

Sermon

The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost | 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 | Peter Lane

Today I want to talk about passing the peace, you know, the bit of the liturgy where the presider says, "The Peace of the Lord be always with you," you respond "And also with you," and then we go around offering one another peace. The roots of passing the peace are in our reading today from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, where he says, "the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss." Paul promotes a radically egalitarian ritual which makes us all participate in the beloved community of God. In the peace, we anticipate a future when God will reign on earth, when justice and peace and love will be realities not hopes. In the peace, we grab that future and enact it ritually in the present. The ritual gives us a vision of how our world ought to look. I'll get back to describing how our ritual developed from Paul's letter. But first, let's look at the world's favorite notion of peace.

We begin our investigation by recalling the 6th episode of that greatest television series, "The Sopranos". The episode was called "Pax Soprano." Toni Soprano meets his Uncle Junior, the new boss of the crime family, at a Little League Baseball game. Toni tries to convince Junior that the best way to lead is to model himself after Caesar Augustus. "Everybody loved him!" Toni says. "It was the longest time of peace in Rome's history." Toni wanted Junior to take a very strong hand so that everybody knew who was in charge and then within that show magnanimity, thus keeping the peace. Toni was appealing to the Pax Romana, the long period of relative peace in the 1st couple centuries of the Common Era. Many came to understand that peace as being a byproduct of the very strong Roman military, including the influential historian Edward Gibbon. George Washington paraphrased Gibbon in his first presidential address to congress, saying that the Romans "preserved peace by a constant preparation for war." It is a notion of peace that requires everybody to know who is in charge, who has the most power to enforce obedience. Teddy Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace Prize by following the strategy. "Speak softly and carry a big stick," Roosevelt said. The speak softly bit meant that you would quietly negotiate. The big stick part meant that everyone at the negotiating table knew who had the baddest, strongest, most fearsome military. Roosevelt built battleships, painted them white and sent them sailing around the world so everybody would know who had the strength to keep the peace. Roosevelt brokered the end of the Russo-Japanese War. For that, he won the 1906 Nobel Peace Prize. Who knows exactly why President Obama won the

Nobel Peace Prize, but in his speech accepting it he made clear that peace relied on a strong military. Obama said, "The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. So yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace." Obama defends this positive view of abundant killing power by saying, "I face the world as it is." Obama, like Caesar Augustus, Teddy Roosevelt, and even Tony Soprano faced the world "as it is" and sought peace by establishing a hierarchy of power.

When we pass the peace, we are participating in the world not "as it is" but "as it will be." "[T]he God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss."

[Quick side note. Kissing on the cheek was a common greeting. Think France. There is nothing erotic about these kisses. If the idea of greeting someone by kissing them on the cheek doesn't sit well with you, you can translate Paul's words to mean, "Greet one another with a holy handshake."]

Paul's understanding of the Kiss of Peace as ritual of passing the peace of God is rooted in the idea of Shalom, the Hebrew Bible idea of peace and wholeness and completeness. Shalom was the state of the world after the sixth day of creation. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." For Paul, this peaceful state was the natural state of God's creation. Human action had introduced conflict, but the world would one day be restored to Shalom, a world of peace, wholeness, "of completeness in mind, body, spirit, and community." Historian Thomas Wilson writes "The kiss is a sign of the covenant that unites God to people and people to God, and to all who are in the covenant to one another; it is an anamnesis (or recollection) of the gift of God in creation, and a promise that the relationship will continue." When we pass the peace, we make present the future vision of "faithful harmony with God and creation."

Like everything in church history, the way I look at the peace is not the only way it can be viewed. Even in the bible, there is not agreement about the purpose of the Holy Kiss of Peace. The notion of broad inclusion, of the spreading of Shalom across the world, can be found in Luke and in Paul. Matthew uses the kiss of peace as a marker of belonging to the community. Matthew was

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interested in maintaining a community of righteousness. Who's in and who's out. Not exactly all invited without exception.

Throughout church history, both Mathew's righteousness understanding and the Luke's inclusive understanding continued. In times and places when being a Christian could be very dangerous, Mathew's version stuck. The peace was an important marker of who ones friends were. The famous martyrs Perpetua and Felicity, who died in 203, gave each other the kiss of peace before going to their deaths. In this regard, it is like the kisses with which Toni Soprano and the rest of his Mafiosos greeted one another. A kiss, the peace, as a sign of community membership.

That sense of community in the face of trial was corrupted once Christianity became the preferred religion. The priests and hierarchy still wanted to use the kiss as a way of knowing who was in or out, but eventually it was in or out of the holiness club. By the 10th century the peace had become a way for the clergy to show their power and holiness. By that point, according to Wilson, "The peace descend[ed] from the altar as a blessing emanating from the holy space populated by the pure clergy." This hierarchical notion became so prevalent than eventually the peace was reserved for the altar party only. Wilson says, "The peace was not to be squandered on the peasants, but kept for the priestly caste." I fear that what Paul meant in his letter to the Corinthians had been totally lost and was the peace beginning to look more like a strategy from Teddy Roosevelt.

Martin Luther was not impressed. He wanted the peace returned to the people. Thomas Cranmer, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury who put together the Book of Common Prayer and was heavily influenced by Luther, tried to restore the peace in the original 1549 Book of Common Prayer, but dropped it from the 1552 book. The peace was then absent from the Episcopal/Anglican liturgy for almost 400 years. Thankfully the Church of South India brought it back to us in their liturgical revisions in the 1950s. The Episcopalians learned from the South Indians and returned the peace to our liturgies in the 1979 prayer book. In our liturgy, the peace returns to its roots in Paul's understanding of a reconciled community taking part in spreading the peace of God.

When we do the peace here at SPR, we are participating ritually in the beloved community that is the vision of God. We are acting out

the in-breaking kingdom of God in the world. So make sure you don't just offer a sign of peace to your friends and family. Make sure you mark the value of inclusion in this parish by offering the peace to someone around you that you don't know. That kind of community is much more what Paul had in mind.

A brief note, before I end, on Roosevelt and Obama and Augustus. I don't criticize them for viewing the world "as it is." But if we are to deal with the world "as it is" in our political action, we must keep in mind what we seek. Where are we going? What ideal motivates us? As Christians, the egalitarian peace of God must be our end. It is only with that firmly established as our goal can we entertain arguments of just war and proposals that hierarchy in society is the best way to reach our goals. All too often leaders get drunk from their power, demanding loyalty, and militaries can't help but want to use their fancy weapons. The power of a leader, the might of a military, must be exercised to the end of God's peace. Our politics should be disciplined by the weekly ritual of passing the peace.

Paul imagined a community that made present the future promise of God's beloved, reconciled community. It is a great calling for this parish. The Peace of the Lord be always with you.

Amen.

Source:

Wilson, Thomas E. "A Pax on Both Your Houses: A Reflection on the Peace." *Sewanee Theological Review* 39:2 (1996).