

“Sword and Peace”

*“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.  
For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”*  
[Matthew 10:34-36]

*“I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”*

Who remembers what I preached on last week?

I preached on several brief passages from two letters from St. Paul.

In Ephesians 4:1-3, he writes:

*“I beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,  
<sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,  
<sup>3</sup> making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace....”*

And in Galatians 5:22-23, he writes: *“<sup>22</sup> ... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace....”*

Okay, let me ask you: what is the symbol of the Holy Spirit? Everybody, look at the cover of your bulletin.

What’s the very first thing that’s on all of our correspondence here at Salem?

The logo of a dove with an olive branch!

Now do any of you remember when we switched from the old logo of our building to that logo?

As soon as I arrived here!

Do any of you remember why?

Because as soon as I told 3 different non-Christian friends of mine

that I was going to a new church named Salem, their response was, “Salem? Like in the witch trials?!”

To which I explained that “salem” was a Scandinavian word that meant the same thing

as the Jewish word, “shalom”, and the Muslim word, “salaam”, which all mean “peace”.

If you want to grow a church and reach out to non-Christians,

a name that brings to mind witch trials is not particularly helpful!

And since I didn’t think we were about to change our name,

the best idea I could come up with, was to change our logo

to make sure that people knew the connection between Salem & salaam & shalom & peace.

And what better symbol was there to represent us,

than that of the Holy Spirit, the dove with an olive branch, the dove of peace?

Now the dove is not the only symbol of the Holy Spirit. What are some other symbols? (Think Pentecost!)

Roaring wind. And fire. And people speaking in different languages.

In fact, if we look back over the history of Salem in the past 70 years,

especially if you talk to former pastors, fire and wind and conflicting tongues

has probably been more evident than a dove of peace!

So how do we make sense of this Jesus who said he came to bring, not peace, but a sword

and who also promised to send us the Spirit who would bring peace and unity?

(This is why people should come to Bible study!

Because when you try to make sense of it on your own, it’s not easy.

But when we come together to study God’s word, it is absolutely fascinating!)

How do we make sense of these two apparently contradictory images of Jesus?

It’s not easy. That’s for sure.

In fact, I spent all week trying to figure out how to preach on this text today!

But it is fascinating when the spirit enlightens us –

as happened yesterday morning when God finally gave me this word to preach to you.

How do we make sense of Jesus who said he came to bring not peace, but a sword,  
and who is also known as the Prince of Peace?

Well there is a way.

Because peace is not the absence of conflict, but rather the goal of conflict.

Think of it as the goal of the hero in a fairytale.

In order to win the prize, the hero must go on a dangerous journey

that involves encountering evil, and having to battle his way to victory.

He doesn't start out with peace. Peace is the promise and a prize.

That's true for every Christian and every congregation, to some extent,  
because peace is one of the fruits of the spirit.

But for Salem? It is much more than that.

It's our calling. It's our destiny. It's our purpose.

Peace is our God-given identity. Peace is our God-given purpose, promise, and prize.

So I want you all to think of yourselves as heroes on an epic journey  
to win the greatest prize in all the world: peace.

Peace like this congregation has never known before.

So how do we get there?

How many of you remember the author M Scott Peck?

Anyone remember the famous book he wrote?

Peck was an American psychiatrist and best-selling author

who wrote the book, The Road Less Traveled, published in 1978.

He wrote other books as well,

including one in 1987 called The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace  
in which he explores, in depth, the concept of building community.

He writes about how he had been involved in very few true communities over the course of his life,  
but the few true communities he had experienced had had a tremendous impact on his life.

Soon after his book came out, I went to a workshop with Peck

to learn about community making, and I will never forget what I learned there.

He explained that most of our experience is in pseudo communities –

communities that come together because of visible things that they have in common –  
like race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, belief systems, and traditions and rituals.

These pseudo communities attempt to maintain their community by being “nice” –

i.e., by being pleasant with each another,

avoiding disagreement even if it means tolerating disrespectful behavior,  
and clinging to their identity in those surface things

so that despite any claim to the contrary, others seldom feel welcome.

A PSEUDO COMMUNITY is neither sincere nor authentic,  
for its unity is based on surface characteristics only.

Peck goes on to say that in order for a pseudo community to become a true community,  
the illusion of the false community must be stripped away.

This happens when the individual members of the community share their sincere and authentic beliefs.

And this is where Jesus' use of the sword comes in – it cuts away pseudo community.

And that's when Stage 2 in community development occurs: CHAOS!

When people share what they really think and feel, the entire illusion of community is shattered.

As people realize that while they may share in some surface commonalities,

there are significant and often many differences of opinion.

It's what Jesus is describing when he says that his sword will set family members against one another.

In this Chaos stage, factions develop, and well-intentioned but misguided attempts are made to persuade, convert, win, or even coerce others to their “side”.

At this point such communities often part ways or end,  
but for those who hold on and don’t leave or fall away, there is a stage 3.

Peck calls Stage 3 EMPTINESS, and says that this is the most difficult stage because people can see no way to resolve their differences.

Feelings of sadness and grief, depression and despair, frustration and impatience, anger and fear threaten to overwhelm.

When Peck worked with groups to bring true community, he said this was the hardest stage because everyone needed to wait,  
and since they weren’t sure what they were waiting for,  
and since they didn’t know how long they would need to wait, it was tough.

And yet, if they waited, Peck said, something incredible happened.

And he told us that he could only attribute this incredible thing to the work of the Spirit.

He said that people would begin emptying themselves  
from their preconceptions, their assumptions, their prejudices, their own desires,  
and their need to convert anyone else.

And as everyone gave themselves over to this experience of emptying themselves  
and opening themselves to the others,  
they found themselves in a whole new place –mentally, emotionally, spiritually, & even bodily.

They discovered they had found TRUE COMMUNITY after all  
as a gentle peace that was almost mystical and magical settled upon them.

A sense of love enveloped them, and they understood that  
that love was wide enough and deep enough and strong enough  
to embrace all of their differences

and to hold each and every one of them in all of their honesty, authenticity, and diversity. In this place of true community, they could be truly welcoming and inclusive and loving.

True community, according to Peck, is a group that has developed these characteristics:

- inclusivity, commitment, and consensus; a sense of realism;
- the ability to be contemplative and self-aware; feelings of safety in all members;
- the ability for members to experiment with new types of behaviors;
- the ability to fight gracefully; a place where all members are leaders; and a spirit of peace.

Peck went on to say that, of course, since we are all human,  
true community can devolve back into pseudo community,  
but that if a group commits itself to finding true community again, it will find it.

I’ll sum this up shortly,

but I want to say 1 more word about that stage of emptying in which WAITING is the key.

Anyone who has read the Bible knows that no matter what human beings want,

God has God’s own timetable.

Giving God a deadline is not in align with scripture or Christian tradition.

In fact, it can be a very bad idea.

I think I told you before about my conversation with God a few years back

when I was telling God that I was really tired of waiting for this thing God had promised me. I wanted it NOW!

I didn’t hear anything from God right away.

But several hours later as I was out driving in my car, I heard God say,

“If you were 4 months pregnant, would you want the baby now?”

“Oh. No. I guess that would be pretty dumb”, I said. “Kind of counter-productive.”

And a few minutes later I said, “Okay. I get it. You know best. I’ll trust you & your timetable.”

That’s when I came to realize that giving God a deadline is *not* the best idea.

But there's something else I want to share with you about deadlines as well.

When some pastoral colleagues asked about our meeting here at Salem last week,  
I said that I really felt that the Spirit had been present –  
but there was one decision we made that I did not feel was Spirit-led – we had set a deadline.  
And one of the pastors said, “You're right! We don't need a DEADline. We need a LIFeline!”  
And I was there, “Wow. I had never even thought about the word “deadline”!  
But it has the word “dead” in it.  
Deadlines are about death because God is not about our deadlines.  
Instead of setting deadlines, we must wait patiently for God to send us the LIFeline  
that God has for us whenever God is ready to give it to us.

So to sum up, Jesus came to bring both the sword and peace.  
The sword is what shatters pseudo community  
in order to make way for the Spirit to create true community.

Here is what I believe about Salem.  
First of all, no matter what we've exhibited in our behavior in the past,  
I believe that our name – Salem / Peace – is not a random happening.  
It's our calling. It's our destiny. It's our promised land.  
Peace is our God-given identity. Peace is our god given purpose, promise, and prize.

So I really do want you all think of yourselves as heroes on an epic journey  
to win the greatest prize in all the world: peace.  
Peace like this congregation has never known before.

I also believe this:  
I believe God has chosen this little ordinary unknown congregation  
in just the same way that God chose that little ordinary unknown people of Israel –  
blessing us so that we can be a blessing to others.  
God is doing a new thing in Bridgeport, God is doing a new thing in the Council of Churches,  
and God is doing a new thing in the New England Synod.  
And God is doing a new thing in us here at Salem.

I believe that Jesus has started by using the sword to cut apart our pseudo community,  
and that the Spirit will then lead us from pseudo community through chaos and emptiness  
into the most amazing true community any of us have ever known.  
I believe with all my heart,  
that if we wait in patience, if we pray, if we listen and look for God, if we follow and obey,  
then God will use our little ordinary unknown congregation  
to do huge, extraordinary, amazing, spectacular things.

I believe that. And I hope that you will begin to believe that, too.  
Because it's when we begin to believe that we will receive! Thanks be to God! Amen