



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

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“Two Kinds of Peace”

Rev. David Jones

This one is tough. The world seems difficult enough, overwhelming enough, without a trusted teacher lecturing and scolding us. Surely, we have been through enough long days, enough bitterness and anger, enough painful division in this country as it is.

This passage is similar to one found in Matthew, where Jesus says he did not come to bring peace but the sword. According to Jesus, his teachings are not intended to be soothing or placating, they are intentionally sharp-edged like a weapon.

We like to think of our teachers and gaining greater understanding as inherently uniting, as intrinsically peace-making. We much prefer a Jesus who heals and comforts and mediates and resolves our conflicts. And yet today Jesus says he'll do precisely the opposite: by his teachings, households will be divided, parents and children and siblings pitted against one another. In an already divided world, Jesus threatens to divide the unity even of the family. Nothing will be spared, nothing is sacred.

This is a tough one.

In the 1970s in Nicaragua, in a community of peasants in the islands of Solentiname, a priest named Ernesto Cardenal gathered people together to study the Gospels.

When the priest and the peasants there read this passage, they had a similar reaction: surely Jesus is all about love, and love is surely all about unity. Why would Jesus come to cause divisions among us? Why would Jesus cause divisions within our families? This community, like so many in Nicaragua at that time, was regularly subjected to the capricious violence of a dictator, and so they recoiled at the thought of Jesus swinging a sword, bringing greater unrest.

But one of the members of the group had a question for the others: are there not two kinds of peace in this world? Is there not a peace that is really just the quiet acceptance of things as they are? Is there not a peace that is really just turning a blind eye to struggle and to poverty, that is really just the absence of violence? And is there not another kind of peace, one that is fought for and hard won, that settles in among us only after true justice has been established? Yes, Jesus is all about love. And yes, love is about unity. But if love arrives on the doorstep of a community and witnesses the peace of burying your head in the sand, witnesses the peace of ignoring inequality and discrimination, ignores the power of the bully and the powerlessness of the victim—what is love to do?

One of the members of the study group, quoted in our bulletin today, eventually connects this tough passage to the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. For Alejandro, the peace that conceals or hides from suffering is incompatible with the love of your neighbor. If you have love for your neighbor, you will see this kind of peace is no peace at all.

Let us imagine, for example, that Love Incarnate has just turned off 112 or made their way through Conway and arrived on Main Street in Ashfield. And Love parks their car somewhere and wanders along different streets. Love sets their eyes on the trees and the people, goes door to door and shop to shop, visits both of our little churches. Love gets a coffee at Elmer's or Neighbors, checks out a book at the library, walks through the kid's market. Like the community in Solentiname, Love would surely see a peaceful and a happy place. Love might be so taken with this place that they decide to stay and rent an apartment or buy a home. Love would get to know the people more deeply, Love would see clearly how beautiful and joy filled life here can be.

But Love by nature is a relentless listener, and Love bends their ear to everyone equally. Love does not take any one person's word about this place over another's, Love hears us all the same. Love hears of our successes and our struggles. They hear that some of us can relax and enjoy life, and focus only on our own families. And Love hears that some of us are constantly distressed, constantly worried about how to keep up, how to make ends meet. Love would hear the cries of those who are grieving, and would feel the anxiety of those who feel alone or lost. Love would see through the peace on the surface, and beyond the partial peace, and find the churning and the struggling beneath, would find where Love is not complete. So though Love Incarnate in Ashfield would be full of joy and happiness, Love would also be increasingly uneasy. Because Love would not be contained to one household, would not sit only at one dining room table. In fact, Love would not really be contained in Ashfield, Love would visit Goshen and Plainfield, Love would pop back over to Conway or head down the hill to Shelburne Falls. Love would see the farms in Buckland, and the river to Charlemont, try cider in Colrain, and march for pride in Greenfield.

And Love would not feel settled or at ease. Love cannot feel secure in any home if their neighbor is facing eviction. Love would not feel comforted by having health insurance knowing a neighbor did not have the same access to care. Love would not feel surrounded by companions and supporters if even one of their neighbors felt alone and rejected. So what is Love to do?

There are two kinds of peace in this world, and in every community. But once Love Incarnate arrives on Main Street or at our doorstep, in the hilltowns or in the valley, Love cannot help but choose one kind of peace over the other. Love Incarnate is the opposite of quiet and passive; Love comes to earth like fire, its teachings are sharp like a sword. The false edifice of unity will have to be destroyed, so that true unity can be built in its place.

This is why Jesus, Love Incarnate, announces the coming divisions. Love is a constructive process that begins with a breaking apart.

Toward the end of this tough passage, Jesus points the finger at us and calls us all hypocrites. This word "hypocrite" was closely associated with the ancient Greek theater. A hypocrite was like an actor, someone pretending, someone claiming to be someone or something they are not. A hypocrite was someone who wore a mask to deceive, or to hide their true motive. But the disciples gathered to listen and learn from Jesus were not there as actors, anymore than we are acting by being here today. So this is a harsh thing for Jesus to say about them, to say about us.

Harsh though it is, it is also good news. We do not realize what we have been doing. To wear a mask means we have another face underneath. To be pretending means that what we are now, is not what we really are. The kind of peace that leaves some people out, that forgets people and leaves them behind, that tolerates and accepts poverty and hunger and evictions as 'normal' features of our society, that persecutes those suffering from addiction, that fails to nurture and share the abundance of God's Creation with all of God's children—that is only the mask that we are wearing.

Jesus says he comes to bring fire to the earth, but he wishes it were already kindled. Jesus is gracious after all. Like rain with the clouds or a scorching heat with the south wind, the present time is for the other kind of peace.

Alleluia and amen.