

God's ways are not our ways... ...God's ways are not our ways. This phrase has been running through my head all week and is a concept that that both inspires me and also freaks me out a little. It would be one thing if God did things God's way, and we humans went about doing things our way and that was that. But that is not that. As we heard in both of our texts this morning, being a follower of Jesus means resisting the ways of the world and seeking to do things God's way. Much of the time, that is easier said than done.

Peter is a perfect example of how difficult it can be to not only follow God's way, but even to simply understand what God's way is. Throughout the Gospels Peter, as well as most of the disciples, struggle to fully understand what Jesus is teaching them. They fall short over and over and over again. But in our text last week, we heard Peter finally get it right. He proclaims that Jesus is the messiah and Jesus declares that Peter is blessed. But only a few verses later, Peter shows that he didn't yet completely understand what Jesus's ministry would lead to. It is a common assumption that Peter expected Jesus to be a warrior king - A messiah like King David. This may not have been the expectation held by all Jewish people at the time of what the messiah would be like, but Peter at least seems to be hoping that the messiah would liberate the people of Israel from the oppressive power of Rome. The Romans were foreign occupiers, not only imposing Roman law but heavily taxing the Israelite people to sustain their occupation. The Roman rulers enforced their occupation, order, and taxation through violent force.

David Lose of Luther seminary explains that "the problem with Peter's expectation is that not that it's unreasonable, but that it doesn't change anything." He explains that Rome is [Israel] in force and by violence. Jesus as the warrior-king would use greater force and violence to drive them out. "Eventually, someone with even more force or willing to do greater violence takes over yet again. Who's in charge may change, but wheel of force and violence keeps revolving."¹

¹ David Lose, "Pentecost 13 A: Can You Imagine?," *In the Meantime*, August 28, 2017, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-13-a-can-you-imagine/>.

Jesus sought instead to liberate the people from this destructive cycle of violence and force and replace it with compassion, love, and mercy. Rev. Lose writes that “[Jesus] knows that by introducing a different logic – one that runs by forgiveness, mercy, and love rather than retribution, violence, and hate – he is challenging the powers that be. Moreover, he knows that the wheel of force and violence will not tolerate his obstruction but run him over.”

This is the reality that Jesus is preparing Peter and the other disciples for. The reality that it will seem like the world of violence and oppression and fear will have the last word. But God is full of surprises. The resurrection of Jesus, whether a literal resurrection or a metaphorical one, proclaims to the world that love, forgiveness, and mercy will ultimately prevail. It is this understanding of the realm of God that we hear in Paul’s letter to the new church community in Rome written 20 or so years after Jesus was executed by the state. The verses we heard this morning read like sentiments that might appear in needlepoint on a pillow, especially when reading them in the New Revised Standard Version: “Let love be genuine.” “Rejoice in hope.” “Live peaceably with all.” “Leave room for God’s wrath.” Ok, some of the phrases make better pillows than others. I had Lori read the Common English Bible translation of these verses from Romans, but I want to share the Message translation with you as well. For those of you not familiar with The Message translation, it is a paraphrase of the biblical text written by clergyman and scholar Eugene Peterson. It reads,

“Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don’t burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don’t quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they’re happy; share tears when they’re down. Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody. Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody. Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. “I’ll do the judging,” says God. “I’ll take care of it.” Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your

enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good."

This all sounds nice and good... until we genuinely attempt to fully practice these ways. Especially the last few verses. This first half of this letter appears to be focusing on relationships within the Christian community. While loving genuinely, resisting evil, and helping the needy members of our Christian siblings might at times be challenging, those are a cake walk compared to what comes next. Bless your enemies. Bless people who harass you, discover beauty in everyone. Feed your enemy, give them a drink. Invite *everyone* to the table.

This is what God's kingdom looks like. I got an image this week of the kingdom of God like a big buffet. Or maybe a better image is a cafeteria counter where instead of serving yourself, the holy spirit offers huge portions of grace, forgiveness, love, mercy, acceptance, and affirmation. We arrive at this cafeteria counter holding an invitation that simply reads "Come." Once we have received an abundance of spiritual nourishment, we walk into the dining room only to discover that instead of small tables, there is one infinite table that always has an open seat. But when we go to sit down, we realize that in addition to our friends and loved ones, we share the table with people we despise. And God expects us to pass them the salt! There is no guest list to come and be fed at the table of God because no one is excluded.

I recently fell in love with quote that states, "When you have more than you need, build a longer table not a higher fence." I have a feeling that Jesus might alter this statement slightly. I don't think he would make building a longer table contingent on having more than one needs. Instead, I wonder if Jesus would phrase it this way: "When others are in need, build a longer table, not a higher fence."

The ways of the world encourage us to respond to violence with more violence – to respond with fire and fury when our enemies threaten us. The ways of the world scare us into thinking there is not enough to go around. Enough food, enough money, enough land, enough jobs, enough time, enough compassion, enough hope. We are

expected to be generous but at the same time are encouraged to hoard our resources. Protect our own interests first. The ways of the world tells us that we are different from one another – that some people are worthy of safety and dignity and humanity and others are not.

But these are not God's ways. They are not the ways of Jesus. And they are not the ways into which the church is called to live. We are called to build bigger tables, to add more chairs, to set another place, and fill another cup. We are not in charge of the guest list but we are called to provide the hospitality. What does that hospitality look like? It looks like giving someone another chance instead of writing them off. It is forgiving someone who has wronged us instead of seeking retribution. It looks like being open-handed and generous with the resources we've been blessed with instead of holding onto whatever we can. It looks like seeking joy as we serve others rather than looking for joy in more and more stuff. It looks like offering our future to God rather than planning each step. We are not in charge of the guest list. All are invited to the table of God's kin-dom regardless of income, immigration status, gender identity, race, education level, employment status, physical abilities, sexual orientation, and the list goes on. All are invited to the table whether we believe them to be worthy of that invitation or not... including ourselves. All are invited to the table, because the invitation isn't ours to extend in the first place. Thanks be to God! Amen.