

Words that Make Peace Possible

Luke 24: 13-35

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work.

The disciples walking to Emmaus were taking their first tentative steps in the post-resurrection world. They had not physically seen Jesus until the stranger we know to be the risen Christ approached them, but they had heard word from several of the women in their group not only that the tomb had been found empty, but that Angels had met them there and told them that Jesus was alive.

And yet these men, despite the fact that they hoped it was true, despite the fact that they wanted to believe, had simply seen too much in the past few days to truly embrace the reality of the resurrection, at least at first. They had heard the stories, but they just weren't ready to make that final leap. And Jesus says to them, before breaking bread with them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared." How slow of heart they were to let the good news of the resurrection take root in their lives. They wanted to believe everything that Jesus told them, but there were things that held them back.

As we've experienced the news of this past week, I have felt and seen slowness of heart as I've realized how hard it can be to live in the light of the resurrection when our feelings are as strong and complex as, for many of us, they are right now.

The good news I have seen this week, and by that I mean the Gospel good news, has been the vision for a truly peaceful world that was first put forward in a sermon in 1957 by Martin Luther King, Jr. There is a quote from the sermon that has been widely circulated this week, and I first have to say that if you don't already know it, the quotation that was first circulated (mostly on Facebook) was a misquote. Most of the quote is taken directly from a sermon King wrote in jail in Birmingham, but part of it was written by someone else. What King actually wrote was this:

*"Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."*¹

You may have seen quotation that includes "I will mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy". That may be a powerful phrase, but King didn't write it. As I understand it, a teacher in Japan wrote it this week and then followed it by quoting Martin Luther King, and the internet being the internet it spread like wildfire.

But let's hold on to what King really wrote in his 1957 sermon. "*Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that*". And if you go to the sermon, he says a whole lot more about the damage that hatred does. He says that it "*scars the soul and distorts the personality.*" He says that "*hate is just as injurious to the person who hates...it corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity...it destroys a man's sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him*

¹ *Loving Your Enemies*, by Martin Luther King, Jr., can be found in its entirety at <http://www.salsa.net/peace/conv/8weekconv4-2.html>.

to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and confuse the true with the false and the false with the true.”

Hate can't drive out hate; only love can do that. It's as if King is speaking to us from far to the other side of the road to Emmaus, speaking to us from a place in which the world can be totally viewed in light of the resurrection. And so many of us are like those disciples, who want so much to know that that's the way the world will work from now on, but just aren't there yet.

But King gives me hope. He gives me a vision of hope that transcends the complex feelings of sadness that I feel when I think about all that has been lost in the last 10 years. Many have lost loved ones, many more have seen our world become a darker place, a place that is more paranoid and more suspicious. The death of one man does not undo the damage that he has caused. This fills me with sadness.

But the words of Martin Luther King, which cannot undo the damage, can lead us out of it. They cast light on the vision of true peace and true justice that Jesus teaches us, on a world in which all of God's children can live peacefully, free of fear, and free of violence.

We all have our perspectives on September 11th, 2001, and what has happened in the years in between. I worked in New York City until 2001; the city is very close to my heart. I had left New York and had entered seminary in New Haven and had one day of classes under my belt when the attacks happened. I had some big questions then, and still do, about how to work through what had happened. What was the Christian response? What does it mean to be a people committed to reconciliation and peace, when so many of us had a hard time imagining it? How was I to set aside my feelings of anger, of fear, and even of dread?

The answer was, I wasn't. My feelings were real and an important part of how I prayed. And it was then, when responding to Jesus' call to love and pray for enemies when it was most difficult, that I really realized how *hard* it sometimes was to be a Christian, but also how meaningful it was.

It was a sermon that I heard by Peter Gomes that helped me with this. This was just a few months after the attacks, when he said at Battell Chapel in New Haven: "Either the Gospel matters today, or never mattered at all." Either it matters today – that day -, when the ashes of the World Trade center just an hour's drive away were still smoldering, when our grief and our anger and our hunger for answers were consuming us, when we were particularly in danger of letting our hatred rather than our love define who we were, either the message of the Gospel mattered that day, or it never mattered at all.

When Jesus said to love and pray for our enemies, he didn't mean to do it just when it seemed easy. He meant for us to do it especially when it was hard for us, because if we don't, if we react to hatred with hatred, then our perspective, our personalities, our values, would become warped by another person's hatred. I don't believe that Jesus wanted men and women of violence to have that kind of power over us. I believe that Jesus wants us to be more free than that.

But once we start thinking about what we feel and why we feel it, things start to get really complex. I don't know if I can give a straightforward answer to some of the

big questions that are out there from the pulpit: is it appropriate to celebrate, or to express relief, or to speak only of sadness? I can't claim to know what each of us is feeling right now, but I do believe that whatever we're feeling, God hungers to be let in: to be let into our hearts, and into these places where our feelings are so powerful and so complex. We are the people of the resurrection, which means we are called to something that transcends violence, that honors the dignity of every human being. We cannot do this unless we are prayerfully welcoming God into our hearts, inviting God to bring healing and transformation to those places where we only know wounds.

The collect we read last Sunday morning challenges us to truly live in the post-resurrection world: "Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation. Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith." It is an Easter Prayer for an Easter People. It is a call also to be a people of reconciliation, which to me means being a people who, in our actions and our thoughts and in our prayers, commit ourselves to "work for a world where all may dwell in peace."

I am grateful for those who have dedicated, and in many cases given, their lives these past few years so that all may dwell in peace. The question is, what do we do with the opportunities they have given us? Which path do we take?

My hope is that this week we can all see more clearly the different worlds envisioned by those who preach hatred and violence and terror, and the world envisioned by men and women of peace. King's words, which to me echo with wisdom and transcendence, are the very words that make peace possible.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens

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3rd Sunday of Easter, Year A

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro NC