



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of our loving God, who is the source of all our strength. Please be seated.

Before I start my sermon, I just want to give a big thank you, a really heartfelt thank you to this congregation for their support, not only in my step towards ordination and help with me for seminary but also all of the support that my wife, Betsy, and I have received over these last many months. My wife Betsy, had a stroke in April. And the outpouring of love and support and cards, it meant so much. We're very, very thankful and I'm happy to report that Betsy is doing really, really well and hopefully will be back with us very, very soon.

For a class I took in July involving cross-cultural mission and ministry, we each had to take a test called the Intercultural Development Inventory, or IDI, to assess our incoming intercultural competencies. The main growth area that was identified for me was that when dealing with people from other cultures, I too easily downplay our cultural differences and operate instead on the Pollyanna-ish assumption that all people are basically alike.

I do this, so the IDI folks posited, probably because I want to avoid conflict and fear that highlighting our cultural differences might appear to create conflict. The problem with that sort of conflict avoidance approach, they said, is that by glossing over cultural differences and focusing instead only on superficial commonalities, I hold myself back from true engagement and understanding and keep myself from forging genuine deep cross-cultural connection.

A few weeks later, in preparation for a board retreat for a nonprofit I serve, all the board members had to take the 16 personalities test, a variation on the familiar Myers-Briggs inventory. A recurring theme in my report from that one was that I have a strong drive to be helpful and create harmony in all of my surroundings. Which has a lot of things to commend it, let me tell you, but it has some downsides too. My desire for harmony, the report said, can sometimes lead me to avoid necessary conflicts. My constant drive to keep the peace, they said, can prevent me from addressing issues that need to be addressed.

Then last week, a solicitation shows up in my email inviting me to take an Enneagram test. The price was right and I was getting a kick in more ways than one out of all this testing stuff. So I did it. According to that report, my Enneagram

type (number six) is responsible, hardworking, and trustworthy. All good stuff. But also craves security and stability so much to the point of risking being overly cautious and being afraid to rock the boat sometimes to my detriment. They recommended that I work on being more assertive.

That these three tests painted a fairly consistent picture is expected, since I was the sole source of all of the information that any of them had about me. But still, I had not expected that there would be two things, that all three of them coming from different perspectives and different reasons would agree upon. First, conflict avoidance is one of my defining tendencies. And second, that is not something to be celebrated, but something to work on overcoming.

What a coincidence then that on the heels of that triple epiphany, here comes Jesus in today's gospel reading saying, do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. Conflict avoidance, it seems, indeed, is not Jesus's thing. Nope. I guess we knew that since Jesus was, after all, the one who challenged the religious authorities of his day, turned the tables over at the temple, and, well, took on the Roman Empire. But that's not the image we like to cherish. The verse, "They will be divided against father and son and son against daughter, son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother" is not one that any Sunday school class anywhere has asked the children to memorize. And the verse, "From now on five in one household will be divided three against two and two against three" does not show up on any refrigerator magnets to inspire us when we go to get the milk carton.

But this is still the same Jesus who we say Isaiah foretold as Prince of Peace. At the moment of His birth, the shepherds in their fields heard the heavenly host sing about peace on earth. This is the Jesus who in the Sermon on the Mount declared blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. And who sent many of those who He healed on their way with the words, "Go in peace." This is the Jesus whose first words when He appeared to the disciples on Easter morning were, "Peace be with you." An opening and repeated again a week later when Thomas was with them, and then again on the road to Emmaus.

Make no mistake, Jesus is all about peace. How then do we reconcile that with what He says here? The answer may differ perhaps in Luke's time than ours. Luke was writing for a largely gentile audience whose conversion could or already did result in persecution or loss of social standing and likely would divide families. They needed to be prepared for those possibilities and assured that following Jesus was the right thing, even if or when those risks materialized. At least in our country, of course, we don't face those same kinds of risks today. But we know all too well that even in our day, religion can divide us and our families.

Some of that is inevitable if we stand for what we believe. As Alan Brehm in his Waking Dreamer blog observed, "When anyone has the nerve to look at the way things are and say, this isn't right, it has an unavoidable effect. It divides people. Those who benefit from the status quo will fight tooth and nail to oppose anyone who tries to change things. But it is more than that. Yes, taking a stand for anything will sometimes result in conflict and division as an inevitable side effect, but as conflict avoidant types like me know, there are plenty of ways to avoid conflict. By glossing over differences, by ignoring inconvenient truths, by keeping silent in order to avoid making waves or rocking the boat.

In this passage, Jesus is not only warning us of the risk of inevitable conflicts we may face, but also girding us to be willing to walk right into ones that we might otherwise preferred to and could avoid. It is important to bear in mind that when Jesus talks about division in this passage, He is not describing it as a desired end state. Jesus came to herald the coming reign of God. That's the goal. That's the end state. The point He is making here, whether for the first century or 21st, is that sometimes the way there is going to involve conflict. Rather than pursue a policy of conflict avoidance, sometimes we need to embrace it as the way forward, not avoiding it, but confronting it in order to work through it.

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*, which includes our concept of peace, but means so much more. It conveys a sense of wellbeing and wholeness, of being at harmony with one another in creation. In His farewell discourse, Jesus tells the disciples, He leaves them His peace, His *shalom*, but stresses to them that this was not peace as the world gives. I think that distinction is at play in today's passage. The peace that in today's passage, He says He did not come to bring, is peace as the world gives. The *shalom* He offers is deeper and more lasting.

But the way there involves conflict, either as an inevitable side effect of pursuing a righteous path, or because it is a necessary step on the path. There is no salvation without the cross, no Eucharist until the bread is raised and broken, and no *shalom* until what is broken in us and around us is honestly acknowledged. Because doing so is what is going to open the door to repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and wholeness.

As one commentator observed, as any recovering addict will attest, hard truths are the ground upon which real hope stands. Honesty about brokenness is a necessary preface to healing. We, or at least people like me, fool ourselves into thinking that we can get peace through conflict avoidance, but any peace bought that way is illusory. Minimizing, ignoring, or papering over wrongdoing brings no *shalom*, but merely ensures that the brokenness remains festering beneath the surface.

This applies in our individual lives and our relationships, and it applies to society at large. As the right Reverend Frank Logue put it, "We let coworkers steal from the company, friends cheat on their spouses, brothers fall deeper into drug use. We fail to stand with those being bullied, with neighbors being denied human rights. We do all of this in the hope of keeping the peace and instead fall short of the deep peace Jesus wants for us, our families, and our places of work."

Anytime we preserve the peace at someone or some group's expense, we trade God's *shalom* for a chief imitation. To the alarm of many of us, we now see this sort of ethic being played out as official governmental policy pursuant to the Orwellian named Executive Order, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," the National Parks and other properties under the control of the Department of the Interior are being purged of any content that disparages any American, living or past, so that the only content that will be allowed to be displayed on National Parks ground is that which extols the greatness of the achievements and progress of the American people, or the beauty of the American landscape. An analogous housekeeping is underway at the Smithsonian.

In his opinion, peace issued for Independence Day 2025, our presiding bishop, Sean Rowe, reflected upon how Independence Day was, "shaping up to be a complicated one for the Episcopal Church. We were once the church of the founding fathers and presidents," he said, Today, however, we are known less for the powerful people in our pews than for our resistance to the rising tide of authoritarianism and Christian nationalism emanating from Washington DC." Conflict avoidance, it seems, is not the presiding bishop's thing either.

Harking then to first principles Presiding Bishop Rowe writes, "God calls us to place the most vulnerable and marginalized at the center of our common life. And we must follow that command regardless of the dictates of any political party or earthly power." Our call as Christians today may require us to reclaim Christianity's counter-cultural roots. We do this not by pointing fingers or self-righteous posturing. We do it mainly by the examples we can set, being true to our baptismal vows, and with God's help living the lives God means for us even if that may bring us into conflict with the prevailing social winds.

My IDI and Myers Briggs and Enneagram tests may have given me some useful food for thought. But at the end of the day, tests like that are just theoretical exercises based on hypothetical questions with no real world consequences. What's happening around us now is different, affecting millions of lives, perhaps for many years to come. How we individually as a church and as a people respond to the present time is massively consequential. This is not a test, or maybe it is.

Amen.