

*A DISTURBING PEACE*

John 20.19-21

Sunday, April 12, 2015, Eastertide

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Lesson: John 20.19-21

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Temple authorities.

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Having said this, the savior showed them the marks of crucifixion.

The disciples were filled with joy when they saw Jesus, who said to them again, "Peace be with you. As Abba God sent me, so I'm sending you."

*A Disturbing Peace*

Imagine.

*Imagine all the people*

*Living life in peace.*

That's lovely. But I have discovered over the years that peace and quiet can be disturbing.

The kids are playing upstairs and suddenly it gets quiet – *too* quiet. And you just know that peacefulness means they are up to something.

You may have seen the images of the devastating tornado that ripped through Illinois this week. I was talking with a friend from the Midwest the other day about that eerie quiet before the storm. The air changes into this yellow-green color and, when it gets calm, that's when it's time to run.

Or you've spent your life with someone and that person is gone and the quiet is disturbing. Peace just reminds you that you are alone.

Peace and quiet are wonderful. But they can also be disturbing.

"Imagine all the people living life in peace," John Lennon writes. But it can also be a little disturbing if it means ...*Imagine there's no heaven ...Imagine there's no countries ...And no religion, too ...Imagine no possessions.*

John Lennon is right, I think, that if what we imagine is the world – or our own lives -- as a place of peace, the question is: What has to be disturbed to get there? What ideas of heaven and hell have to be challenged? What national boundaries need to get crossed? What religious understandings have to be reconsidered? What attachment to things gets in the way of the peace we say we want?

After their wake-up call early that Easter morning, by evening the disciples are safely locked away in the prison of their own fear. And Jesus disturbs that fear by breaking in to that locked room with the greeting, “Peace be with you.” And he says it twice just in case they missed it the first time.

I don’t automatically think of peace as that which disturbs fear. But that seems to be the case in this story. And it does seem to happen along the way.

This past Christmas we celebrated the centennial of the Christmas Truce, that iconic moment on Christmas Eve in WWI when soldiers on both sides stopped shooting at each other and ventured out into no man’s land to sing together and to give each other gifts. It was quiet along the front.

A year later, *afraid* that peace would break out again, the military leaders gave orders that this spontaneous Christmas Truce was *not* to happen again and they specifically incited raids and artillery attacks along the battle lines.

Those momentary outbreaks of peace were disturbing because there was a war to win. And the generals were afraid that human connection across enemy lines would derail that effort. Imagine being afraid of soldiers singing “Silent Night” to each other. It’s disturbing, right?

Or there is Julia Ward Howe’s original call for a Mother’s Day in 1872 as a response to this country’s Civil War – a war in which, on average, 500 people died every day and more than 2% of the nation’s entire population was killed. Hundreds of thousands of people were left wounded, broken, and homeless. It was destruction on a scale we can hardly imagine.

So it was a “Mother’s Day for Peace,” Julia Ward Howe had in mind when she wrote:

*Arise, all women who have hearts ...*

*Say firmly: We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.*

I wonder if Julia Ward Howe is pointing to a peace that disturbs not only the expectations of war but also those gender assumptions about what it means to be a real man or a real woman. What if, for the sake of peace as Julia Ward Howe imagined all those years ago, women rose up and said “no” and men refused to unlearn all they know of charity, mercy and patience? Maybe Julia Ward Howe’s great dream of an international congress of women never happened because the whole idea was too disturbing.

I learned Marty Haugen’s song, “Healer of our Every Ill,” at the height of the AIDS crisis in Chicago. There was a lot of fear then and somewhere along the line, we imagined a service that would let people know they were not alone and that love and healing were still happening. But we were afraid that no one would come – people would be too afraid to show up. And, also out of fear, people would be disturbed about having a gathering like this in their church or in their neighborhood.

But there was a church that invited us to come. And so we started planning the service.

And people came. The pews filled. And then the aisles. And then we squeezed into the chancel. And then we opened the doors out to the street where people were standing out on the stairs.

We invited people to come forward to write the names of those they had lost on these long banners. And they came – individuals and groups of people, partners and parents, family and friends, hospice workers and social workers and people of all kinds all huddled together writing names and crying.

The kept coming and we kept singing:  
*Healer of our every ill,  
Light of each tomorrow,  
Give us peace beyond our fear  
And hope beyond our sorrow.*

“Peace beyond our fear.”

I'm not exactly sure of the connection between peace and fear. But I'm pretty sure that the only way to "imagine all the people living life in peace," is to break through whatever fear there is that needs to be disturbed.

We could probably make a list.

Maybe it's the fear of failure -- although Marianne Williamson is famous for saying that "our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure."

Maybe it's the fear of change -- but everything changes anyway so we might as well imagine the kind of change we want to invest ourselves in.

Maybe it's the fear of other people's perceptions -- although by now you have probably figured out that other people, for their own sense of control, are way more invested in their perceptions of you than you need to be.

One of my favorite hymns of all time is the one we are about to sing: "When Peace Like a River / It is Well with my Soul."

I've told the story of this hymn before but it bears repeating in the context of a disturbing peace that moves beyond fear.

Horatio Spafford was no stranger to tragedy. He lost most of his wealth in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. And, on a trip to England, there was an accident at sea that took the lives of all four of his daughters. Only his wife, Anna, survived. So Horatio wrote:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, you have taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Now the tragedy would have been bad enough for Horatio and Anna to face. But their good Christian friends back in Chicago were convinced that the Spaffords must have done something to deserve this divine punishment. Imagine being told that your children died because you must have sinned.

So Horatio writes:

*My sin -- my sin, really -- My sin -- oh, the bliss of this glorious thought --  
My sin -- not in part but the whole --  
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.  
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!*

Now this is not my theological understanding of how sin and salvation work. But I have to give Horatio credit for refusing to live into other people's perceptions. "You are not pinning this on me," Horatio says. Whatever my sin, it is nailed to the cross and it has nothing to do with what happened to my daughters. You aren't going to shame me into submitting to your understanding of God. I will bear it no more.

For Horatio's friends, this would be a very disturbing kind of peace. It may have seemed like a cavalier confidence in the face of God's obvious condemnation. And that made them afraid for Horatio and for themselves.

Not surprising, perhaps, Chicago didn't feel much like home anymore and Horatio and Anna began to imagine another way of life. So they packed up and moved to Jerusalem where they established a school and support services for children regardless of their religious affiliation – Muslim, Christian, Jewish children were all welcome.

That center, and its work for peace, continues to this day.

Our hymnal has different words for the last verse but these are the words Horatio wrote:

*And Lord haste the day, when the faith shall be sight,  
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;  
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,  
Even so – even then – it is well with my soul.*

I may not share Horatio's vision for the future but I am inspired by this hope that can imagine peace beyond any fear. Even if the sky rolls back and God shows up with trumpets blaring, even then, Horatio says, it is well with my soul.

Disturbing though it might be to others, the work for peace in his own heart and the work for peace in Jerusalem taught him that peace that goes beyond fear.

*Whatever my lot, you have taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Whatever fear has you locked up inside this morning, there is a voice trying to break through to say: Peace! Peace be with you!

It may be disturbing at first, but today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

## NOTES

The historical information about the Christmas Truce, Julia Ward Howe's "Mother's Day Proclamation," and the story of the Spaffords and "It Is Well with my Soul," are available online at [Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org). The Marianne Williamson quote is included in Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat's *Spiritual Literacy* (Scribner, 1996), p.508.