

Proper 9, Year C
Church of the Resurrection, Centerville, UT
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Today's Gospel is often used as a call to Christian evangelism, and it is that. However, it's a particular kind of evangelism that doesn't fit easily into a mold we often think of. This message isn't about increasing church membership – it's about *proclaiming the reign of God*. The church is a *sign* of this new creation, and we, the *Body of Christ*, are called to be the extension of Christ in the world. To be "Christ in the world" we must do the kind of evangelism Jesus did – feed the hungry, heal the sick and proclaim God's love to the poor and outcast. My, my, you may ask, "How are we doing?"

We, like the 70 evangelists in today's Gospel, are called to announce to everyone we encounter that the Reign of God has drawn near. This announcement is most authentically made, not by standing in pulpits or on television, but by walking out into the world – into homes, hospitals, prisons, food pantries – places where people live and die, and cry out for the Reign of God.

Mother Teresa once told a story of walking past a place in Bombay where a large conference about hunger was being held. Inside hundreds of people were talking about food and hunger. Right outside the front door of the building she found a dying man. She took him home with her, where he died of starvation. Inside people were talking about how in 15 years there will be so much food, so much this and that...and still the man died. Mother Teresa asked, "Do you see the *difference*?" In the words of an old

Hindu saying, “Talk does not cook the rice.” This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t talk, or plan, hope or pray for a better future for the world. But mere talk about the Reign of God, *without living it into being*, is senseless

Peace is another major theme in today’s Scriptures. Jesus again and again speaks of offering peace, receiving peace, keeping peace. As a result of the Resurrection, Jesus inaugurates an era of peace and reconciliation in which “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together.” The word “peace” is Luke’s *shorthand* for the dawning of the Reign of God, which *is* the peaceable kingdom. In today’s Gospel, Jesus orders the 70 - in Jewish tradition representing all the nations of the world – to go out into the villages offering peace, and announcing that the Kingdom of God is very near, to all they encounter. There are some subtleties about this offering that are important to note. Whether the message is received or rejected, the same message is to be offered to all, even to those who reject it.

This is, as we all know, *not so easy to do*. I was talking the other day with a man who works in the customer service department of a large retail electronics company. His employer makes it difficult for customers to return merchandise, so the man is constantly dealing with angry customers. He tries to calm them down and help them find solutions to their problem, and he sometimes does help, but often there’s nothing he can do. Some people get really nasty and threatening, demanding to talk with his supervisor. He, as you might imagine, finds it difficult to remain patient and peaceful when this happens. I’m pretty sure we’ve all been in similar situations at one time or

another. How do we manage to maintain our peace, “keep our cool”, and not strike back, when this happens?

Here’s where the subtle twist of the Gospel comes in. / Jesus tells them to offer their peace, and if *it’s shared*, it will rest on the person we offer it to, *but even if it’s not shared, it will come back to us*. / What do you suppose this means? If you think about it, it’s a rather startling pronouncement – *if we’re truly at peace, our peace can’t be lost* because it’s not dependent on its being received by anyone else.

How would you stay peaceful when a customer is yelling and threatening you? Or in any life situations when we’re tempted to lose our cool – in traffic, with our kids, with a difficult neighbor, or someone of a different political persuasion? This is only possible when we realize that we really can’t change anyone else, the *only one we can truly change is ourselves*. When we remain peaceful, even in the face of another’s anger, our peace shines through us to the person who is frustrated and angry, giving them a glimpse of life in the Kingdom of God,

One of my favorite people of the 20th century is a woman named Mildred Norman Ryder, more familiarly known as Peace Pilgrim. As a result of a remarkable spiritual experience she undertook a personal pilgrimage for peace. She began her trek in 1953 and continued until her death in 1981, walking back and forth across the United States, proclaiming her message of peace, “I will walk 25,000 miles as a penniless pilgrim. I have only what I wear and carry in my small pockets. I will walk until given shelter and

fast until given food, remaining a wanderer until humankind has learned the way of peace.” The way she said this would happen is to, “Overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth and hatred with love. She said, *There is nothing new about this message except the practice of it.*” She believed it was impossible for us to obtain world peace until we’ve experienced inner peace. She lived fully the message of the Gospel, trusting in God to meet all her needs and offering peace to everyone she encountered.

You may have met her – a professor friend of mine invited her to speak to his classes at Weber State whenever she passed this way. There are many stories about her remarkable life, but one always strikes me as especially powerful. She had been invited to stay at a ranch and *was there* with an eight year old girl while the rest of the family went to town. A car arrived and a man got out. The young girl saw him and ran. He followed, chasing her into the barn. Peace Pilgrim went into the barn, where the girl was cowering in the corner in terror. The man was walking slowly and deliberately toward her. Peace Pilgrim recounted, “I put my body immediately between the man and the girl and *I just stood* and looked at this poor, psychologically sick man with loving compassion. He came close and then he stopped. He looked at me for quite a while. Then he turned and walked away. Not a word was spoken.” She said, “Never underestimate the power of God’s love – It transforms. It reaches the spark of good in the other person and he is disarmed.”

Her peace didn’t depend on her circumstances - she was perfectly happy sleeping on a bed, on a floor, or even on the side of the road. She wrote, “When God guides me to do

something, I am given strength...I am shown the way...I am given words to speak. I walk in the light of God's love, peace and joy...This is (what it is) to know God. And knowing God is not reserved for the great ones. It is *for little folks like you and me*. God is always seeking you, every one of you. You can find God only if you seek ...by *loving people*. (And) when you find God...it will be within."

We each have the possibility of knowing the "Peace of God which passes all understanding." *Like all gifts, we have it most fully when we share it with others*. On this Independence Day weekend we celebrate the gifts of freedom and peace we were given by our founders. We're reminded of what we have, and I believe it inspires us to share it and help make the world a better place for all. I heard on the radio just a few days ago that, despite ongoing world conflicts, this is the most peaceful time in recorded history. Let's do our part by saying to the world, in *thought, word and action*, "Peace be to you and to your household." As you do this, you will find that peace comes upon you and spreads out over all the world.

AMEN.