

“Peace Work”

Sermon on Sunday, July 3, 2022

Dear church,

Every once in a while, I like to read Scripture in the translation of ‘The Message’, a contemporary and highly interpretive version of Scripture, published in 1993. It helps shake the dust off of old passages, revealing new meaning to well-worn phrases, challenging us, inspiring us. And so it is with today’s text from Galatians 6. While Jesus sends his 72 disciples on a Peace Mission, Paul, in the epistle reading paired with the gospel, explains how that actually works,” making peace. In the creative translation of The Message Paul sounds like this: “Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.”

In other words, the peace mission starts in the mirror, when we look at ourselves more carefully. What do we see in that mirror? What kind of person looks back at us? Let me share a funny little poem that was recently read at a Memorial Service at May’s Funeral Home. The deceased person had worked as a principal for an Elementary School in the Hudson Valley for most of his career. He had this text memorized and drew much pleasure from reciting it in public. Maybe it is from Dr. Seuss, I wouldn’t be surprised. This is how it goes:

“I look in the mirror and what do I see?
A strange looking person, why can that be me?
For I am much younger, not nearly so fat,
As that face in the mirror I’m looking at.
Now where are the mirrors we used to know,
Like the ones of 20 years ago?
All things have changed, I’m sure you’ll agree,
Mirrors aren’t what they used to be.”

I am sure those of us above a certain age can all relate to the lighthearted message of this poem. We've had our moments when we glanced in the mirror and thought, "this can't be!" We change, and sometimes it is hard to believe. Not a few people report that in their own self-perception, in their innermost image of themselves, they feel quite a bit younger than what the mirror presents to them in unrelenting truth. Well, that's also true sometimes of the moral images we have of ourselves or of our country or of a group we belong to, including our church. We have an image in our head that doesn't always square with reality, at least not when we look into God's mirror. Sometimes we conveniently overlook certain wrinkles and warts. We choose not to see them. And to those who point them out (how dare they!) we say, "Don't be so negative!" Looking into the mirror and seeing what's there can be hard. But that's precisely where the peace work begins.

"Make a careful exploration of who you are and what you have been given." When we look more carefully into the mirror, what do we see? We may see the face of our father and our mother. I think I have the nose from my dad and the narrow face shape of the Wagner ancestors. I have my mother's soft hair and light skin; the shortsightedness that has me wear glasses for better vision also comes from her. But those are only superficialities, right? When I look deeper into the mirror, I may notice subtle signs of insecurity or pride or tension or discomfort, little things that, if we are not careful, may tempt us to react to others because we are not at peace with ourselves, that's usually how it goes. How many people do you know who are at peace with themselves most of the time? And how many of those people cause others harm or injury on a frequent basis? Probably very few is my guess. When you are at peace you bring peace.

I would like to say something in love of America, the country we honor and celebrate this weekend. I would like America to look more carefully into the mirror, not because she is a bad country and needs to shape up. (That's a given... we all need to shape up.) No, but because like all of us, she tends to avoid looking at herself carefully and with self-respect in the mirror. She tends not to see the warts and wrinkles, the wounds and scars, the traumas. And to those who point them out, she says, "Don't be so negative!" But as

Paul teaches us, it is important that we examine ourselves, see what is there and recognize what needs God's healing hand. After we do this work, we may actually be capable of bringing peace to the world. Lisa Miller drew this American flag in the form of a dove. I love this image and what it implies. A peace-loving country. It can only become reality when we look carefully into the mirror, accept both virtues and flaws, points of pride and points of shame while receiving, undeservedly, the peace that surpasses all understanding. It comes from God. And so, as we love our country, let us try to look her in the eye, for it is very difficult to love someone truthfully without looking them in the eye. And if we resist the urge to whitewash, excuse or defend, we may even come to a greater and deeper sense of love. That is true for ourselves as individuals, but it is also true for us as citizens of these United States. May God bring us peace!

Amen.