

Let Your Peace Return to You

July 9, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Matthew 10: 1-14

Matthew 11: 28-30

I love when Issa comes, and Nola, too of course, and it's not only because of the powerful music they bring. It also means I get to connect with this beautiful man before the service, about the hymns, themes, and scripture, which usually means some shared time of reflection about how the week's texts are speaking to us. This happened last Saturday. I told him what passages I was considering from Matthew. We batted them back and forth. We talked briefly about the "take no bags" and "wipe your feet at the door" parts of what Jesus tells his disciples before he sends them out to share the good news of God's love. Verse 14 may be the most familiar to us: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." Yet I told Issa what lit up most for me, in this read-through, is what Jesus says just before, in verse 13: "As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, if you are not welcomed, let your peace return to you." Especially that last phrase: "Let your peace return to you."

About an hour or so after Issa and I spoke, and while Nancy was in DC visiting her mom, I hit the road for the Cape for a quick overnight and to attend an annual party my sister hosts every year around July 4! Our conversation and "let your peace return to you" helpfully came to mind several times while stuck in an epic traffic jam that added two hours to the drive. When I arrived, though, it was all good - a lavish outdoor spread, great food and drinks, old friends and new friends. Amid it, I found myself standing by a cooler and cracking a beer with a dear friend's wife, whom I hadn't seen in some time. We clinked our cans, caught up for a bit, and had a few laughs. She and her husband are some of the funniest, most upbeat people I know! But then came a pause in the conversation. Her mind and heart turned to something I gathered she'd wanted to say to me or someone for a while. She started shaking her head. "You know I hate to say this, given what you do and all, but my church is dead to me!" I nodded once, eyebrows raised, and simply said: "Bring it!" She took a sip and went on to share a heartbreaking story of how her daughter was horrifically bullied when she was in high school a few years back, just after she came out as gay. I knew her daughter was gay, but I hadn't heard this part. She spared the details and was quick to assure me that they all got through it, but then she told me that in the early days of the bullying, she went back to her home church with an open heart, seeking solace. She went trusting what she had heard from their pulpit on many Sundays, namely, that in that church, at least, everyone was welcome. She liked and trusted the clergy enough to open up to him and share the devastating trauma and pain of the bullying experience for her daughter and for her. "You know what he said in response?" she asked. He told her he was sorry for what she was going through but then proceeded to remind her about their wider church's teachings about "homosexuality," which were the farthest thing from welcoming. I could tell his words landed in her like a gut punch, and the sense of betrayal, the rejection (on top of rejection), and the anger that came with it was still sitting right there inside her years later.

Yes, it occurred to me to tell her to try a different church, maybe one like this, but it wasn't the time for that. I mostly listened. And as I did, Jesus' words from our passage came to mind again. Not just the

“when you aren’t welcome, shake the dust off and leave” part. True that for my friend, and it’s exactly what she did, even though it was from the very house of God where she was turned away. It was verse 13 I wanted her to hear as if Jesus himself were empowering her and saying: “Beloved, when that stuff happens, when you open your heart and have a door shut in your face, even at church, let your peace return to you! Let my peace and let God’s peace return to you!” When she finished her sharing, I took a risk and started to tell her about the conversation I just had with Issa and this passage. Believe me, sermon texts are usually the last thing on my mind when I’m kicking and throwing back with friends and family, but not that night, not after that story. Thankfully, my friend knew this and was open to it. For better or worse, we were soon interrupted by some other party-goers. We agreed to talk more soon, just the two of us, and it was back to the party, laughter, and lighter times.

For us, it’s back to this scripture and verse 13. In other translations, it’s ‘if the house is worthy, welcoming you and your message, give it your blessing of peace, that is, a blessing of well-being ...and the favor of God. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace.’ Or in alternate versions, ‘if the household is trustworthy,’ or ‘if it deserves it,’ or ‘if the home welcomes you,’ then let your ‘blessing of peace,’ your ‘gift of peace,’ ‘your shalom’ rest on it. ‘If it’s not trustworthy,’ ‘if they don’t welcome you,’ then let your blessing, gift, shalom, and peace be restored. Let it return to you.¹

I’m not sure why I find these words so powerful today. Maybe it’s because we are living in an increasingly polarized and unpredictable world where one can never be sure what we will encounter when we show up or how people will respond to our ideas of God’s love, peace and justice. But Jesus knows all about it! He makes that clear here and prepares us for it. It’s either hospitality or hostility and he gives us instruction for how to handle both!

In his own context, offering a blessing or greeting of peace, as the Oxford Bible Commentary reminds us was “not just a social convention.” Jesus isn’t just teaching them manners or how to act around strangers. No, the greeting of peace here should be understood as nothing less than a “sign of the inbreaking of God’s kin-dom: God is bringing shalom to these houses and villages!” Their greetings were a big deal, a signal of new reality emerging in their midst, a new and deeper sense of wholeness, healing, and a peace the world cannot give. The commentary underscores that: “It was an unprecedented honor to hear the disciple’s proclamation and unprecedented failure to reject it” which is why Jesus suggests such a clear demonstration of wiping one’s feet and shaking the dust off and moving on. This may all mean more power to my friend for stomping out of her church, for declaring it dead to her! And yet, I wonder how it would be if she and we could also hear Jesus’ instructions just before: *First*, let your peace return to you! As in: don’t give them the power to take it away! It’s too precious! As in: Let the peace that Christ has already given us and asked us to share come back to us! *This* is the peace of God’s kin-dom that is not only drawing near as he reminds us in verse 7 but a peace of the kin-dom that is already within us as he says elsewhere. First, let *that* peace return to and restore you, and then gently walk away.

I wonder what personal examples you may be already conjuring. Whether we are preaching the gospel, using our gifts to bring love or healing, or beauty to the world, or just showing up with an open, humble, and vulnerable heart, there are undoubtedly times when we, too, will encounter either hospitality or hostility! We don’t have to be going to door to door in a mangy tunic, empty-handed. We see and feel these dynamics every day, and maybe especially at this time of year, when many of us are prone to

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Matthew%2010:13>

travel, visit relatives who may not always share our politics, or just to be and move outside more where we have to the opportunity to encounter strangers, to offer them some gesture or message of kindness, peace or love! Or...or...what peace might we have or be missing the opportunity to receive and share and take back right here in this household?

I often share the words of Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber with newcomers to First Church who are moved by the welcome they feel here! She tells newcomers at her church, as a means of caring for them and warning them, in essence, “Stick around! At some point, we will disappoint you!” While I hope this isn’t true for her church or ours, I love the honesty of it. For at some point, you may encounter something that feels like, or is, exclusion or hostility here in God’s house, which can make it especially painful because here of all places there should be nothing but inclusion and belonging and welcome, eternal, no matter who you are because we are all children of God, and we all belong! But it only takes a cold shoulder, a zinger, a bad mood or some bad theology, however unintended, to undo it all. And here’s where Jesus’ words that come a few chapters later may be especially helpful to recall. If you find yourself still struggling to trust clergy, or the church these days, or political leaders, or your in-laws, or those on the other side of the aisle, given all the egregious acts on hostility, inhospitality, uncivility and downright hatred, Jesus says it best...Come to me! As we’ll sing it in a moment, “Come to me, o weary traveler, come to me and find your rest!” Notice he says this two chapters *after* he sends the disciples out and knowing they will encounter hostility on the way. That’s part of it, part of the way that is *the way* of following Jesus. And yet his words are like a reminder of what he says when he first sends them out! “Come to me! As in: Return to me, and let my peace return to you, and I will give you rest, and I promise your burdens for the journey ahead will be lighter!

So, church...Are you weary after a long year of trying to make the world a better place? I am!

Are you weak from trying your best in relationships, with friends, family or at work, that just aren’t working?

Are you sick of all the stories and headlines of hostility and hatred? Yup!

Then this text is for you (and is definitely for me)! Let Jesus clink a can or glass of cold lemonade on lawn with you and hear him say it right to your very soul:

Let your peace your return to you!
Let my peace and God’s return and restore you!
Remember that’s it been there all along!
Come to me, and I will you give rest...and strength ...and renewal,
Come to me until your burdens are light!
Come to me until and let your peace return!
Until you are ready to go out and be on the way again,
With peace in your heart
Ready to greet the world in God’s peace and love!

Amen!