

“Breathing Peace”

April 16, 2023

Scripture: I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Scholars are uncertain how much persecution the Christians who wrote the New Testament actually experienced. There's no doubt that Jesus was tortured and crucified or that Paul was imprisoned multiple times and probably tortured, but was that the experience of the average Christian? For instance, were the disciples really in so much danger that they needed to hide themselves from the Jewish authorities? And if they were being threatened, where was Mary Magdalene who was the only person actually claiming to have seen Jesus? I suspect they were hiding because of their own anxiety and not because anyone was actually looking for them, or even thinking about them. As far as the authorities were concerned, the movement around Jesus was done.

But what about those later Christians, the ones written to by the writer of First Peter? For the first hundred and fifty years or so, there's not a lot of evidence that Christians were being persecuted by the Roman government as a policy. There is a letter from around 112 by a local magistrate named Pliny to the Emperor Trajan describing how he handles Christian troublemakers and asking if what he's done is acceptable. That implies there was no set policy in place, it was handled on a case-by-case basis. Trajan does tell Pliny to ignore anonymous accusations against people suspected of being Christian. Turning in your neighbor because you don't like the way they keep their lawn goes back a long way. According to one commentator of First Peter, “if a Christian housechurch was willing to tolerate their members attending public festivals honoring the gods or the ancestors, or participating in annual banquets of trade or burial societies held in pagan temples—then they could probably go about their lives unmolested, or suffering nothing worse than name-calling.”

So why do these writers keep talking about suffering for the sake of the gospel? What I hear over and over in these writings is encouragement to live up to the teaching and ministry of Jesus. If they do that, if they truly embrace Jesus' ministry in their daily lives, then they will risk offending their neighbors by rejecting the values on which their society is built. Roman society was built on a very strict division of classes and categories of people. Groups that violated that hierarchy were seen as subversive and a danger to the state. All the writers of the New Testament, whether they were writing gospels or letters or sermons, were telling their audiences to break the rules and reject the social order.

Jesus' ministry was one of compassion and healing, inclusion and justice. It got him killed. And when the church lives up to Jesus' ministry through acceptance and inclusion of people society rejects it creates what the late John Lewis called “good trouble.” So, maybe the disciples weren't wrong to hide for a little while. Maybe they needed to regroup and get their heads together, figure out who they were going to be. And when Jesus appears to them, breathing the Holy Spirit on them, challenging Thomas to trust what can't be seen, they're changed in

some fundamental way. The people who leave that room go out to face the world's hostility by embodying Christ and breathing peace.

Like those disciples, like the communities being written in First Peter, we are called to breathe peace into the world by rejecting the categories and divisions society wants us to observe. In his letter to the Galatian Christians, Paul says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In a society defined by hierarchy and patriarchy those words are revolutionary. But they're not exhaustive, there are other divisions to be rejected. Today we're called to reject white supremacy and antisemitism, Islamophobia, transphobia and homophobia. We're called to breathe peace into the world by embracing all those who are targeted because of their skin color or their religion or their immigration status or their gender identity. In the words of the great theologian and mystic Howard Thurman we're called to create a world where "I can be *me* without making it difficult for you to be *you*."

And if we truly do that, then we'll meet hostility and resistance. We'll be accused of subversion and disorder. Some will even claim we're hypocrites because we don't accept certain views, like Christian nationalism. But rejecting a person's ideology isn't the same as rejecting their humanity. As we've learned over the last several weeks discussing the rise of white Christian nationalism, that ideology is not Christianity and there's nothing about it we should accept. But we can still have compassion for people who hold those views and let them know they can be freed of them.

By appearing to his disciples and breathing the Holy Spirit on them, Jesus empowers us all to go into the world and breathe peace through his ministry of justice and compassion, inclusion and hope. We risk experiencing hostility out of our love for Christ and our gratitude that in him we are raised, we're given "a new birth into a living hope," as the writer of First Peter says. We can't keep that to ourselves; we can't stay hidden. For no matter what hostility or threat of persecution we might face, we have nothing to fear. Christ is our peace and through us Christ will be known in the world.

Amen