion, blow-up, assault, attack, and, inevitably, pain. If someone mistreats you and you repress, repress, repress you will eventually retaliate in some way. What he is talking about is the division that comes when someone actually embraces the message these disciples will bring. Belief in the Gospel disrupts things, upsets things, shakes things up, challenges false peace.

To understand what he is saying first consider all the talk there is of peace. You hear it every day. Temporary cease fires. Peace treaties. Mid-east peace talks. Think of earnestly sung songs of peace (“All we are saying is give peace a chance”), hymns of peace (“let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me”), peace marches, peace rallies, Peace Hon bumper stickers, peace tee shirts, peace signs. Think of pleas to stand for peace and to pray for peace. It would be very hard to go through a normal day and not hear words of war and words of peace within our selves, our families, our nation, our world. And in all of these cases, the issue is not peace but false peace.

The issue here is not the threat of all out nuclear holocaust but also the very real cost of following Jesus.

In his book *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, Shane Claiborne writes:

“I know there are people out there who say, “My life was such a mess. I was drinking, partying, sleeping around...and then I met Jesus and my whole life came together.” God bless those people. But me, I had it together. I used to be cool. And then I met Jesus and he wrecked my life. The more I read the Gospel, the more it messed me up, turning everything I believed in, valued, and hoped for upside down. I am still recovering from my conversion....I was in the in-crowd, popular, ready to make lots of money and buy lots of stuff, on the upward track of success...But as I pursued that dream of upward mobility preparing for college, things just didn’t fit together. As I read Scriptures about how the last shall be first, I started wondering why I was working so hard to be first...I had no idea what I should do. I thought about leaving everything to follow Jesus, like the Apostles, and hitting the road with nothing but my sandals and a staff, but I wasn’t sure where to pick up a staff.”

Those instructions to pick up a staff come in a long list of instructions in the tenth chapter of Matthew. Jesus is giving the disciples the pre-game talk. He is telling them all kinds of things to do and not to do as he sends them out. Claiborne’s sardonic tone captures the reality of those words in our personal lives; it is a reality often avoided by pastors who don’t want to scare off potential donors by saying: you might want to think long and hard about becoming a Christian. It isn’t that easy. Pastors are real good at saying: “Come all you who are burdened and I will give you peace.” That sounds good. That soothes. That sells. They (we!) are less willing to talk about swords and struggles and the cost of true discipleship.

We need to use Jesus' honest language to talk about what is being said here. Think about how we use the language of peace and war every day to describe our lives. Think of the mine fields of personal, inner turmoil. When one is addicted we say: she is battling her demons. When one is unhappy in marriage and tempted to find comfort in someone else's bed we say: he is fighting temptation. When we talk of the demands to compromise our selves at our often toxic work places we say: that damn place is war zone. We have daily conflicts, skirmishes, confrontations. We taunt. We spar. We fire the first shot. We construct elaborate defense systems. We launch verbal grenades. Our personal, interior landscapes are often war torn. So Jesus is offering more of the same? Thanks but no thanks.

But it is exactly because Jesus understands the dark and painful realities of everyday life that he uses the language he does. In order to deal with our addictions, temptations, rages and Machiavellian tendencies we need to change—radically. That is what those disciples are inviting folks to do: change radically. And if you do change radically your relationships change radically, your priorities change radically, everything changes radically. And that, in turn, leads to division. Jesus is saying: look guys. You are going out and inviting people to totally transform their lives. You are bringing my word, my story, my reality, my truth to them. And if you are going to do that be honest. I didn't come to bring a false peace. I did not come to make sure everyone was always cordial and polite. I am not the one who says: never talk about religion or politics. If they listen to you, if they transform, if they become followers of my way there will be a lot of upheaval. They will need to reconsider everything in the light of the Gospel. Take money. To follow me is to see money differently, to use money differently, to share money differently. How will that go down at home?

Take time. To follow me is to see time differently, to use time differently, to share time differently. How will that go down with their family and friends? To follow me may mean to see family and friends differently, to treat them differently, to talk to them differently. It may mean an interaction and an honesty that has never been there before. It may mean separation. It may mean divorce. It will mean the work of reconciliation. Things may not be so peaceful.

Maybe, just maybe, we prefer conflict because it keeps us distracted. If we are yelling, screaming, shooting and bombing we do not have to deal with our own truth. War can be an escape. Sometimes, however, the conflict is the result of truth seeking. Think of what happens in a family when someone refuses to play their part, when they stand up to the bully, when they challenge the corporate lie.

“In the...beginnings of the early church, there were enormous divisions in the family when a person converted to Christ and Christianity...When someone in the family becomes a devout Christian, it can create conflict within that family. In Jesus’ time of history, there were persistent family tensions as so many Jewish people were converting...There were tensions in their synagogues and also divisions in their families. Jesus was warning his disciples what to expect when they began to follow him.”<sup>1</sup>

In almost every aspect of life that you can imagine, making a decision based on what Jesus calls you to do can lead you to be different. And when you don’t act the way you are suppose to act, when you don’t say what you are suppose to say, when you don’t play your part, when you don’t read your lines, when you actually inject authentic Gospel into the conversation, things can get very un-peaceful. Just think about all that you have ever done—all

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au-loader/MtPentecost26.htm>

that you have ever been asked to do—to keep the peace at home, at school, at work, with friends.

In our family, and in nation “...what passes under that name of peace is often only as mask that masquerades and hides injustice, brutality, and a dictatorship. Some families or nations give an aura and illusion of peace simply because of the dictatorial ‘peaceful’ rule of a despot. Jesus was not bringing a false peace which tolerated injustice or oppression.”<sup>2</sup> Long before Jesus the prophets cried out against false peace. The prophet Jeremiah railed against leaders who used the promise of peace to oppress: “For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush.” (Jeremiah 6: 14-15a) This would not be news to the folks the apostles encounter.

Whether Jeremiah or Jesus we do not like to hear the truth. We want to hear: I will defend you. I will save you. Go home and don’t worry. Let me take care of it. That we like. So what do we do to those prophets who tell us the peace is false? What have we done to prophets and saints and poets? What have we done to Gandhi, to King, to Jesus? What do we do to the truth tellers? Don’t we want to be left alone to eat our dinners in front of our TV’s? Don’t we want to continue to recite the lines that allow us to keep that family conflict under wraps? Don’t our jobs and livelihood often depend on telling the naked boss how much we like his Brooks Brothers suit? Don’t we often put our faith in a little box with a secure lid so that it doesn’t offend anyone? How angry do we get at those who say: take the Gospel seriously?

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_a\\_true\\_discipleship\\_GA.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_true_discipleship_GA.htm)

How threatened are we by those who mess with our “peace”?

Very often what is sold as gospel in our families or gangs or cliques or teams is not Gospel. Very often, what is taught as Christianity in your family may not be. Very often what talk shows and politicians pitch as Christianity is not. Very often your friends are not the most reliable theologians. As a child of God you must judge what your mother says, what your best friend says, what Trump says, what Biden says, what your partner says, what self improvement gurus say, what your boss says, what anyone says by what Jesus says. And then there may be dissent. Disagreement. Division. To follow Jesus may mean leaving. To follow means to say: this is not what I believe. **THIS** is what I believe. And there goes the calm. There goes the false peace.

Jesus is saying to his teachers in training: when you preach the Gospel it is a new Gospel. When people really hear, and take to heart, the word of truth, they change. And it is not possible to experience this transformation, this conversion, this rebirth, this *metanoia*, without shaking things up. A lot. And not everyone is going to like that. Make no mistake about it. The words of true prophets cut deeply. The words of Jesus can slash.

Still we seek peace. We long for it. Yet so many of the ways we try to find it fail us. Just think of the dollars spent on weapons, on anti-anxiety medication and on booze. But all of that—and all we have discussed—don’t seem to get at the heart of peace. The cease fire is good but not lasting if we keep the guns loaded. The *détente* is good but not lasting if we keep the missiles pointed at our enemy. The pleasant family dinner is good but not lasting if there is always underlying and unresolved toxicity.

Could it be that Jesus calls us to a peace that is deeper, broader, more

transcendent, permanent? Could it be that Jesus is trying to bring us to a real and lasting and brutally honest peace? Could it be that he is teaching his teachers to say: have the courage to leave that which really has never worked for you and will never work for you because it is based on something not real, not true. Could it be that we are invited to join the only family where peace accepts us as we are? Could it be that the sword that Jesus brings is used to cut out the dis-ease that disables us, the cancer of hate that kills us, those scripted untruths within us that prevent us from being at peace with a God who cannot lie? Could it be that Jesus "...has in mind nothing less than ...liberation for living the life of the kingdom."? Could it be that it is only in God's kingdom that we can find peace? Could it be that I do not have to give up my Peace/Justice" tee shirt? Could it be that as I dare to courageously embrace the Jesus who is "the human face of what God looks like in human form" that I not only have to wear the shirt but I also have to live it?

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020