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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 p.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 25, 2017

“The Sword of Peace”

Scripture: Matthew 10:24-39; 3 Pentecost A (Proper 7)

Well, so much for the “Prince of Peace.” That’s what I thought we were getting in the Messiah, but it appears to be otherwise. By Jesus’ own admission, he didn’t come to bring peace, he says, but a sword. And I have to believe that Jesus does so because he recognizes that peace consists not solely of the absence of conflict, rather peace is achieved through the presence of fairness, of justice, of care and compassion available for all people. A balance of power sustained by the threat of annihilation is one way to hold off war, I suppose, but living perpetually “under the gun” surely distorts the well-being of both body and soul. And so... all the violence we have seen of late. The pressure is just too great. People feel desperate, cheated, without purpose, and unloved. And people tend to seek security by cordoning off from others who are perceived as different or threatening. And we risk forgetting our purpose... to live in love and reconciliation and service with all people. All people. And surely that is a risk, because we cannot control how others act. But it’s a risk that Jesus takes and a risk he asks us to take with him, because there is no other way to real peace.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Familiar words to you, I hope, from the prophet Micah. And I use them this morning, because it is this same lesson that Jesus learned from the Scriptures as a child growing up in his religious community. And Jesus borrows words from Micah to speak of himself when he tells us this morning that he has come:

*...to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

And why would this come to be? And it is Micah that gives an answer:

*Woe is me! [says the prophet]
For I have become like one who,
after the summer fruit has been gathered,
after the vintage has been gleaned,
finds no cluster to eat;
there is no first-ripe fig for which I hunger.
The faithful have disappeared from the land,
and there is no one left who is upright;
they all lie in wait for blood,
and they hunt each other with nets.
Their hands are skilled to do evil;
the official and the judge ask for a bribe,
and the powerful dictate what they desire;
thus they pervert justice.*

And this is the situation in which Jesus and his people lived. No matter how hard they worked, no matter how faithfully they prayed, no matter how fairly they lived,

they did not reap the benefits of their labors. They were oppressed, overly taxed, threatened with violence, working harder while growing increasingly poor, and they felt cheated and afraid. They would grow the grapes, but someone else drank their wine. They could reap the harvest, and yet still have not enough to eat, because the system was set up to take it from them. From the Romans and from their own Jewish leaders there was little justice and even less mercy. And things were not right. And Jesus knew it was time to make a stand. It was not a time for false peace or complacency. It was a time to speak up from the housetops, to decry the unfairness, a time to show mercy and humility. It was a time for a sword!

And if we stopped here, we could be woefully misguided. I recently heard a person say that in times like these, times of fear and swelling injustice, "... my Jesus would fight!" Perhaps. But let's consider how he fought. Let's speak of the sword he used. For I do not believe that the one who fought by laying down his own privilege --and the one who gave his own life rather than take away the life of others--- fought with the sword of conquest, beating down his enemies in order to assert his own ideals. That cannot be the sword of which Jesus speaks. Rather the sword he brings to bear is, I believe, a sword of *conflict*, of unrest, of agitation, but not first and foremost conflict or agitation with others. No, the sword of which Jesus speaks is first pointed at ourselves. It is a sword that calls us to question our complacency in the way of things, a sword that opens our eyes to injustice, a sword that asks us to

Speak what may be an uncomfortable truth for ourselves and even for those we love most, our families and our friends.

We are not in a good way right now. I'm concerned that our society is in the place of which Micah speaks, where justice seems far away, where ordinary people perceive little mercy, and where peace is a distant hope. It's time to shine a light for kindness, mercy, and humility. In whatever way we can. Share what you have with others. Listen. Stand up for others. Speak up. Will such a life make us uncomfortable? I would think so. The world assigns little value to the needs of the meek. But Jesus asks us to not be afraid, because our value is beyond measure, and the way to find purpose in our lives is to give it away for the sake of others, using whatever skills and tools and means we have. *"Those who lose their lives for my sake will find it."* That is the only true road to lasting peace. That is the sword we wield. Our lives are given over to kindness, mercy, and humility.

As William Sloane Coffin once said:

"[People] are at their worst when, persuaded of their superior virtue, they crusade against the vices of others. They are at their best when they claim their God-given kinship with all humanity, offering prayers and thanks that there is more mercy in God than sin in us." *(Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, Credo.)*