

EVE OF THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 13, 2022

PSALM 82 | LUKE 12:49-56

There's a good book that came out last summer by Heather McGhee called *The Sum of Us*.¹ It's about the ways in which racism in particular and social inequality more generally doesn't just create discrete classes of victims and perpetrators but hurts everyone, even the people who believe themselves to be benefitting from it.

One of the memorable stories she tells in the book is about pools. After World War II, there were many towns that built public swimming pools that were the white civic leaders lifted up as amenities that made their community a desirable place to live. And as the Warren Court started desegregating public institutions, it appeared that these local mayors and councils would have to integrate the pools. There was really no other option. But because they didn't want integrated pools, they just decided to get rid of the pools entirely. So they drained them and filled them in with concrete.

It helps to have that image of the drained pool in mind when you read today's gospel reading. Today's gospel reading is—to put it mildly—pretty harsh. “Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I've come to disrupt and confront!”

This is not the kind of Jesus we're used to hearing. I'm not aware of anyone who wants this read at their wedding or funeral. Isn't the whole point of Jesus to bring peace and wholeness and redemption and all that?

Well, yes and no. It depends what you mean by peace. When we talk about peace, we're often talking about what Martin Luther King, Jr. called a kind of “negative peace.”² A negative peace is one in which there's no outright fighting and no in-the-open conflict. In the Letter from a Birmingham Jail, King called it “the absence of tension.” To use the language of this translation, negative peace just “smooths things over.” It gets rid of the tension, but it doesn't change the underlying problems.

If you want an image of negative peace, you can think of the drained swimming pool. There was conflict over whether public spaces should be integrated, so these towns got rid of the public spaces, and now people stopped arguing. So from the perspective of these mayors, the conflict went away.

Jesus is not interested in negative peace. You could imagine a telling of the gospels in which all Jesus tries to do is smooth things over and absolve tension. And it would look very different. When someone asks to be healed on the Sabbath, Jesus would reply that it might offend some Pharisees, so he'll just have to tough it out for a bit longer. When the disciples tell Jesus not to go to Jerusalem because he'll be crucified, Jesus say, “Well, let's get some focus groups going. Get some feedback. Develop some consensus.” But that's obviously not what Jesus is interested in.

¹ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (Random House Publishing Group, 2021).

² Full context: “I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.””

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What Jesus is here to bring is a positive peace. Not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of reconciliation, reparations, and renewal. In that same letter, King says that positive peace isn't the absence of tension but the "presence of justice." In the Hebrew Bible, that positive peace is called "shalom." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has a great definition of shalom. He says that it's "completeness, perfection, the harmonious working of a complex system, integrated diversity, a state in which everything is in its proper place and all is at one with the physical and ethical laws governing the universe."³ It's not just smoothing things over. It's bringing everything back together. And that is exactly what Jesus is here to do.

That image that Sacks uses of everything being in its proper place and at one with the order of God's creation is a great image. Except for one thing. There's a lot of stuff that isn't in the right place. People's hearts are attached to power and wealth and status. People's interests are aligned with injustice and indifference and quietism. People's minds are set on self-preservation. So for God's positive peace to come to fruition, for the kingdom of God to be present, means a disruption, a break from the old ways of doing things.

In the psalms, this process is often summed up as orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.⁴ We believe that life is stable and predictable until something happens that knocks us off track and we get disoriented. When we get disoriented, the temptation is often for us to just try to get back to the old orientation. We try to get back to the old orientation by seeking a negative peace. To drain the swimming pool, as it were. But instead, God reorients us into the kinds of relationships that Sacks was talking about. Harmonious. Complex. Integrated diversity. That's the life that God gives us in Jesus.

And this is where that image of Jesus bringing fire to the earth is so interesting. It sounds destructive, like something from a Michael Bay movie. But Jesus isn't advocating retribution or violence here. In fact, you might remember that back in June, we heard the story of when Jesus is rejected by a Samaritan village. They don't want to talk to him. And the disciples ask if they should rain down fire on this Samaritan village. And Jesus says that they're not going to do that. You can't save creation by getting rid of it.

But Jesus does pour down fire from the heavens. And he does that at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit is given to the apostles and the Jesus movement. Jesus gives them the power of the resurrection that is symbolized by fire. That is the fire that empowers these apostles to continue in Jesus's mission of seeking peace. Not negative peace. Not just smoothing everything over. But of bringing positive peace, God's shalom, to fruition in the world. Of bringing everything into a new orientation, a new alignment, a new completeness. You could even say that God reorients us into the power of the resurrection.

So has Jesus come to divide? Yes. Jesus has come to divide us from anything that would keep us from living in God's kingdom. Has Jesus come to give us peace? Yes. But not just an absence of tension but the presence of the divine life. And has Jesus come to bring fire? Yes. Jesus has come to give us the fire of the Holy Spirit, not to destroy, but to reorient us into God's mission.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ "Covenant & Conversation | Naso | The Pursuit of Peace | Rabbi Sacks," May 26, 2017, <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/naso/the-pursuit-of-peace/>.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Fortress Press, 2004).

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