

ISAIAH 5:1-7 or JEREMIAH 23:23-29

PSALM 80:1-2, 8-19 or PSALM 82

HEBREWS 11:29-12:2

LUKE 12:49-56

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 14, 2022; Year C

Piece This Peace!

Peace! Prince of Peace! “Peace on earth, good will toward all!” According to one source there are 429 references to peace in the Bible, ninety-one in the Christian scriptures, thirty in the Book of Isaiah, twenty-four in the Gospels, and the rest scattered throughout. In other words, “peace” is a rather important word in scripture, certainly a major theme found within various biblical texts. We talk a lot about peace, the lack of it and the need for it. It seems that there are not nearly enough peacemakers in the world today, far too many warmongers, far more hawks than doves, or so it seems. We clamor for peace against a cacophony of dissonant voices whose mantra suggests that they want otherwise, that they are looking to pick a fight, to instigate violence to satisfy their lustful rage. Perhaps in their shallow belief system might makes right, that the one with the bigger guns wins and rules. We tend to talk about peace in a sappy, syrupy, kind of way, allowing warm and fuzzy images to dictate and dominate our thoughts and feelings, especially exacerbated when certain holidays come into focus, all those snapshots adding joy, anticipation and excitement, to the normal routine of our ordinary ho hum calendars. It might be said of the subject that somehow peace loses any substantive quality, the depth and breadth of a subject that is indeed much more highly complex and complicated than we perceive or presume. Yes, peace is always paramount on the Second Sunday of Advent, accompanying the four Sunday liturgical observances that also include the wonderfully gracious images of hope, joy, and love. Peace! We call attention to Jesus’ presumptive peacefulness at Christmas, certainly a major image on many a Hallmark greeting card.

Peace! We all want it! We all need it! We just don’t know how to get it, how to make it happen, how to manifest it in the worldwide killing fields infecting our conflicted global village, a world always seemingly on the brink of war, or as with Russia’s egregious invasion of Ukraine, already fully engaged. Peace is a noble, a most worthy, but a most elusive goal, suddenly rare on our local, almost appearing nowhere on the collective radar of the international stage. The best we seem to achieve is some pedestrian, almost trivial, level of truce, a fragile détente that is always vulnerable, on the shakiest of ground, always at risk, conveniently, or not, belying a suspiciously simmering distrust and animosity. In many ways peace is as mysterious as the God who created its grandiose capacity and longs for its substantive reality to be magnanimously and miraculously manifest among all the peoples

of this global village we inhabit, realized among every tribe and clan, contentious or not. And, perhaps above every other word, more than every other adjective associated with Jesus, peace is frequently used in relation to Jesus, perfectly though perhaps inaccurate in our descriptions of what we naively claim to be his mostly calm demeanor, his generous embrace, imaging the very lovingly gracious essence of his being. We understand Jesus and peace as like proverbial peas and carrots, two sides of the same coin, unified as one harmoniously synthetic composite, hardwired, inseparably enmeshed, as part and parcel of the same, peace clearly an intrinsic aspect of his multifaceted hospitable, his welcoming and inclusive identity. This must be what it means when we talk about the peace that passes all understanding because this stuff is way beyond our paygrade! Perhaps we need a further review, another look!

Peace! Have we jumped too quickly, leaped to our conclusions as we guzzle that traditional Kool Aid? Have we made some seriously flawed assumptions? Have we gotten it right? Have we gotten it wrong? Have we erred in our assumptive proclamations about who Jesus was and thus remains as the pervasive Spirit of Christ? Perhaps Jesus is not who we thought he was! Maybe our traditional understandings of the person need a new or different interpretation. In certain instances, in the Gospels Jesus is very much the consummate, quintessential, provocateur! His oft agitating personality was most provocative, as in eliciting provocation! Remember that it is the same Jesus who cleansed the temple with a whip of cords, driving out the money changers in a fit of rage, the same Jesus who called people “vipers” and “serpents,” “hypocrites” and “liars,” who talked about weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, death and destruction, damnation and eternal fire, even referring to his enemies as whitewashed, perhaps the great unwashed, conjuring up images of tombs full of rotting dead people, calling his detractors the very devil’s spawn. Yes, name calling and slanderous labels always wins friends and influences people! These are not the accusations of a peace maker, a peace monger! Jesus’ politics, yes, he was a political figure as a peasant reformer, were anything but peaceful!

Peace! Returning to our litany of questions, shifting our inquiries just a bit, would we even know what to do with world peace if we had it? Today, our homiletical journey through the Witness from the Gospels in Luke takes us to a most uncomfortable destination, a most awkwardly challenging place. For while these very well were most likely the words of the early Church as their scribes wrote the Gospels, all these musings conveniently placed in Jesus’ mouth, and thus in print, they leave us with far more questions than answers. If these textual provocations provide a window, a doorway, into the very person of Jesus of Nazareth, then he is anything but what he appeared or appears to be. In these heavily loaded narratives, he comes across as if a facsimile somehow taken hostage and now proudly masquerading as the humble Rabbi from Galilee. He becomes like an object in the rearview mirror, the closer he gets the further he is away or vice versa. He is unlike anything that he looks like on a first

glance. It is as if we are seeing his image like someone looking into a funhouse mirror, distorted beyond all familiar recognition. And with all this perhaps surprising and startling stuff, off we go!

Peace! The first thing we must remember as we go about the task of unpacking this short but fully loaded text is that all the Gospels were written after 70CE with the monumental second destruction and fall of Jerusalem and its Temple, the center of cultural and religious activity. The Gospels were written during the height of the most turbulent of times, including these specific references from the unknown “Q” source in Luke (12:49-56) and Matthew (10:34-36). Just as we cannot begin to understand the content of the Hebrew Bible without acknowledging the first destruction and fall of Jerusalem and its Temple in 587BCE, we cannot begin to understand the Christian scriptures without knowing how this bellwether event impacted the writers and thus the writings contained in these sacred texts. These historic episodes serve as lines of demarcation in each narrative. Likewise, in the exact same way, These were shifting, unsettling, times—sound familiar—Christians facing the dejection that accompanies the rejection experienced by those expelled from the parental faith tradition that gave them birth in Judaism’s warm and wonderfully incubating womb, as well as the mounting persecution, terror and torture, that confronted them by their Roman adversaries, making them exemplar martyrs through burnings and other forms of execution, including the atrocities carried out at the coliseum, all in the name of cheap entertainment. Every knock on the door brought fear and trembling, of being found out as it were, arrested and slated for the next round of murderous ravage. Jesus was now dead and the young, fledgling Church was seeking to get a foothold, becoming established as a new religion in the empire as it galvanized an emerging and evolving theology that reflected the horrors they were experiencing in real time. These graphically sadistic killings were far removed from the lovingly gracious ways that portrayed the humble rabbi from Nazareth. With this background, an essential backdrop for understanding essential contextual milieu defining the impossibility of their traumatized lives, the raw and rough edge exposed in today’s Gospel lection becomes a lot clearer, a lot simpler, no surprise in the least. The writers were simply echoing the communal crises that defined the landscape of their fellow Christian constituents. It was art imitating life defined for posterity in graphically articulated verbally and literarily perverse diatribes. It was also a way of justifying any reactionary or responsive hostility within the ongoing family feud that was conceived and consummated in a conflagration between the old and new guard, the tradition of Judaism versus the revelation of the way of Jesus, yes, Christians versus Jews in a most hideous smack down of epic proportions, an unfortunate situation that would forever in many ways define as least to some degree the relationship for centuries, right up until this very moment.

Peace! The prophet Micah, quoted in today’s lection by both the writer of Luke and Matthew declares (7:4-6), this translation taken from the *New Jerusalem Bible*, “Put no trust

in a neighbour, have no confidence in a friend; to the woman who shares your bed do not open your mouth.” As I read these words, it occurred to me that I do not have to worry about that one! “For son insults father, daughter defies mother, daughter-in-law defies mother-in-law; a man’s enemies are those of his own household. . . among them, the best is like a briar, the most honest a hedge of thorn. Today will come their ordeal from the North, now is the time for their confusion.” It is these dire warnings from back in the prophet Micah’s day that both the writers of Luke and Matthew obviously recall as being a clarion call, pertinent, relevant, to their contemporary setting in every way imaginable. The occasion for the Lukan and Matthean narratives is the disfellowshipping of Jesus’ followers from synagogue and/or temple life. These writers were giving the painful, sobering, reminders of the cost of choosing to follow Jesus by anyone who had once been a faithful, card-carrying traditional Jew. What we are witnessing is the residual, the fallout, yes, the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual collateral damage resulting from what was clearly a full blown religious civil war, yes, the ultimate example, the very definition, of an oxymoron.

Peace! All of us can recall the sharp divisions that occurred in our own country’s civil war back in the day, with family and friends choosing sides and going off to battle, giddily going to war, one against the other. Being a child from the south, oh how I remember the pride of the Confederacy as it ignorantly and hatefully stood on the wrong side of history, their flag of shame flapping in the breeze in a host of inappropriate places of government and halls of learning! Writing in the aftermath of the search warrant at Mar-a-Lago, popular progressive Christian writer in an article titled “Bad Blood: Christian Theology and Civil War,” in her blog called *The Cottage*, Diana Butler Bass discusses what she calls the “violent rhetoric and threats of an impending Civil War” that has “skyrocketed on social media” since that bellwether event earlier this week. She quotes Ben Collins, doomsday predictor, who gives these dire warnings, “There are a lot of Americans right now who are extraordinarily angry. . . They believe this is the end. . . that we’re in a full-fledged civil war. . . It is much worse than you can imagine!” I would add that these people are nuts, idiots and fools, the very definition of stupid, the very height of stupidity! Lock and load? What is wrong with these people? Seriously! We have already seen through our television screens, yes, up close and personal, privy to enough needless, pointless, unnecessary deaths, caused by this mass hysteria, the psychotic episode in Cincinnati, Ohio, only the latest casualty of this yet to be determined war. It begs the very real and relevant question, “Are we at war?” As in already! We are certainly not at peace! Butler Bass observes, “As an historian of nineteenth-century America, I hate talk of civil war. The American civil war — the actual one — was a bloody, horrible affair where brothers and cousins murdered one another. About 2% of the entire population was killed in combat, more than 600,000 men. The military number doesn’t include civilian losses or prison deaths, permanent injuries and disabilities, mutilated limbs, or the trauma of sexual violence and rape.” She goes on to add, “Civil wars are the most

uncivil of wars, bloodletting between siblings the most violent conflicts. Indeed, some political scientists argue that civil war violence is brutally irrational (sounds about right), and particularly gruesome in hegemonic populations when fueled by rivalry and revenge.” She semi-concludes by stating, “And now — all this glib chatter of civil war. But people aren’t kidding: they desire blood; they’ve been longing for it;” I would add hoping and praying for it! “They crave revenge. Some of America’s white Christian nationalists want to kill others. And, if it comes to it, a lot of white people will be killed as well as the nationalists’ most despised enemies (we know who they are). Civil war is like that. There are no real winners, just death. Bloody apocalypse and civil war are malevolent twins.” And yes, history seems to be repeating itself once more, as it frequently does! Yes, what goes around comes around, and as Carly Simon once sang about love, “It’s coming around again!” And yes, this newly minted version of a sadistic showdown at Armageddon in many ways is very much a mirror reflecting, perhaps a window or doorway allowing entry, into exactly the kinds of events that were transpiring between the Jews and Christians who squared off against one another when the latter was unceremoniously thrown like mamma from the proverbial train. By the way, I recommend for your reading Diana Butler Bass’ article. It is disturbing but I think dead red accurate in its analytical assumptions.

Peace! The same rubrics indeed hold true in this Christian/Jewish uncivil clash hidden within our reading for today. The writers, interestingly and intriguingly not naming or taking sides, though the reader knows, boldly describe the tension, the anger and hostility, the vitriol that now defined the relationship of folks who had once been immersed in peace and harmony, but were now openly hostile, totally adversarial, now sworn enemies, an unfortunate development that ironically would come to define our collective histories as cousin faith communities. As New Testament scholar and fishing buddy R. Alan Culpepper observes, “The sword is not the disciples’ weapon, but rather the violence they will experience.” The dissension, disruption, and displacement of family members was palpable. Against the backdrop of one of the ten, the commandment demanding the honoring of mother and father, the writer presents a whole host of family feud scenarios, each one emphasizing the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual agony that occurs when separation anxieties rule and rue the day. Hear once again the cacophony of negatively infused anger and frustration, perhaps even budding hatred, “From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” Oh, what a happy household! It is a free for all! As Culpepper notes, “Jesus left home and family and called his disciples to do the same!” After all, this same Jesus once coldly said to let the dead bury their own, that there is not even time to bid loved ones farewell, that “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the realm of God!”

Peace! The not so ironic reality is that peace can never be achieved as long as there is conflict and strife, unrest and societal upheaval, and of course, a lack of justice, social justice. That deduction does not demand the intuition of a rocket scientist! And just as with justice, in all its myriad forms, peace delayed is peace denied! No justice, no peace! Whatever might be said about the historical Jesus, it is obvious that he understood human dynamics, and understood them well. My hunch, along with most reputable biblical scholars, is that Jesus never uttered, never said these exact or even remotely similar words, certainly not in any literal way, these warnings definitely not verbatim quotations. The theory is that Jesus was a peasant reformer who was believed to be leading a peasant revolt, a life that directly led to his arrest, conviction, and execution by crucifixion, his attitudes and actions creating an untenable and irreversible situation in the mind of Roman authorities. The sentiments expressed in these toxically based words indeed might have reflected and revealed, at least to some degree, at some level, Jesus' true thoughts, his very real sentiments, his authentic, genuine feelings. In any case, it is impossible for us to read these stridently poignant words and continue to think of Jesus as a pale, sickly looking, passive pushover, the kind of milk-toasty moderate we usually are guilty of associating with his person. In my best southern speak, there simply ain't no such thing as a "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" in this one who speaks like an experienced, a hardened, well-seasoned warmonger, who promises to bring fire to the earth, so reminiscent of his vitriol filled cousin John, complete with fire and a winnowing fork for good measure. Jesus, as portrayed in this sobering text, is so hot and bothered, so amped up, so revved up, so very agitated, that he is impatiently and wistfully wishing that this all-consuming fire were already kindled! Piece this peace! Wow, what a puzzle! It is interesting that his offer of baptism follows immediately his pyromaniacal ways, giving new meaning to tried by fire! Jesus adds that this inferno is already kindled, already ablaze! And then he dares ask his no doubt confused disciples, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" NO, he declares with unequivocal and unqualified conviction and consternation! He then adds for good measure that not only has he not come to bring peace, "but rather division!" And in Matthew's version of these verbal histrionics, he does not promise division, but a sword a vivid implement of battle. This from the same man who healed a soldier's ear and scolded Peter for using a sword much in the same way Barney Fife carried a single bullet for his pistol, telling Peter to put away the dangerous thing because someone could get hurt! Once again if biblical consistency is what you seek in the Bible, you will be sadly disappointed because it does not exist, it is not in there anywhere. Those who say there are no inconsistencies, no discrepancies, in the biblical narrative, are fooling themselves, deluding themselves while drinking a very toxic communal Kool Aid. The Bible is a study in contradictions!

Peace! So, knowing all these confusing and most confounding things, just what are we to do with this text? How do we find resolution? Yes, how do we make peace with these words? Pardon the pun! Couldn't help myself! I guess I would begin and end with the seriousness of

this thing we call gospel Christianity, including the way we choose to take up our crosses as we seek to humbly, boldly, and honestly follow, integrity being the centerpiece and cornerstone of the foundation of our faithfulness. Carrying our cross is not a matter of “if” but “when” and “how!” We take this stuff lightly at our own risk! Today’s lection is a sobering reminder of the cost of discipleship, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once brilliantly described it. Our commitment, born of our convictions, was never intended to be a piece of cake, a walk in the park, no bowl of cherries. If our faith resembles those comforting remarks in any way possible, then perhaps there just might be something missing, something lacking in our Christian faithfulness, in our testimony, in our individual and corporate witness. We always need to be reassessing, always taking a second glance, infinitum. Christian integrity demands that we stand for what we believe and that we boldly and proudly proclaim the dictates of conscience that drive what should not be a unique, certainly not alternative, understanding of the lovingly gracious, the welcoming and inclusively hospitable, way and ways of Jesus. Right now, perhaps more than ever before, peace loving Christians of every stripe are being tested and being called to deliver an authentic, genuine message filled with hope and all the embraceable images we associate with the humble carpenter turned rabbi from Nazareth. There is no middle ground, nor can there be. There never was! There can be no waffling or wavering in our commitment to his cause. We must be brave, not bland; bold, not blah; courageous not convenient; yes, edgy even to the point of risking danger and the compromised vulnerability that comes with having the audacity to embrace a countercultural, counterintuitive, narrative, more than willing to go against the grain of the prevailing convenience of conservatively exclusionary beliefs and practices. As Jesus once declared, we cannot hide our beliefs and our faith under a bushel! We must boldly, proudly, fly our flag! There should be no shame in our convictions because there is none! We cannot bend or bow to peer pressure, no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey! We cannot stop while pondering and wondering, “what will the neighbors think?” And yes, the smaller the town, the more intimate the surroundings, the more challenging and difficult the response. After all, we are a blue church in a red church arena! Our banner outside says it all and at the same time says very little! What will it look like to fully, unapologetically, lean into the beautiful spectrum of those many colors and all that goes with them? Yes, civil wars are always way more than messy, arguing with neighbors a most uncomfortable exercise, an enterprise fraught with fear and anxiety. In other words, it is so much harder, the degree of difficulty exacerbated, when debating within the broader family of faith, with brothers and sisters who consider themselves, siblings whose beliefs portend a traditional, conservative, and/or fundamentalist bent and consider us radical secular humanists, the worst kind of apostate heretics. I must confess, that as a liberal or progressive type, I am much more comfortable discussing my faith perspective with an agnostic or an atheist! How is that for irony? It is imperative, that for the living of these days, as the hymn sings, that we get comfortable, becoming secure in what we believe, able to defend and articulate, especially in the often-toxic arena of biblical dialogue, discussion, and debate.

Peace! The early Church had their crosses to bear and now we have ours. Should we choose to carry them, to dare and take them to heart and mind, painfully aware of each one in so many ways, the rewards are untold but no doubt overflowing with grace. We see the issues staring us in the face and experience them daily to at least some degree, yes, up close and personal. These conflicted challenges have become a steady and constant companion, our thorn in the flesh, and no doubt will continue to be with us throughout our lives. For more than 2000 years the church has faced conflicts, both external and internal, the squabbles inside the steeple usually the most painful. And yet the Church and the churches still stand, a testimony to the resilience of an institution that while human driven resiliently remains at its core Spirit led, Spirit fed. The good news for all of us who have chosen to seek to emulate Christ, to encourage the Spirit within, to follow the humble but clearly convicted ways of Jesus, is that God's grace will be enough and will sustain us and get us to where the Holy One would have us be both now and in the mystery of the eternal life to come, completely immersed in the great Spirit of the universe. We are safe and secure in the arms of a lovingly gracious God, a divine presence letting none perish, allowing no one to fall through the cracks.

Peace! In the meantime, we know our assignments, the task at hand, the calling which is ours to behold, and that is to, the best of our ability, to be attentive to the pervasive movement of the still speaking Spirit as we lovingly and graciously seek to welcome, to inclusively affirm every human being, "no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey." And as they have said on many occasions, and you know who "they" is, we would dare to be so bold and perhaps arrogant as to parrot their nauseating mantra, using their own pious words against them, yes, loving the sinner and hating the sin, hoping to heap hot coals on their foreheads. I have always wanted to flip that script and turn those tables! Mission accomplished! And as we all know full well, that sin is always anything that separates, that categorizes or compartmentalizes any people group, anything that hinders our relationship to God, to others, i.e., neighbors, and to self, the brokenness contained within any and all of it having the damnable capacity to diminish our humanity. Just know, that no matter, all will be well. Yes, thanks be to God, all will be well. There but by the grace of God go all of us, no matter which side of the aisle we might choose to be. Let's bury all this civil war nonsense. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, it is high time we beat our swords into plowshares! Enough is enough! Good God almighty, the peoples of the world have seen enough of this testosterone laden, gladiatorial nonsense, all this saber rattling, throughout our shrinking global villages' long and storied history. As the First Congregational United Church of Christ, may we continue to lean into the word adopted as our Closing Song and our hope for the world, our prayer for all humanity!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and once again, a constant refrain, longs for all of us to be one and at peace, no matter our faithful expression, no matter how we get there. Amen and amen.