

“Passing the Peace”
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
August 18, 2019
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

“This is going to hurt before it feels better,” my father warned me before he poured hydrogen peroxide onto my busted knee, washing away the bits of gravel and dirt lodged into my bloodied flesh that had been torn open in a skating accident. I was about ten years old. Sure enough, a wave of fire washed over me, and my tears fell onto my knee, which had turned to a bubbling white as the peroxide did its cleansing power, wiping away the bacteria that could cause infection. As a howl escaped me, my father whispered, “shhh,” and his lips formed into a circle as he began to blow his soothing breath onto my knee. The fire passed, and once he had blotted my knee dry, he covered it in a clean bandage. I was on my way to healing-- and skating again.

This passage in the gospel reads like the sting of angry, stinging bubbles on an open wound. Here we have Jesus promising a fire to the earth, a baptism made complete in his death by crucifixion, and a division that will split household upon itself, parent against child.

Jesus, also called the Prince of Peace, had lots to say about peace: bringing it, making it, building it. We, his followers are called to be peacemakers. Our worship life reflects this, as each week we greet one another in the Passing of the Peace: “The peace of Christ be with you!”

Hear these words about peace in the gospels, from the announcement of Jesus’ coming, to his parting words to his disciples:

Luke 2:13-14 “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’”

Matthew 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

Luke 1:78-79 “Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

John 14:27 “Peace I leave to you, my peace I give to you.”

Why can't we get *that* Jesus today? Then we could feel refreshed and recharged, and get on with our day and whatever the rest of summer asks of us. Instead, we get *this* Jesus:

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Jesus tells the crowds.

Don't get me wrong. I *know* division and how it has crept into my life, into this country, and has marked each one of us.

I come from a divided household. My parents divorced when I was 2 years old. My father remarried, and throughout my childhood I felt a push and pull between the households of the people I loved most. I still marvel that my body carries within it genetic information of two people so completely different from one another-- and yet somehow, in just the act of being me in the package of my body, I have to figure out how to make them come together.

I come from a divided country. Before we even talk about what is going on today in this country, let me remind you-- in this year that marks 400 years since the slave trade was brought to this land-- that the owning and exploiting of black, human lives for economic gain has created social, political, economic, and religious differences in this country that still exist today.

The divisions we feel in this country are echoed around the world. This weekend marks an Ecumenical Prayer for the Reunification of Korea. I understand that when the Korean Peninsula was divided, many families were split up, never to see one another for the rest of their lives. In addition to dividing mother from daughter, or brother from brother, the lives of Koreans in the north and Koreans in the south are very much divided economically. Yet many still hope and pray for peace, even though they have seen, time after time, the peace literally pass right by. Some of us enjoy the luxury of being far removed from this division, but we are not as far away as we may believe; for it is US foreign policy that heavily supports the ongoing division.

We are divided today, with no idea how to get beyond it. At Session last week, someone proposed taking part in a seminar based at a church in Cresskill, looking at how we can talk to one another across political differences in ways that move a conversation forward rather than shuts our conversation partners down. It was a great proposal, but we did not have enough information on the speaker to commit to its support. And in truth, I wonder if we have all become too cynical about the possibility that we can move beyond our divisions in this testy climate.

The singer Billy Joel is a history buff, and before he became a successful musician, he considered being a history teacher. One day, he heard a 20-year old complain that “the world was an unfixable mess. Joel replied to him, “I thought the same things when I was 21”. The person replied, “Yeah, but you grew up in the 50’s and everybody knows that nothing happened in the 50’s”. Joel retorted, “Wait a minute, didn’t you hear of Korea, the Hungarian freedom fighters or the Suez Crisis?” And after that, he wrote the lyrics of a hit, “We Didn’t Start the Fire,” which went through 50 years of history from the time he was born, in 1949, to 1989, when the song was released. Billy Joel’s song spanned generations to tell us that the divisions we face now have been with us for more generations than our own.

So what *can* we dare to hope in the face of such division?

We can know that even when we are broken, Christ can make us whole. Jesus demonstrates that truth in the breaking of the bread, which would predict his broken body. Even when we find ourselves without our family and friends at our side, God dares to call us sons, daughters, beloved children. For in our baptism, we are claimed: “this is my child, the beloved. With you I am well-pleased.” We are related by more than blood. We are related by the waters that claim and carry God’s children.

This is no small thing for biblical writing, for you can see throughout the bible how important real family ties are. The whole religion came about through family ties to one man, Abraham. In the bible, people are repeatedly referred to as the son or daughter of so-and-so, and sometimes the bible goes on to mention relatives that go generations and generations back. Even at the start of Jesus’ ministry, the people were so surprised to hear him, saying, “Isn’t that Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” Family determined who you are, and who you could be.

In their eyes, carpenter’s sons were not saviors. They were carpenters. ¹

¹ David R. Henson, “The Divisive Love of God: Homily for Proper 15C (Luke 12:49-56), August 14, 2013

There is some hope for what we can be when our identity is no longer bound by what households we come from, or the limits of what our families expect from us, or by loyalty that demands that we put them above all others. It certainly makes us freer to follow Jesus, who constantly made alliances that did not fit expectations of family, or of gender, or of status.

When Jesus hung from the cross with his life slipping away from him, he made one of these alliances. “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

I am always moved by a group at Pride parades that offers “Free Mom Hugs” to people who have been rejected by their own families. This summer I saw a sign that said, “If your parents aren’t accepting of your identity, *I’m* your mom now. Drink some water. Take your meds. Make sure you eat. I love you.” This movement has picked up in Korea, and their local PFLAG chapter had moms (and dads) giving hugs to strangers for three straight hours at the Queer Cultural Festival in Seoul. “Woman, here is your son... here is your mother.”

After Margie Reckard was killed by a racist with a gun in a Walmart a couple of weeks ago, her widowed husband Antonio feared nobody would come to her funeral services. They did not have any more relatives living in the area, and they lived a quiet, simple life revolved around one another. Not wanting to grieve by himself, Antonio invited the public to come to the service. And they did! More than 1000 strangers come to pay their respects, not only from the local area, but from several states over. Flowers were sent too, from places as far away as Japan and New Zealand. This man who had just lost the last of his family inherited a family bigger than he ever dreamed of. That does not take away the devastation of how his wife died, and that she is no longer with him, or the larger problem of gun violence. But being surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses does point him towards the healing resurrection brings.

The sad truth is that we will be divided. Sometimes it will be by ideology or violence. Sometimes it will be by death. But what Christ teaches is that we belong to one another in ways that are more powerful than family, more powerful even than death. If we can act on that belonging, rather than cling only to our own self-interests, our own families, our own tribes, then we may come to know a peace that will not pass us by.

You see Jesus shows us that a Christian response to division is modeling expansive grace: that is, a wide mercy and a generous welcome. That is how we can end up with

a faithful and large Roman Catholic family coming on a presbyterian mission trip. That is how we know it is possible that God has already begun work in building the beloved community that heals our most painful divisions, even through you, even through me.