

Lenten Sermon Series 2009

*The Beatitudes 6: The Prince of Peace*

Isaiah 52:7-10; John 14:27-31a

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

Palm/Passion Sunday

5 April 2009

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” All the previous Beatitudes have been building up to this point, so I was surprised to find that none of my source books was particularly helpful on this Beatitude. They talked about peace as a spiritual quality, of things like serenity and a sense of proportion and trust. All of that is well and good, but this Beatitude does not say, “Blessed are those who are at peace” any more than two weeks ago it said, “Blessed are those who are righteous.” It says, rather, “Blessed are those who *make* peace.” That’s really something altogether different. It’s the first Beatitude, and really the only one, that actually asks us to do something. All the others really are about attitudes.

I wonder, though, if this Beatitude is above all the one that makes people feel like the Beatitudes as a whole are unrealistic. It’s all very well and good to talk about peace, but to actually *make* peace? That’s a tall order. And if it seems tough in our day and age of global terrorism, consider how hard it would have been in Jesus’ own context. Judea was ruled by the Roman Empire, famed bringer of *Pax Romana*. But that Roman peace was maintained by the threat of violence. The Roman government would not hesitate to employ extreme force, including crucifixion, on anyone who even hinted at rebellion.

This pressure had made Jewish society begin to crack. The three main factions were the Pharisees, who focused on the spiritual realm and tried to have as little as possible to do with the Romans; the Sadducees, who didn’t believe in heaven and focused on the here and now, trying to deal with the Romans through diplomacy; and the Zealots, who advocated open, violent rebellion against the Romans. All three of these factions were at each other’s throats, and all three appear in the gospels, whereas the Romans themselves are scarcely mentioned. In fact, the author of one of my books, in discussing the peacemaker Beatitude, marveled at Jesus’ silence on the subject of the Romans, noting that he seemed uninterested in the matter.

Well, that gave me pause, and I wondered if it was really true. I’m going to summarize a lot of Bible scholarship here, so please bear with me, but I really am going somewhere with it. You see, the Zealots eventually got their rebellion in 70 AD, and all of Judea was severely punished for it. The Temple was destroyed for the final time, and any concessions the Romans had made toward Jewish autonomy were stripped away. Really, the Jewish nation ceased to exist after that point. All the gospels were written after that rebellion, and the writers were at pains not to appear threatening to the Romans, lest the fate that befell the Jews would happen to them too. So they downplayed the role that the Romans had played in killing Jesus in the first place. Because make no mistake: it *was* the Romans who killed him, not the Jews. Oh, Jesus had his beef with the religious authorities, too, but it’s wrong to say he never addressed the Roman occupation. The thing is, he addressed it in a way that no one – not the Romans, nor the religious leaders, nor the crowds, nor even his own followers – expected. And it has everything to do with peacemaking.

Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, which we remember today, found Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. It strikes us as a rather humble image, but it was not. He was deliberately playing into the image of the Messiah. That is, the

new king who would reestablish the rule of that greatest of Jewish kings, David. The crowd went nuts because they thought he was coming to kick out the Romans. That freaked out the religious authorities, who were afraid that if the Romans got wind of it, they'd do one of their mass executions, something Pontius Pilate was infamous for. In order to prevent mass bloodshed, they tipped off the Romans themselves, handing Jesus over to them so that, as one of the high priests said, "Only one man would die rather than a whole nation." Pontius Pilate was only too happy to oblige. He loved making examples out of people. So he exercised the power of *Pax Romana* and sent Jesus to his death, complete with a sign that both announced his crime and also warned others what happened to rebels. The sign read in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic, "This is the King of the Jews."

Now, how on earth is that story about peacemaking? To all appearances, this is a total contradiction of everything the Beatitude is about. This isn't peace, it's murder! It's bloodshed! Nothing is accomplished, nothing is gained. Jesus is a total failure. Right? Except we know that this is not the end of the story. Jesus will be raised again on the third day, and the real lesson is in what he does *not* do when that happens. He does *not* come with righteous vengeance. He does *not* strike down Pilate or blow up the Temple. He doesn't even condemn his own disciples who had all abandoned him. Rather, he returns with a simple message, so unbelievable and so important that he has to repeat it over and over again before the disciples get it, and that message is, "Peace. Peace. Peace."

When someone strikes out in violence, you expect violence in response. You expect condemnation, anger, retaliation, revenge, even so-called "justice." You do not expect forgiveness. You do not expect an out-stretched hand. You do not expect peace.

The rest of the Sermon on the Mount contains very detailed instructions on how Christians are to make peace, and the themes we hear over and over again are mercy, non-retaliation, forgiveness. What the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount and all the gospels tell us – what Jesus' own life and most especially his death tells us – is that *Christians have no enemies*. Oh, it's not that other people won't see themselves as the enemy of Christians – that's what the final Beatitude is about. But the Christian attitude is to see no one as an enemy. No one. Not those who betray you, not those who abandon you, not even those who murder you.

Remember again that Jesus lived under a violent regime, the effect of which was to cause the Jewish community to split into factions that fought among themselves. Any violence he might have used would have only furthered the cycle of violence, as the Zealots would themselves discover in 70 AD. *Any* violence, including judgment, because as we talked about last week, even judgment is a form of violence, a form that Jesus himself refused to use. As we saw last week, even though he was the only one pure enough to wield it, he declined to do so, choosing mercy instead.

Certainly, Jesus tangled with various factions. He argued with them, he pointed out their errors. But he never saw any of them as his enemies. He would dine in the houses of the very Pharisees he butted heads with. He numbered Zealots among his own disciples, and he did not hesitate to help any Roman who came to him and asked for it. When he was arrested and brought before the High Priests, before Herod, before Pilate, Jesus never spoke out in anger or rebuke. He talked with them, but he absolutely refused to play their game of guilt and blame and murder. They saw him as an enemy, but he never treated them the same way. And ultimately, what happened? Sure, they killed Jesus. But within three hundred years, his followers would take over that very Empire, converting the Emperor himself. And they did so utterly without violence.

Now, I'm not saying that Christians have always gotten it right. Unfortunately Christians have indeed always seen some people as enemies. And while they took over the Roman Empire nonviolently, once they got that power they had no

problem with using the might of the Empire to punish their enemies. But that's not the gospel's fault; that's our fault. The fact still remains, and as much as I read the gospel, I cannot interpret it any other way: that to be a Christian means to view no one as your enemy.

This is peace. As Jesus says to his disciples in his farewell address in the Gospel of John, "Peace I give to you. My peace I leave with you. Not as the world gives do I give." Not the world's gifts, which come with strings attached, with conditions and warranties and a return policy. And it's not peace as the world knows it either, which means "no one is shooting anyone else right now." That's *Pax Romana* again. No, Jesus offers a gift, unearned, ours to make of it what we will. That gift is to see no one as our enemy. That gift is the ticket, the only ticket, out of the endless cycle of violence.

Is it naïve? Well, people debate that. I'm not going to go into it here, and besides I talk about it enough in other sermons. It's absurd, yes! Just like all the rest of the Beatitudes, but I believe it is no more naïve than any of the other Beatitudes. The wisdom of God appears as foolishness to mortals. Jesus asks a lot of us, but I believe he never asks anything of us that he isn't willing to do himself, and he will give us the power to do what seems impossible to us. I'll leave it at that.

Instead, let's look at the second part of this Beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." What a reward this is! It seems a bit incongruous, like it doesn't fit. Shouldn't it be, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall have peace" or some such? Yet the last Beatitude will remind us that's not always true. Instead, the peacemakers will be called children of God. The thing is, God already has a Son. So if we become children of God, then that kind of makes us...Jesus' brothers and sisters, doesn't it? Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus asks, "Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? They are the ones who do the will of my Father." That will, we see here, is for us to make peace.

It's a tall order, but really: can there be any greater reward than that?