

The Wisdom of God's Peace 11-13-05

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In Belfast, Northern Ireland, there is a large cross in a Catholic Cemetery commemorating those who died in World War II. And on this large cross is a sword, running the length and breadth of the cross. I had never seen the two so closely tied together. It was a startling image for me, and one that I have thought about often.

When we enter into the Wisdom of God as it relates to peace, we must begin at a most unlikely place. We begin with an execution, with the death penalty, with the cross. If you look at the cross in the shape of a sword, then you see that the sword has been put into the ground. The business end of the sword has been grounded, planted, sheathed if you will into the earth. That is the starting point for us as people of faith when we examine the way God has revealed his will when it comes to confronting violence and injustice.

So we see this inverted sword, the cross, used as the capital punishment instrument of its day. The cross of crucifixion of the Roman Empire was a place of unspeakable suffering, torture and a slow death. Why would God use such an ugly, despicable and violent image to reveal his wisdom of peace?

In the words of Eugene Peterson in his translation of 1 Corinthians 1:18-25:

The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hellbent on destruction, but for those on the way of salvation it makes perfect sense. This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out.

God starts here, and that is where we must start because that is where Jesus is. Somehow, after three years of teaching, preaching, evangelizing, healing and eating with people, Jesus ended up on the cross. We could ask why God allowed that to happen? We could ask why Jesus didn't run from that fate? We could ask why Jesus, as the only perfect and sinless human being, ends up on death row? Why didn't he run away? Why didn't his disciples fight to prevent his arrest? Why wasn't he given a fair trial? Why didn't his followers riot and get him off that cross?

How can God's savior of the world end up there? How does the hero of the story end up defeated, defenseless and dead? Where is the wisdom of peace when the sword won at the end of the day? The first clue as Peterson says:

1. This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out.

With Jesus on the cross, we begin to see how God works. God had tried all sorts of other ways to reach out to the human beings that he loved so dearly. Bringing them out of slavery in Egypt with great signs and wonders didn't seem to do the trick. Giving them a promised land flowing with milk and honey didn't seem to win their loyalty. Conceding an

earthly king to them didn't keep them from ignoring their covenant commitments. Exile in Babylon and the destruction of the temple and their way of life, in the long run didn't turn things around either. So God sends Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, and starts from below with a new approach.

He enters the world as one of the least of these, without wealth or privilege, without status or body guards. He enters the world as a baby born to low-income parents who became refugees in Egypt. In the pyramid of power of Jesus' day, Jesus was at the bottom. He was a nobody, did not own land. He had no birthright of power and privilege.

But the wisdom of God was among the least of these that Jesus was a part of. He began preaching and teaching and people began to listen. He healed people, fed people, talked to people and did theology along the way. What Kosuke Koyama calls the "three mile-an-hour-God" theology. Three miles an hour is about how fast a person can walk, and Jesus walked just about everywhere he went. And when you walk you can also talk, and you can stop and visit, and eat, and touch people, and interact with them. This is what they call a *local theology*, a theology that happens among people where they really live—that's where Jesus was—that's how God works.

And we always have to remember that this is how the story of Jesus begins—from below, at the bottom of the social ladder, at the ground level.

2. Peterson's translation of Paul's words to the church in Corinth says "I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head, I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots."

Conventional wisdom is a powerful thing in any culture. It is the general consensus about how things really work in situations that matter. Let's say you want to start a movement that would challenge the very foundations of the most powerful empire the earth had ever known. First of all, conventional wisdom, especially in a culture that thought in groups, as clans, as tribes and not as individuals, would say "can't be done!" Rome is too powerful, too much fire-power, too wealthy, too many troops, too many spies. Conventional wisdom says better lay low, cooperate where we have to and maybe they'll leave us alone. Don't stir up trouble, don't make a scene, go along to get along.

Starting from below, Jesus begins to say things that go against conventional wisdom: love your enemies, pray for your persecutors, the first shall be last, the kingdom of God is near, Jesus is Lord (and *not* Caesar is Lord). God wants to create a new humanity that is a community of equals based on love, not a stratified society based on power and privilege and coercion. This was NOT conventional wisdom!

3. More from The Message: So where can you find someone truly wise, truly educated, truly intelligent in this day and age? Hasn't God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense? Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb—*preaching*, of all things!—to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation.

By proclaiming that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, the way of salvation that comes by hearing and embracing the Word of God to humanity in Jesus, then we have to keep following Jesus all the way to the cross. "If you want to follow me," said Jesus, "then pick up your cross." Conventional wisdom would say that isn't a very effective marketing tool. Join this movement and you may end up being arrested. Become a Jesus follower and you end up in prison. Confess Jesus as Lord and you're given the death sentence. Now, why would you try and build a movement, or gather a people, or start a revolution with that as your marketing strategy?

Well, because this is the wisdom of God. And the wisdom of God has a way of exposing what is really foolish in the world and by naming what is most important in life—and that is overcoming our fear of death. If life itself begins with God, and God's creative act of love, then it seems logical that death is also part of that love and a re-creation of life in a different form. With that in mind, we begin to get a glimpse of God's wisdom coming through when he uses the most violent means of death known to humankind—the cross, to make his point.

Once again from the Message: While Jews clamor for miraculous demonstrations and Greeks go in for philosophical wisdom, we go right on proclaiming Christ, the Crucified. Jews treat this like an *anti*-miracle—and Greeks pass it off as absurd. But to us who are personally called by God himself—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one.

So we go back to the Catholic cemetery in Belfast and ask "How did that sword get put on the cross anyway?" How did the two get so closely aligned? Historically, we are told that when the Roman Emperor Constantine warmed up to the Christian faith, slowly, over time the church and the state collaborated in such a way that infant baptism became compulsive, heretics were hunted down and forced to recant, and as John Howard Yoder says "It took more courage NOT to be a Christian" during such a time, than to be one. We must also hold the Church accountable for this compromise as much as we blame the Roman Emperor.

We learn of entire legions of soldiers being baptized in a river, submersed so that their souls would be saved should they be killed in battle, but holding their right arm and sword up out of the water, so that it could wield it's carnal power.

That is trying to have it both ways. That's putting the sword on top of the cross so that you can force others to conform to your will—all in the name of Jesus—all with the best of intentions—but all for the purpose of putting others on the cross, not yourself, and that's a very important difference.

4. The final point is this.

The Gospel has both sides of the cross in its message: we first need to study and understand how and why Jesus ended up on the cross and embrace with both eyes open the utter horror of that reality. That is the fear of death that is part of our humanity. When Jesus is on the cross we see a crucified God—a God willing to be so humiliated by the powers that be,

self-limiting his own limitless power in order to make that reality accessible to us. Following Christ in life, also means picking up our cross of crucifixion. But then we see the other side of the cross—the empty cross which leads to the empty tomb. Resurrection redeems the cross, resurrection disarms the cross, resurrection puts the sword, tip down, into the ground and leads us to retool that symbol of death and coercion and forcing our will, into a plowshare to prepare the soil, to plant seeds, to cultivate the wisdom of God in the hearts and minds of others we encounter on our short journey through life, to surrender to God's will and God's way.

Peterson concludes the text this way:

Human wisdom is so tinny, so impotent, next to the seeming absurdity of God. Human strength can't begin to compete with God's "weakness."

The wisdom of God's peace is looking at both sides of the cross, and taking down the sword from the cross because it doesn't belong there. In the disarmed cross we find the wisdom of God's peace. We find the surrender, salvation, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and by following him through life and death and resurrection, we too find that peace.

May it be so for us. AMEN