

Untitled
Matthew 5:1–12; Matthew 22:34–46
Sunday, October 29, 2023 (All Saints' Sunday)

Let us pray: Not *my* word, O Lord, but *your* word be spoken, that *your* will might be done, in our lives and in this world, in Jesus' name. Amen.

So obviously, our scripture readings are different than the one listed in the bulletin, because the sermon I want to preach is different than the one I had prepared when the bulletin was printed on Friday. I had one all ready to go, and I was really happy with it. Maybe I'll preach it next year for All Saints'. But it didn't feel like it addressed what I *think* is weighing on a lot of us right now. It didn't feel right for the moment.

It's been three weeks since I last preached, and a lot has been happening in that time. From Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, Israel's response since then, other countries beginning to rattle sabers in support of one side or the other, *another* mass shooting on Wednesday in Maine. And then I was sitting at home on Friday night, watching video of Gaza being bombed so hard that the sky was red with fire, and you could hear people screaming for help. Hostages taken. Hospitals bombed. Innocent civilians and *children* being killed on both sides. Over 8,000 people have been killed since October 7, and one report I saw said that over 3,000 of them are children. For the past three weeks, we have been inundated with a near-constant stream of violence and death and destruction and fear in the world around us. All of this *weighs* on us, and we bring it in here with us. It's not like we just check it at the door or pretend like nothing's wrong. Something is very, very *wrong* in our world right now.

And I really try not to do this, not to rewrite a sermon based on something that happens on Friday or Saturday night, because I don't want to *react* to every single thing that happens. If I

did that, I'd be rewriting the sermon every single week. I see posts on social media all the time where people say, "If your pastor's not talking about *this* on Sunday morning, then you need to find a new church!" I don't agree with that. I don't think we need to chase after every single thing that happens in the world. I think that sometimes you have a very different perspective on something if you sit with it for a few days than you do in the immediate aftermath. And I want to make sure that what I'm preaching is truly a word from *God* and not just what *I* want to say. That's something I take very seriously. And if you are truly preaching God's word, then it will usually speak to that situation without even directly addressing it. Last week Dick Ollinger preached an incredible sermon here that spoke to us *about* the situation in Israel and addressed what so many of us were *feeling* without specifically *being* about that situation.

But sometimes we *do* need to name the situation. And I felt like God was calling me to *do* that this morning. I sat with that a while and waited as long as I possibly could just to make sure this was from God and not my own feelings. And what convinced me of that was when I looked back at the lectionary readings for today. I was originally going to preach on this story from Deuteronomy where Moses and the people of Israel are just about to cross into the promised land, 40 years after leaving slavery in Egypt, and God takes Moses up to the top of a mountain and shows him the whole land that God is giving to them, but Moses doesn't get to enter into it with the people of Israel. He dies before he can. Now, certainly a story like that could speak to the current situation in Israel, because the *land* that God showed to Moses is the very land that they are fighting over today. But that story *only* spoke to that situation, and there's been a lot of *other* things going on and weighing on us.

When I looked back at the lectionary readings for today – which were selected *decades* ago, before anyone could possibly know what was going to be happening in the world today – I saw

that the two gospel readings were Jesus' beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount and this story from Matthew 22. So with all of the violence and death and destruction and fear in the world around us right now, the assigned scripture readings were:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you,”

and then:

“What is the greatest commandment? ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

I heard God's word in *that*. I heard it addressing the situations that we are currently facing, but also the deeper fears and longings of our hearts.

Now, let me just say, I do not *pretend* to know the solution to the problem between Israelis and Palestinians. Or even to fully *understand* it. It is such an incredibly complex situation stretching back *thousands* of years. You can't just say, “What *caused* this situation? Well, it was *that*.” Because then one side is going to say, “Well, *that* was in response to *that*.” And then the *other* side says, “Well, *that* was in response to *that*.” And we just keep going back and forth throughout history, blaming one side or the other. So I don't know how to *solve* this problem. I know there are a lot of *you* who probably understand it better than *I* do.

And I'm also very mindful of how many people in this church have Jewish spouses or family members and how deep these feelings run. In the days after the October 7 attack, Jen and I sat in

the stands at the Conestoga football game with two friends of ours who are Jewish and heard the pain that they felt over what had happened and the *fear* they felt for themselves and their children. And with the rash of antisemitic incidents right here in our community over the past few months (at Valley Forge Middle School, in Chesterbrook, in *our neighborhood* our kids found a swastika spraypainted on a bridge), this is hitting closer to home for them than ever before. I don't know what to *say* to them, other than asking them how they're doing, listening to them, honoring their feelings, and letting them know that I care about them. But I don't know how to *fix* this. I don't know how to fix the problem of mass shootings in America.

But here's what I *do* know; what I *believe* and *trust* in: *violence* is *never* the solution. Violence never actually *solves* the problem. It only begets *more* violence and leads to *more* problems. As followers of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, we are called to love God and love our neighbor, and not *just* to love our neighbor, but to love our *enemies*. To *pray* for them and *feed* them. As Paul says to the Romans, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Never avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God who says, 'Vengeance is *mine*, I will repay.' Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." As Peter says in his first letter, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called."

Some people say, "Scripture says an eye for an eye." And Jesus spoke directly to that. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven." And when Jesus said, "Love your enemies," he did not mean *hurt* them. He did not

mean *shoot* them. He did not mean *bomb* them. He did not mean *kill* them. He *meant* love them.

And that runs entirely contrary to the way that the rest of the world works. The world does not believe that the *meek* shall inherit the earth; they believe that the *powerful* will inherit the earth. The world around us does not believe that if you are merciful, you will *receive* mercy, but that if you show mercy, you will be taken advantage of. The world around us does not believe that peace is made through *loving* your enemies but through *eliminating* your enemies.

But we are not called to be like the rest of the world. Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace who died on a cross refusing to wage war upon his enemies. And we are called to live as citizens of his kingdom no matter what the rest of the world does. We are called to show the world that a *different* world is possible, and indeed, it is *here*. I'm not saying it is *easy*. It is very, very hard. But Jesus says, "The road is *easy* that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. The road is *hard* that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Part of the problem is that a lot of Christians have come to believe in what theologian Walter Wink called "the myth of redemptive violence." This is the idea that war brings peace and violence is what will save us. They point to Jesus' crucifixion as a way of showing that it is an act of violence that leads to our salvation. But the crucifixion is not about *God's* violence toward humanity. It is about *humanity's* violence toward *God*. Jesus did not redeem us *through* violence. He redeemed us *despite* violence. When humanity was faced with the incarnate creator of the universe, *God with us*, the response of humanity was not to *love* him but to *kill* him. But Jesus took all of the anger and hatred and violence of humanity upon himself and said,

“Father, *forgive them*, for they do not know what they are doing.” God’s response to anger and hatred and violence was to forgive it. In *that* is our salvation.

We are called to be voices of peace in the world. And so when I see the violence that is taking place in the world around us, I cannot stay silent. *We* cannot stay silent. We have to say *this is wrong*. It is *wrong* for Palestinians to kill Israelis, and it is wrong for Israelis to kill Palestinians. It is *wrong* for Russians to kill Ukrainians, and it is wrong for Ukrainians to kill Russians. It is *wrong* for mass shooters to kill people, and it is wrong to kill them in return. You can only take an eye for an eye so many times until everyone is blind. It *doesn’t work*. If it *did*, we would have no more problems, no more wars, no more killings, because our violence would have *solved* it all. But it *hasn’t*. And it *won’t*. Because it *doesn’t* work. There is a *better way*, the way of Jesus Christ, and the only question is, *do we really believe it?* Do we believe that Jesus really *meant* the things that he said?

Christ calls us to believe that peace is possible. Christ calls us to believe that we can live peaceably in this world with every other person in this world. Christ calls us to believe that every Israeli and every Palestinian was created in the image of God and deserves to live the fullness of life. Christ calls us to believe that every Ukrainian and every Russian was created in the image of God and deserves to live the fullness of life. Christ calls us to believe that every conservative and every liberal was created in the image of God and deserves to live the fullness of life. Christ calls us to believe that *every single person in this world* was created in the image of God and deserves to live the fullness of life. Christ calls us to believe that we can love one another and live life together, even in the midst of our differences and disagreements. Christ calls us to look for the best in people and not the worst. Christ calls us to do our best not to hurt others. When we *do*, Christ calls us to seek their forgiveness. When they hurt *us*, Christ calls us

to seek their forgiveness. That is what we see in Jesus Christ. That is the way that we are called to live in this world, because it is the way that leads to life. But we'll never know unless we try.

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day. It's actually on Wednesday, but we celebrate it together today. It is a day on which we remember all the faithful men and women who have gone on before us to live a new life with God. So I want to close with the prayer of Saint Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

May that not just be our *prayer*. May it be the way we seek to *live*. Because in doing so we will be like Christ. And we will show the world that a *better* world is possible. Amen.