

“Disrupting the Peace”
The Reverend Allison Caudill
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
10th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15C) – 17 & 18 August 2019

While I was in seminary, I learned about this unofficial tradition called “seminarian Sundays.” These were days in the church year when, if you were a seminarian or an intern or a freshly ordained deacon, you better plan to preach, and you better look at the lessons ahead of time. These Sundays when the newbies got scheduled to preach were often around the time a seasoned priest might, I don’t know, need a vacation or a few extra hours of sleep? Times like the week after Christmas, The second week of Easter, the end of May and the beginning of the school year. These Sundays also just so happen to have some particularly challenging readings assigned to them. I have been an intern at three parishes, and preached to a total of 12 congregations, and let me tell ya, I have preached on EVERY “seminarian Sunday” reading there is at this point. Every single time, a parishioner came up to me afterwards to comment on the difficulty of the themes in the Gospel that day. The words “baptism by fire” usually came up. My colleagues in seminary always laughed when we all found ourselves scheduled to preach on the exact same day, because that usually meant we needed to hit the books, as the lectionary was about to throw us all a curve ball.

While I don’t think today would really be considered a seminarian Sunday, our Gospel passage this morning is definitely an eyebrow raiser. “I came to bring fire to the earth” Jesus tells us. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” Jesus says that he will divide households against one another, families will turn against themselves and be in discord with one another. Looking at the world we are living in, at the political climate and at our own journey toward making changes to our fellowship and education spaces, I’d say we are very familiar with discord. I think I’d be safe in saying a lot of our prayers these days are for peace, for the end of discord and the healing of divisions. The Prince of Peace hears our prayers. But he tells us that what he brings is not the peace we imagined.

When I hear the word peace, I think of quietness, stability. I imagine a peaceful village, a quiet and simple place full of people living quiet and simple lives, treating each other with kindness and fairness. I think of the common phrase “rest in peace,” a prayer and a wish we have for our beloved dead. I think of “Peace on Earth,” a mantra written across banners and the front pages of Christmas cards. I think of the blessing and the invitation we hear every week in this place “The peace of the Lord be always with you.”

These images of peace evoke calm, rest, an absence of disagreements and a sense of unity. These are the sorts of things we wish to share with each other when we pass the peace, shaking hands and hugging and greeting one another in the name of God. We reach out to one another in an act of welcome, as brothers and sisters in Christ. But Jesus tells us that even within families there will be division. So when we reach out our hands to one another and say “the peace of Christ,” what exactly are we wishing one another?

In addition to these calm, comforting, unified images of peace, I find myself thinking of some other phrases that feel familiar too, other ways that we talk about peace in this world. Peaceful protest. Disturbing the peace. No Justice, No peace.

These are all phrases familiar to activists during the Civil Rights movement, both in the history of our nation and today. Good Christian people of all races and denominations have spoken these words and employed these methods of action to bring about justice and change. The active non-violence of the reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee called at once for peace and for disturbing the peace. Activists were called to take up room in places that were not meant for them. Students were called upon to join marches that would disrupt the normal routines of whole communities and place themselves in vulnerable positions to protect those who were even more so. Christian Leaders were prevailed upon to speak out in ways that put their jobs, their reputations, and their very lives at risk. In working for peace, these heroes of history found themselves in the chasm of division.

In a few days the church will mark the anniversary of the martyrdom of Jonathon Daniels, an Episcopalian seminarian who was murdered in Hayneville Alabama in 1965. He was in Lowdes County because he believed it was his duty as a Christian and a future priest to protect the rights and lives of the people there, who had just been granted the right to vote. He was in Hayneville because he had been arrested for protesting the segregation of shopping areas a town away, and had been transported to his unair-conditioned cell in the back of a garbage truck. He and another priest and two young women were released, and he took his companions to the only store in town that would sell the young women a soda despite the color of their skin. A special deputy armed with two firearms blocked the entrance to the store, and pointed his shotgun at one of the young women. Jonathon pushed her out of the way, and was shot at point blank range. Ruby Sales, the young woman Jonathon gave his life to save, was 17 years old. She is still alive.

Jonathon Daniels was in Hayneville Alabama because he had been arrested for disturbing the peace. Jonathon Daniels was murdered because he believed that in order to have peace, there must be justice. Jonathon was martyred because he believed in the peace of Jesus, and was working to achieve it even in his death.

The division caused by injustice does not exist only at a national or political level. These divisions are not just about race, or class, or upbringing. We feel these divisions in our communities, in our parishes, in our homes. We feel these divisions in our own hearts. Every time we are faced with a difficult question, with the suffering of our neighbor or the temptations in our lives, we are divided. We are divided in our hearts between the peaceful choice and the just one, the simple one and the complicated one. We are turned against ourselves and against one another as we wrestle and puzzle out what is our will, and what is God's will, and what in the end we pray will be done.

Just like Jonathon, and Dr. King, and the blessed justice-makers throughout the history of the church, we are charged with the holy task of disrupting the peace. The peace that allows people to be treated differently based on their skin color or the person that they love. The peace that allows children to remain parentless and veteran soldiers to remain homeless. The peace that is really just the status quo, masquerading as our only option. Jesus came to show us that it isn't.

The work we have been called to won't be easy. It never has been. Jesus was arrested, tormented, and hung on a cross to die. The early Christians were hunted, persecuted, and killed. The family of God has endured disagreements and schisms and we continue to wrestle with disputes that prevent us from full union in one body. Mothers and daughters, Fathers and sons, brothers and sisters have turned against

one another time and time again as we continue to discern the truth and fullness of God's will for us. Jesus wasn't exaggerating about any of it. God knows what we are up against.

When Jesus tells us that he comes to bring not peace, but division, he does not mean that peace will never come. That peace which passes all understanding, that peace which governs the kingdom we are promised from our Father in heaven, is available to us. That peace is possible. It just doesn't come first.

The division that Jesus brings to the earth is not the opposite of peace. It is the precursor. It is the act of getting to the bottom of things, of stretching and broadening our imaginations and our lives until they are wide enough to hold the kingdom of God. Jesus is not the one who divided us against one another. Jesus has come to bring fire, and in its light we can see all the ways we have chosen to divide ourselves. The peace of the Lord is freely offered to us. It is up to us to embrace one another in it.