

“Live in Peace”

2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

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As I read through some commentary notes about our two passages... those familiar words in Matthew known as “The Great Commission,” and the closing verses from Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth... I was particularly struck by a phrase describing the latter one: *“NOTHING EXCEPTIONAL.”* As though these final statements were just ‘throw away lines.’ Such an assessment sure flies in the face of those familiar words of *2 Timothy*, that **“ALL Scripture is God-breathed, and USEFUL...”**! And the funny thing is, as I read over these verses against the backdrop of this past 2 weeks’ tumultuous events, I felt the very opposite... that they were, to the contrary, QUITE ‘exceptional’ indeed. These efforts of Paul to, in the words of that same commentary, *“counter defiance, divisions, and lack of love that had arisen out of pride and self-importance”* in the life of the Corinthian CHURCH then sure spoke loud-and-clear to me of their value for our American NATION today...particularly where Paul implores the people to: **“Put things in order... listen to my appeal... agree with (or “encourage”) one another... live in peace.”** (2 Cor. 13:11)

Does not each one of these exhortations speak to US in our current climate of ‘defiance, division, and lack of love?’ (Now, we’ve got to be a little careful about that whole **“holy kiss”** thing right now, but the rest of it is SPOT ON!) In our 3-year cycle of Bible readings, could this have come at a more perfect time? Coincidence? HARDLY! *Another* ‘dence,’ perhaps. ‘PROVI-dence.’ (Indeed, that word reminds us that God does ‘provide’ no matter how ‘dense’ we may be...)

So, for the next few minutes, let us consider just how WE are fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus. And particularly, in these anxious times,

how His command to those ancient disciples very much relates to we modern-day ones. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, ***“Come, let us reason together”***... just how His marching orders, then and now, include the ability to ***“Live in Peace.”***

We first read that the disciples ***“went... to the mountain to which Jesus directed them.”*** (Matthew 28:16) Ever think about how many of Jesus’ greatest moments... of both triumph and trial... occurred on ‘mountains.’ From His crucifixion on a hill called Golgatha to his Sermon on the Mount, some of Jesus’ ‘best work’ took place in ‘elevated’ places, where he ‘directed’ his followers how to BE ‘followers.’ Recognizing that mountains are places we usually only visit for brief periods; they aren’t places that most of us live... we are ‘valley dwellers.’ You know... as in the ***‘valley of the shadow of death’***... where we shall ***‘fear no evil.’*** **WHY?** Because we know that ‘God is with us.’ Jesus. Emmanuel. ‘God with us.’ And yet, as we have walked this sometimes ‘lonesome valley’ in the last few months... and weeks... has it sometimes been hard NOT to ‘fear evil’...??

Consider what happened next. ***‘When they saw him, they worshipped him... but some doubted.’*** (Matthew 28:17) In the course of these ‘crises,’ from ‘pandemic to protests,’ hasn’t it been a welcome reprieve from the world to come into a time of worship... whether ‘vital or virtual’ (personally or electronically)? But even in the faithful expressions of your trust in God, cannot there *still* be that part of your mind that dwells on all the negative ‘stuff’ we are seeing and feeling every day? Even as we proclaim how ‘great and majestic is God’s name,’ cannot we also hear that insidious voice of doubt in that ‘great God’s’ presence in all this suffering?

Perhaps that is why that Jesus, knowing of the “doubt” that some of His followers had, first reassured them that ***“All authority in heaven and earth has***

been given to me.” ‘I and the Father are one. And through us, along with the Holy Spirit, we are still in control.’ As I said last week, **God’s got this!** What WE are called to do is to BELIEVE that... and to continue to grapple with what part WE are to play in helping others to believe in God’s presence and providence. You know... that God’s ‘provides’ no matter how ‘dense’ we may be. When we hear those ‘commissioning’ words of Christ to ***“Go and make disciples of all nations,”*** just where are we being called to ‘go?’ What ‘nation’... Mexico, Cuba, or...?

And as we consider all the division and anger we are seeing expressed by our ‘black and brown’ brothers and sisters... images that look hauntingly similar to pictures we saw HALF-A-CENTURY ago... perhaps the ‘nation’ we are first being called to is OUR OWN! In fact, that word ‘nation’ can also be translated as ***“Gentiles.”*** Those non-Jews, a people outside of their own faith and ethnic tradition, who might actually live right next door. In other words, Jesus was commanding his disciples to minister to those who were DIFFERENT than them.

Hmmm... so, in other words, if we want to really live out our Christian calling with integrity, we might first look right under our very noses. To look a little differently at those we might think we have nothing in common with. No matter a person’s age or gender, the color of their skin, or neighborhood that they live in, if we truly desire someone to have a relationship with our blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they must first have a relationship with US. Like I’ve said countless times before, people don’t really CARE what you know ‘til they know that you care...

Right here I want to interject something. I hope that you don’t think I have been trying to ‘beat you up’ on how you treat those of different races. For most everyone here, I know that you have good hearts, both for Jesus and for His

brothers and sisters. This is not necessarily about changing WHO you ARE... (and if SO, you 'know who you are')... but rather, WHAT you (and I) DO! How are WE able to make a difference in the lives of men, women, and children like those in those PEACEFUL rallies all around our country?

And I am NOT, first and foremost, talking about programs and policy changes. Not that there don't NEED to be some of those. In a column last week by Cal Thomas, he quoted Harvard prof. Henry Louis Gates, who has had a number of PBS specials on African American history, as saying that *"Racism has been a part of America's cultural DNA since before the ink dried on the Constitution. ...It's a gene that has mutated over time yet has remains part of the inheritance weighing us down, one generation to the next."*

Now, I believe that in many of us, that 'inheritance' has 'mutated' for the better. Others in our society, for the worse. But here's where I really resonated with Mr. Thomas' article: *"This 'DNA' problem is called sin by preachers (and him!) and cannot be altered by government programs. If it could have, it would have been by now."* (As of 2014 - \$22 TRILLION anti-poverty/racial justice programs).

Anyone hear about the maelstrom Drew Brees got in for not being in agreement with kneeling for the National Anthem. Patriotism issue aside, what was the intent of taking that knee? To call attention to the continuing problem of racial injustice in our country, and work toward changes for the better. WELL, just how well is THAT working? From what I saw, all it did was to further divide us, not call us to action. It took just one knee of a deranged policemen in Minnesota to *really* get the nation's attention.

My friends, the way we 'turn the tide' of racism and inequality in this country is NOT simply through legislation or public statements that can be quite

misinterpreted. As Cal said, *“A changed heart is the key, something the government lacks the power to achieve.”* You and I have the power. We have the power to change hearts. Well, who we work for does...

Black, white, brown, green or yellow, if we truly seek to make a disciple of another... and for that matter, to BE one ourselves, I have the PERFECT evangelical tool ‘for your toolbox.’ It’s the same statement that most likely you and I have relied on in times of struggle. We just read it: ***“And remember... I am with you always, to the very end.”*** (Matthew 28:20) There is NOTHING more valuable to someone going through trials in their life than to know that they are NOT alone. Especially from someone they might see as part of their struggle. To simply say, ‘How can I help?’ And then SHUT UP and LISTEN...

I would lift up to you one final quote I came across this week in the midst of the turmoil and confrontation of this past two weeks. Its author said: *“We don’t fear speaking the truth... because we’re doing God’s work. Because we’re covered by the Holy Spirit we don’t fear walking up to people who are angry because we join them in their anger.”* Any idea? Franklin Graham? Al Sharpton? NO. **HPD Chief Art Acevedo.** His was just one of a number of examples of law enforcement having POSITIVE interactions with protesters. In his way, Acevedo was telling them to please ‘remember... I am with you always, to the end.’ His was a beautiful expression of the truth that it is ONE thing to point someone in the right direction... it is a WHOLE other one to actually walk with them...

As you and I seek to live a faithful life in the REAL world, let us be mindful of those whom we need to not merely ‘point’ in the right direction, but those who desperately need someone to walk with them. Be particularly sensitive this week... and the months and years to come... to a person of color who needs to

know the truth of Jesus' statement: 'I am with you always.' I leave you with the admonition of Paul to the church in Corinth... and in Lake Charles/Welsh:

"Brothers and sisters, put things in order, listen to my (and others) appeal, agree with (encourage) one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." (2 Corinthians 13:11) And may ALL God's precious children say, 'AMEN!'

CHARGE: Genesee Cty. Sheriff **Christopher Swanson** approached a large crowd of protestors, with multiple law enforcement agencies present as well. Took off his weapons, his helmet, his riot gear, and went up to the leader, gave him a "big fat hug" and asked "What do we need to do?" Much to his surprise, the crowd chanted "Walk with us." Which of course, he did. And what could have become a bloody riot instead became a peaceful demonstration.

You and I will (hopefully) never have to face such a situation. And yet, we can still react the same way to someone who is angry, frustrated, and perhaps doubtful of your genuine concern for them. Take off the 'armor' of fear, of prejudice, of ignorance, and simply ask, 'What do I need to do for you?' And you just might be surprised at the response. Perhaps to simply ask you to 'walk with us.' And in so doing, you will be obeying Christ's command to "live in peace."

PRAYER: God of Love and Mercy, you have given us stewardship to care for this wonderful planet and to care for our neighbors. We have been blessed with a variety of gifts and talents and you call us to use them to help others. Open our hearts today to ministries of peace with justice. Embolden us to become part of this great cloud of witnesses who were unafraid to be your disciples. We think of so many in this church and in our lives who have gone before us, braving the difficulties presented by life. We name them in our hearts before you, grateful for their example. (Silent prayer.) We also name in our hearts those people who are ill, who mourn, who feel lost and alone, those who are part of cultures of oppression and indignity. Help us to be those people who, by our example, will break those chains of poverty and burst the doors that imprison their spirits. Be with this church that it may be a true witness to Jesus Christ in all that we do. AMEN.