

*Beloved Community: No Justice, No Peace*

Matthew 10:34-39

October 22, 2023

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*<sup>34</sup> “Don’t think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth. I haven’t come to bring peace but a sword. <sup>35</sup> I’ve come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. <sup>36</sup> People’s enemies are members of their own households.*

*<sup>37</sup> “Those who love father or mother more than me aren’t worthy of me. Those who love son or daughter more than me aren’t worthy of me. <sup>38</sup> Those who don’t pick up their crosses and follow me aren’t worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them.*

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This is one of those sayings of Jesus I’d rather skip. Pretend it doesn’t exist.

But it’s there. We don’t know, can’t know, if he said this exactly, or if it’s what the early Jesus followers remembered a generation later when this would have been written down. But either way, there it is, in our Bible. We don’t have to like it. But it’s there.

It’s been used for profound harm. It’s fueled crusades and pogroms and genocide. There are political movements right now claiming this verse as grounds for violence. So, let’s be clear: Jesus does not endorse violence.

We should never read scripture in isolation. Within this same gospel, Jesus tells us to love not just our friends but our enemies. And at the end when they came to arrest him, when he faced losing his life, and one of his followers pulled out an actual sword to defend him, Jesus told him to put it away and healed his enemy’s wound.

This passage does not endorse literal violence. Let’s back up. Jesus says this as he is sending his followers out to heal, cast out demons, and proclaim the kingdom is at hand. All good things. But, he tells them, doing these things is not going to be universally welcomed. They upset the status quo. There will be resistance. That’s when he says, “Don’t think I came to bring peace.”

He’s not saying go pick a fight. He’s telling them conflict’s just going to happen. Healing, liberating, announcing the demands of love will sometimes provoke conflict.

We know that when we’re trying to love a toddler. Sometimes they don’t want to take their medicine. Insisting is going to cause an almighty meltdown, but we face the conflict. It’s the only responsible way to love them. Sometimes love provokes conflict.

It’s not only this way in relationships of dependence. This is just how love is. We have to choose: How will I love this person in this moment? Sometimes those choices lead to immediate relief, an easing of tension, reconciliation.

Sometimes a kind, gentle word or a silent, steadfast presence are the most loving choice. But sometimes facing the conflict, saying or doing the hard thing is the greater act of love.

I know it's true, but I do not like it. Not one bit. I'm scared of conflict. As I've gotten older I've slowly gained courage to face it, but my initial instinct and desire is nearly always to let it go, paper over the problem, avoid the conversation. This doesn't actually serve me well.

Sometimes, I carry resentments for years. Sometimes, my choice to placate one person has had negative repercussions for my family or a whole community. Sometimes, it's enabled someone else to keep hurting me or others.

I have learned slowly from those of you who are more able to engage conflict wisely. I've learned how to face it for the sake of the deeper love. Without truth we cannot fully reconcile, we cannot change generational patterns, we cannot even accept ourselves and grow in right relationship with others. It's not kindness—to anyone—to stay quiet in situations of abuse or allow them to continue for others. It's not loving to squash the truth in our relationships in the name of keeping the peace. It's tempting. Pastors and religious leaders have even counseled it. But the truth is sometimes love causes conflict.

A lot of us, and I count myself in this number, do this in our public lives as well as our private lives. Too often we hold comfort and civility more dear than love or justice. We want to strike grand bargains, make change incrementally. We want to bring folks in, bring folks along, and watch that moral arc bend slowly enough for everyone to get on board. It's lovely when that can happen. But there are also some choices that can't be made halfway. There are changes that can't wait. Sometimes there will be conflict.

We often tell the stories of the civil rights movement with all the hard edges smoothed out, bathed in a soft, nostalgic light. We say Rosa Parks was just a sweet old seamstress who was tired. But she was not old. She was not tired—not any more than she usually was at the end of a workday. She has written, “the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”<sup>1</sup> She may have been kind, but sweet might not be quite the right word for a woman who had already been engaged in confrontational activism and agitation for more than twenty years when she refused to get up that day.

We've entirely forgotten the stories of others, like 15yr old Claudette Colvin who refused to get up nine months before Rosa Parks's protest. As a girl, she was much more vulnerable than Rosa Parks who was known and respected throughout the community. Later, Colvin said “History kept me stuck to my seat. I felt the hand of Harriet Tubman pushing down on one shoulder and Sojourner Truth pushing down on the other.” She would not get up, even though it meant being assaulted by the police and charged with disturbing the peace.

That's exactly what she did. 15yr old Claudette Colvin and 42yr old Rosa Parks disturbed what MLK called “a negative peace which is the absence of tension.” They were working for something better: “a positive peace, which is the presence of justice.” They were working for a peace that would ultimately set not only Black folks free, but also white folks trapped in a web of hate.

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<sup>1</sup> Parks, Rosa; James Haskins (1992). *Rosa Parks: My Story*. Dial Books. p. 116.

Sometimes love requires conflict. The phrase, “No justice, no peace,” has become commonplace in protests. It is not a threat. It is a statement of reality. It's just reality that we cannot be at peace with one another if we aren't in right relationship. To ask someone living with violence, or abuse to just be nice, be patient, wait, is not love, and will not work in the long run. To settle in our relationships for half-truths and quiet seething is not actually kind. It's not really love.

It's not easy to know when to choose which—patience and quiet perseverance versus direct, disruptive words and action. As someone in our Tuesday morning Bible study put it, “When do you shout at people? And when do you have them over for coffee?”

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God. And the second is to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. That's our litmus test, our touchstone, our guiding star. Will this choice I'm about to make help me love my child, my partner, my friends, my parents, my coworker, my boss, the people we will never meet who are stuck in systems of violence? What is the most loving choice I can make right now? Love. Love God. Love neighbor. Love self. The question is always—will this choice help me love this other person? Is it the most loving choice I can make?

Love is not just sweet feelings, kumbaya, and happily ever after. Sometimes it is saying the hard thing. Sometimes it is disturbing the peace, disorderly conduct, troubling the waters. Sometimes the cost of love is division and disagreement.

Sometimes a person giving birth is torn open in the act of giving life. Sometimes love coming into the world tears things apart. Even, maybe especially, non-violent love like Jesus'. Jesus never said it'd be easy. But he did promise it is the way of life—true life, abundant life, a life of love.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023