

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Laity Sunday Worship Service
November 13, 2016

Sermon

“A Prince of Peace for All the People”

Luke 4:14-30

May we all be at prayer together. God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Most of you probably know me. I grew up at South Church beginning with the first grade and I've been here ever since—almost 60 years. When Robyn Guimont approached me to preach the sermon on Laity Sunday back in February, I was honored to be asked and accepted enthusiastically. I stand here this morning as a testament to the fact that if you hang around this church long enough, you'll probably be asked eventually to do what I'm doing today. So if you haven't been asked yet, be forewarned—your time is coming!

The passage from Luke that Laurie Martino just read to you is one that I am very drawn to since I believe that it's especially relevant to our country and world today. I think you will see that as I share with you how these words from Luke speak down through the millennia to me and, I'm hoping when I'm done, to you as well.

In today's reading, we see Jesus returning to his home town of Nazareth. He returns as more than just the son of Joseph, a carpenter, but as a well respected rabbi or teacher. As was the tradition in those days, Jesus is asked to read the scriptures as any visiting rabbi might be asked to read and to teach in the local synagogue. We are told that Jesus went to the synagogue “as was his custom” on the Sabbath day. I find this “custom” of Jesus very interesting as he, the perfect Son of God, attends worship services every week. I thought to myself, if Jesus can attend synagogue every week, how weak and self-serving are my excuses for not attending church services every week. Clearly, I can do better, and I need to do better!

Jesus selects from the scroll handed to him by the attendant that familiar passage from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-2), and reads,

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

At the time these words were written, the Jews were an oppressed people as Israel was in exile in Babylon. Even though the Jews are eventually freed from their Babylonian captors, this freedom does not bring the kind of fulfillment to these people that they had expected. They still feel conquered and oppressed. So we may infer that Isaiah is talking about a future age when a messiah will deliver the people of Israel from bondage.

Fast forward to today's scripture reading from Luke's gospel. When Jesus finishes reading the scripture passage from Isaiah and states, "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," the people in the synagogue do not yet understand what is to come—that Jesus will suffer and die on the cross so that the sins of humankind may be forgiven. They aren't quite able to connect all the dots and realize that Jesus himself is the one who has come "to bring good news to the poor" and "release the captives" and "let the oppressed go free." Although they all have good things to say about Jesus, they don't yet understand that Jesus is indeed the Messiah that will bring all of these great things to pass.

In fact, the situation in the synagogue goes rapidly downhill from there when Jesus begins to talk about a prophet not being "accepted in the prophet's hometown." He tells the people several Old Testament anecdotes which showed that God sometimes chose to help Gentiles rather than Jews, angering his audience since the Jews considered themselves God's uniquely chosen people. They end up driving Jesus out of Nazareth and threatening him with bodily harm.

Jesus was basically putting everyone on notice in his comments that he had been sent by God to be the "good news" for all the people—not just the Jews. He had been sent to release all the captives. He had been sent to set free all the oppressed. Jesus was the embodiment of the good news for all humankind, and he was sent to earth to preach the truth that our God is everyone's God—not just the God of a select group.

As I read between the lines of the passage from Isaiah, I sense that what is really being said here is that Jesus was the Prince of Peace sent into the world to be a savior to all people—to model for all people of the world how to live together in peace and harmony. I see in this passage some direct correlations between that perfect model of peace that Jesus lived for us all to emulate and some modern day "peacemakers" whose lives have exemplified those basic tenets of "peacemaking." I'd like to share three of them with you this morning.

First, I would hold up the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. At the age of 15 when he entered Morehouse College in Atlanta, having skipped two grades in school, Martin was unsure of what he wanted to do with his life. He knew one thing—that he wished to help his people in some way. He saw that the churches were "out of touch" with the real problems of his people—segregation and poverty. With two of Morehouse's leading teachers being ministers, his final decision to pursue the ministry was not too difficult. At the age of 17, he preached a sermon at his father's church which was a big success. In the following year, he became a minister and his father's assistant.

Martin was influenced early on by the teachings of Mahatma Ghandi, especially his teachings on resistance through peaceful means. As he studied the ways of this other great peacemaker, Martin came to believe that the methods he employed such as marches, sit-ins, and boycotts would work well for African Americans. This idea of fighting peacefully against oppression became known as non-violent resistance. Martin saw it as moral and right, and far from being cowardly, as some people might suggest, it took great courage and heroism to risk being struck and to not fight back. Indeed, his use of nonviolence in freeing African Americans from oppression, became for Martin an answer to the most pressing need of all humankind—peace.

Martin embraced the concept of nonviolence in his work to overturn the South's Jim Crow laws which segregated buses, lunch counters, restrooms, and drinking fountains, among other things. He embraced it in his marches to fight for voting rights for black people. He embraced it in his efforts to demand more and better jobs for blacks. He embraced it in the famous march on Washington in 1963 to demand jobs and freedom, leading to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And finally, he even advocated the same philosophy in his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

There is an interesting parallel between Martin's movement to ensure civil rights for his people and Jesus' statement in this morning's passage from Luke when he says, "truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." (Luke 4:24) In his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, which Martin wrote while imprisoned in 1963 for defying a court order halting a protest movement over segregated lunch counters, he writes:

"Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives in the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country."

And he goes on to say later in his letter:

"Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on with the conviction that they were 'a colony of heaven,' and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment."

You've all heard Martin's most well-known message which proclaimed that people would someday be "free at last." Although directed primarily at people of color, this message was actually much broader in scope. It was most importantly a message of inclusiveness—that all people, regardless of their race, should live together as sisters and brothers in peace and harmony—that the content of one's character rather than the color of his or her skin should be the primary emphasis. He was basically saying the same thing that Jesus was preaching in that synagogue 2,000 years ago, that the God who sent him to earth was for all of humankind—that the good news of the gospel was for women, men, and children of all faiths and races—that all people are to be freed from whatever has been keeping them captive—that all types of oppression that are holding back people are set aside.

Clearly, Martin Luther King is one of our finest examples of a modern day peacemaker—a man of peace who probably has no equals in our time.

My second example of a modern day peacemaker concerns a woman who at a young age made a promise to her Native American grandmother that she would some day return to the Cheyenne River Lakota Indian Reservation in central South Dakota and do something to help their people who live in an area that includes the poorest county in America, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Native American people have been largely forgotten by our government, and life on the reservation is tough, with a 90% unemployment rate, a life expectancy of only 48 years, and an

average annual income of under \$3,000. Clearly, the promise of a better life is seemingly a distant dream for many of the people on the reservation. Enter into this rather bleak picture a non-profit organization founded by this woman, which for the past 17 years now has been working, together with a cadre of volunteers, to restore some hope, and the good people of the reservation are finally seeing that there are others who care about their plight. You probably know the woman who I'm speaking about—Rochelle Ripley—and her organization—Hawkwing.

Over the period of Hawkwing's existence, this organization has provided over \$9 million of goods and services to Native American people in the form of food, clothing, medical supplies, books, and toys to some 2,600 children and 500 elders; doctors, nurses, and dentists who provide vital health care and health education; and construction volunteers who make repairs to largely dilapidated tribal homes. Over 100,000 pounds of food are being distributed annually by the Tribal Food Pantry, another program founded by Hawkwing within the last several years. Rochelle does all this work without any compensation which, together with a 100% volunteer workforce, enables Hawkwing to return 98 cents of every dollar donated to this organization directly to goods and services provided, truly a remarkable record. I have traveled three times to this Lakota reservation over the past five years as one of those construction volunteers, so I have seen firsthand the impact that Rochelle and Hawkwing are having in changing Native American lives for the better. I've found my experiences on the reservation both inspirational and life-changing.

Clearly, Rochelle Ripley is a champion among peacemakers.

My final example of a modern day peacemaker is none other than our wonderful church—The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury—and by extension, all of you who volunteer to ensure that our church's many programs continue uninterrupted. This church is a beacon in our local community and around the country, and our reach is even international in scope through mission dollars which send a message of peace far beyond our doors. In this season of stewardship, you have heard at church services and read in the E-Connector many stories about how South Church has had a positive impact on so many people's lives. This is truly a church that has been blessed in being able to "harvest the abundance" of all that God has given us. And the money we distribute to mission partners is only half the story. Just as important are the hands-on projects we perform in our local communities and beyond which put God's love into action and at the same time represent acts of peacemaking, from serving meals at South Park Inn, to building homes for the less fortunate members of our society in youth and adult mission trips, to settling refugees like the Albukaai family, to mission trips to Malawi to provide support to an orphanage and to promote a better understanding between cultures, and to so many other programs that it would be impossible to name them all at this time.

These works are good works. They are works that God would have us do as part of spreading the Good News that Jesus spoke of in Luke's passage this morning. They are works of peace. This church and all of you who support it are champions among peacemakers.

My prayer for all of us is that we each embrace the real message behind Luke's gospel heard and interpreted here this morning, and that we all say a word of peace to our sisters and brothers or perform an act of peace for them today and every day.

May it be so. Amen.

Passing of the Peace

We've heard a message of peace this morning. As a way of tangibly expressing our feelings of peace toward each other, I now invite all of us to turn to our neighbors on either side of us, in front of us, and behind us, and pass the peace to them. I've asked Jim to usher us back together with an appropriate musical refrain after about a minute or so, and we'll sing our next hymn.