

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Hebrews 11:29-40
Luke 12:49-56

FIRESTARTER

For those who know some history about military atrocities, you may have heard of Attila the Hun, the Spanish conquistadors, the Ming Dynasty, the Khmer Rouge, the Rwandan Hutus. We might think these would be the source of a quote like the following: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” No Nobel Peace Prize for anyone who would say something like that. Such a person could well be considered to be a significant danger. Well, Luke tells us that the one who said that was none other than Jesus of Nazareth. These seem to be strange words coming from the One who is at times referred to as the Prince of Peace. Luke’s Gospel is the one that tells us that angels celebrated Jesus’ birth with the joyful proclamation, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” Our passage for today started out with Jesus saying, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” We don’t really worship a pyromaniac or a vicious warrior, do we? So what do we make of this passage? What are our perceptions of the person who said such things?

Our family feels very blessed to have been able to travel over the last two weeks to a number of places in Europe where we had never been. Our final stop was in a city named for the monks who were instrumental in its founding in the twelfth century. Munich’s central square is named Marienplatz, or Mary’s Square, where its central focal point is a golden statue honoring the Virgin Mary. What I found of interest about it is that Mary is depicted as having a cherub at each of the four corners of her statue defending her from potential monstrous attackers. One angel struggles against a lion beast symbolizing war. Another fights against a rooster-headed monster called a cockatrice that represented pestilence. A third angel is engaged with the dragon of hunger or famine. The fourth fighting angel is up against a large serpent, a symbol of heresy.¹ This city, now in the southern part of the modern state of Germany, was a stronghold of the Roman Catholic faith that felt challenges from Martin Luther’s Protestants further to the north. From a Protestant perspective some five hundred years later, I would not consider our wing of the church to be a heretical challenge. However, the statue clearly communicates that there are issues to be confronted for the well-being of all.

Comedian Stephen Colbert coined a word, ‘truthiness’ on the pilot episode of his ten-year running satire program called The Colbert Report. He said ‘truthiness’ was the quality characterizing a ‘truth’ that a person making an assertion claims to know intuitively from the gut or because it simply feels right without regard to evidence or examination of real facts.² In that spirit, I think there could be a word, ‘peaceiness,’ that would indicate a pursuit of the shallowest kind of peace, as in ‘peace and quiet.’ Peaceiness would ignore the real challenges that need to be addressed in order for there to be a deeper sense of peace possible for our larger society. Perhaps we need to listen to our better angels surrounding us or within us, or we need to listen to Jesus himself, whose priorities call us to get engaged with the challenges around us that must be confronted. Only then will there be real prospects for a deep peace, rather than just a shallow ‘peaceiness.’

If the statue that I referred to earlier were to be erected in one of our central squares today, what might be the four primary beasts that would need to be confronted? What do you think? Would the challenging monster of racism be one? From even before our nation was founded, the racist genocidal acts against Native Americans and enslavement of people of color have continued to get lived out in ways that keep our society from a deeper peace. The Justice Department report that came out this week about the practices of significant parts of the Baltimore

Police Department showed that it was pursuing a ‘peaceiness’ for parts of the community by what it called its ‘zero tolerance’ policies that frequently ignored the rights of people of color.³ I dare say there are institutions in many parts of our country that need to be reformed in how they deal with minority communities if we are going to reach a deeper peace in our land.

Another monster that has to do with human relations is one I will call ‘me-ism.’ It consists of a focus so much on the whims of the self, that it ignores the pressing needs of broader groups. Among the symptoms of this monstrous affliction is the growing wealth gap between the super rich and those who are mired in poverty. It enables adults to ignore the needs of children and others who are vulnerable in our society. It constantly looks for the next source of entertainment instead of rolling up its sleeves to take on challenges that have to be addressed in order to reach a deeper peace within our society.

A third monster of a challenge comes from the despair that abides in so many. Many have lost significant hope in our political institutions as they see gaps of integrity in many of our political leaders. Many have lost substantial hope in our religious institutions, in part because there has been a lot of focus on those groups that don’t live up to their own principles. These weakened institutions then have great difficulty addressing pressing needs, which leads to a further lack of public confidence, and a deeper despair that the future holds something broadly more positive.

A fourth monster comes in the form of a quick-fix mentality. In our society, there is a lack of commitment to addressing challenges that will require dedicated and long-term action to adequately address. Such a mindset keeps us from investing in the long term, economically, environmentally, diplomatically. It entices us to accept the routes of gimmicks and short cuts that put us further from the goal.

With the challenges that Jesus saw facing the people to whom he ministered, he was not willing to settle for offering a shallow ‘peaceiness’ that just made folks feel better about the status quo. There were urgent challenges he called his followers to engage. He was stoking the fires of dedicated and sacrificial service to bring about change. In the passage from Hebrews, chapter 11, we heard reminders of people who lived with great faith and faithfulness in times of tremendous challenge. Time after time God used these people to bring about a deeper and broader peace.

Jesus does not call us to the easy way of insulating ourselves from the pressing needs of individuals or of society. He is not interested in the cheap lies that a sense of ‘peaceiness’ or comfort with the status quo offers. He wants more than that for us, so he calls for more from us. Such a challenge from Jesus may not feel like the cheap kind of peace many seek. Not all will be willing to take up his challenge. Jesus cares enough to stir things up, to fire up his followers so that we will partner with him in deeply redemptive action that comes from a deep faith. We may find the challenges, the monsters if you will, scary. But the Spirit of God empowers us to do what we could not do by ourselves. What we are being offered is the way toward a deeper hope, a deeper love, a deeper faith that can lead to a truer and deeper peace for our society and our world. I pray that God enables us to take on the challenges as true people of faith.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marienplatz>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

³ <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/08/12/489489803/dojs-withering-baltimore-report-says-what-black-folks-have-been-saying-for-decad>