

“No Justice, No Peace”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor at Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 12/6/2020

John 16:33

Some of you who have joined in on protests around the country or have tuned in on your television or radio, you will have heard it chanted yourselves, this common protest slogan “No justice, no peace!” It is used typically when a clear injustice has been enacted, and most commonly when racial injustice has occurred. I remember when Ruth and I, and Mumu and our son Isaiah marched in Winston Salem with Rev. William Barber and so many others several years ago during a Moral Monday action, when voter suppression laws were being enacted--specifically to disenfranchise the Black vote. And as we marched, thousands deep down the city streets, the caller would scream through the microphone “No justice!” and we’d we scream back “No peace!” What a strange thing, I thought, for a Christian to be calling back... “No peace.” And this protest was being lead by a Christian leader. Historically, Christians are a people of peace, right? But here we were standing with our Black neighbors who felt anything but peace. How can you as a Christian feel peace when others around you certainly do not? This is a dilemma many of us face in this day and age, especially if you are of the dominant culture. Peace is a luxury, it seems.

Peace is typically the goal of civilization in general, unfortunately it’s typically set by the terms of the dominant group, and favors their interests. I don’t mean to be political about it, but I must call out the realities of our societies-- peace can only exist when all stakeholders are represented fairly, justly--hence the notion, there is really no peace when there is no fairness--or more appropriately labeled--justice. Remember the word justice carries with it an understanding of equality, if not equity itself: A fairness that is equitable. So when the sides are not fair or equitable, it is really only peace for one side (the “winning side” or the “dominant side” rather than for all sides), though politically the word “peace” is ascribed to both sides only because a metaphorical “cease fire” is implemented, if you will. But is that true peace? I would contend that no, not when at least of the stakeholders is disenfranchised. It will not be a true, lasting peace. So, no justice, no peace... isn’t a threat as much as an honest description. However, there are those of the dominant culture, when they hear this slogan used in protests, view it as a threat that unless justice is served, unrest will continue. I will not argue that such is indeed a reality of the situation, but it is less about causing unrest or simply owning up to it honestly because peace is not achieved.

Even Jesus said his peace he gives to us, and to not fear the world because he has overcome the world. But we must understand that simply resting in this fact does not make it so. We must act as the hands and feet of Christ in this world today; we must resist the attitudes of superiority and subjugation, and counter their policies. We must stand with the marginalized. We must advocate for the voiceless. We must weep with the grieving; their tears become our own. We must bleed with the hurting; our blood becomes one. This is how we become peace.

Now, I bring this up in our “Chrisian” context, not as a threat, but as something we need to look at honestly and deal with appropriately. We serve the Prince of Peace. We strive for both a deeply rooted internal and an obvious external peace. It is almost by definition what we understand to be a dominant quality of our faith, our spiritual path: Peace. Many of us are pacifists, and we disavow violence altogether. We hope for nothing but peace in this world as a byproduct of reconciliation with God, our Creator. But my question even for us is, how can we have peace or claim peace, or even impose peace, without justice? It seems a bit presumptive and even could be said to come from a place of privilege, doesn't it? For if you are from a disenfranchised group, an oppressed group, it would be disingenuous to claim peace while still in the throes of resisting oppression, right?

So, how do we reconcile this fact? How can we claim peace without justice? I don't feel right about it... for me it is only by ignoring the suffering that I can hold peace up without mentioning the suffering and that peace is being aspired to, but will not happen without justice alongside it. Therefore, though out of the ordinary for the Advent season, we will light a candle of Justice. I believe we truly cannot have one without the other. (Lights candle)

And with this candle lit alongside that of Peace, we recognize the harmony that exists between the two... “No Justice, No peace.”

Prayer: *Lord we pray for your justice to roll down from the mountain above. Let it roll onto us load like an avalanche of equity and fairness. No more racism, no more oppression, no more elitism, no more prejudices, no more marginalization, no more hypocrisy. Bring into alignment true equity, with no more favoritism, no more privilege, no more thinking of one above another. Let us truly fall in love with our neighbors and melt into each other's arms. Let us apply the principle of Jesus, that of true love: To lay one's life down for another. May we become like this, and then we know true peace, true compassion, true justice. Let us fold into this truth: No justice, no peace. Amen*

And I ask that we abstain from the Lord's supper today, to fast and pray this hour together. And when we take Holy Communion on Christmas Eve, may we do so in somber recognition that the Prince of Peace only becomes Peace on Earth when we lay down our injustice, and become a part of the reconciliation process of Creation with Creator. May our communion at that moment be complete as we embrace all of the Advent qualities we cherish in our Savior and ourselves, Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy... but not without Justice--because without justice, there is no peace.

Blessings to you all