

June 21, 2026—The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. James Wyatt

I Don't Want Peace

Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

How do you feel about that?

What do you think he meant by that?

Do you ever, you know, wish he maybe hadn't said that?

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.” I don't know about you, but I have definitely thought that Jesus *did* come to bring peace to the earth. I've sung about peace on earth and good will to all. I'm pretty sure I've preached about the Prince of Peace around Christmas time. I actually would really like to believe in and follow and serve a God and savior who *did* come to bring peace to the world. The world is in desperate need of peace. I suspect we can all agree on that.

But here Jesus says, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Why did he have to say that? I don't like to imagine Jesus with a sword in his hand, carrying a weapon of war. The idea of Jesus provoking or inciting violence, or even engaging in acts of violence himself, makes me quite uncomfortable. I'm not a fan of violence in general, and I'm *really* not a fan of violence carried out by people who claim to be doing it in God's name or in pursuit of God's will. So the idea that Jesus came to bring a sword does not sit very well with my ideas of who Jesus is—or who God is.

I suspect that many of you share my discomfort with these words in Jesus's mouth. Unfortunately for you and me both, when I'm preaching on a text, I kinda figure I have a responsibility to go to the words that make me uncomfortable and sit with them for a while—not to explain them away, not to try to make them comfortable. I really do think that if we sit with those words and really listen, we'll find that God has a lot to say through our discomfort.

So the thing I have come to realize in sitting with these challenging words is that many of us have learned to feel uncomfortable with any expression of anger or division or outrage, or any hint of a situation that might escalate into violence. Many of us are taught from a very early age to make nice, to smooth ruffled feathers, to paper over differences, to build bridges rather than walls, and to avoid violence at all costs. And in that context, to hear Jesus talk about setting a daughter against her mother and a son against his father (on Father's Day, no less!) is really unpleasant. It suggests that there are differences we can't paper over, that there are divisions we can't bridge.

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I think it's interesting that he makes that contrast, because to the Roman mind, war and peace were two sides of the same coin. The Roman orator Cicero wrote, “The only reason for waging war is so that we Romans may live in peace.” The Roman Empire proudly proclaimed the spread of the Pax Romana—the peace of Rome—which it imposed on subjugated populations through brutal war and oppression. The Roman historian Tacitus admitted that Romans “create a desolation and call it peace.” When you kill and enslave entire populations and suppress any revolt by crucifying the would-be rebels, it's hard to call the result “peace.” In that context, maybe it makes a little more sense for Jesus to say he doesn't come to bring peace—at least not that kind of peace.

Because there are different kinds of peace, right? In a sermon he preached in March of 1956,¹ the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., described what happened when a Black student, Autherine Lucy, was finally allowed to attend classes at the University of Alabama. Her arrival

¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/when-peace-becomes-obnoxious-sermon-delivered-18-march-1956-dexter-avenue>

on campus was met with burning crosses and vicious mobs throwing eggs and bricks at her. “Finally,” he said, “the president and trustees of the University of Alabama asked Autherine to leave for her own safety and the safety of the University.” The next day, he observed, “the paper came out with this headline: ‘Things are quiet in Tuscaloosa today. There is peace on the campus of the University of Alabama.’”

“Yes,” Dr. King said, “things are quiet in Tuscaloosa. Yes, there was peace on the campus, but it was peace at a great price: . . . it was peace that had been purchased at the price of capitulating to the force of darkness. This is the type of peace that all [people] of goodwill hate. It is the type of peace that is obnoxious. It is the type of peace that stinks in the nostrils of the Almighty God.” Much like, I think, the Roman peace.

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Dr. King went on in that sermon to interpret these words of Jesus, and I quote again: “What he is saying is: ‘I come not to bring this peace of escapism, this peace that fails to confront the real issues of life, the peace that makes for stagnant complacency.’ . . . Whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. I come to declare war over injustice. I come to declare war on evil. Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion, but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God.” (end quote)

And the fact is that standing up and speaking out for justice, for goodwill, for the power of the kingdom of God—taking a stand for those positive forces puts us in conflict with the forces of Empire. That’s why the Roman Empire saw Jesus as a revolutionary and gave him a rebel’s death on a cross. I find myself wondering whether that’s actually what Jesus meant when he said, “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me”—what if “taking up the cross” means being willing to be seen as revolutionary? What if it means taking a rebel’s stand against the evils of Empire? Throughout this year, we have seen people in Minneapolis, in Newark, and across the country standing up for the humanity and the basic human rights of their immigrant neighbors and being treated as rebels or insurgents. The mouthpieces of Empire call peaceful protests “domestic terrorism” because the justice of God’s kingdom, where all of God’s beloved children can truly live together in peace, is a real threat to the injustice and oppression that Empire is built on. Without that justice, we can’t have peace. While injustice and oppression persist, we can’t have *real* peace.

Dr. King wrapped up his sermon with these words: “If peace means accepting second-class citizenship, I don’t want it. If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don’t want it. If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo, I don’t want peace. If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated and segregated, I don’t want peace.”

For those of us who have made conflict avoidance a way of life—those of us who are uncomfortable with anger and division and even a hint of violence—these are challenging words: “I don’t want peace.”

“For I have come,” Jesus said, “to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes—one’s enemies—will be members of one’s own household.”

Here’s the thing about that: Dr. King used the language of warfare—“war over injustice, war on evil”—in talking about the struggle to overcome systems of racism. But he never forgot, and we must never forget, that we are in this struggle with members of our own household. Those whom we are tempted to see as enemies are in fact members of our own family. It’s a terrible thing when a family is torn apart, when parents turn against their children or siblings end up in a bitter feud. But the reality is that any division among people is division within the human family. Any strife and conflict divides the household of humanity.

Jesus resisted any effort to distinguish between neighbors and enemies, between those close to us and those farther removed. His words in this text don’t undo what he says five

chapters earlier in the Gospel of Matthew: “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” And his words in this text don’t undo what he says sixteen chapters later: “Put your sword back in its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

But his words do remind me that not all conflict is bad. My discomfort when I hear these words is a reminder to me that there *are* differences we can’t paper over, that there *are* divisions we can’t bridge, that there *are* things worth fighting about—worth fighting *for*. Jesus reminds me in this text that if I value being *nice* to my parents or my in-laws or my child, if I value being *inoffensive* to any member of the whole human family more than I value God’s reign, God’s justice, and God’s peace, then I’ve got my priorities out of whack.

If peace means being nice, being inoffensive, but keeping quiet in the face of injustice, accepting the broken way things are, and doing nothing while people suffer, then I’m with Dr. King—I don’t want peace, not that kind of peace, the obnoxious so-called “peace” that stinks in the nostrils of Almighty God. No, I want justice. I want equality. I want reconciliation. I want the fundamental human rights of all God’s beloved children to be protected. I want truth. I want freedom. I want the riches of the earth to be shared with all. I want God’s kin-dom, God’s beloved community. And of course I want peace—*real* peace, the peace that blooms and flourishes where God’s will is done.

Your kin-dom come, O God, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Amen.