

14th Sunday Ordinary Time, C

“Into whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this household.’”

When we wake up in the morning and check the news, we will hear about numerous senseless tragedies that occur in our city, our country, and around the world. And those are just the tragedies that have captured recent headlines. There are others, however, that don't make the headlines, though they are no less important, no less painful, and no less tragic. Some are global, some are national, and some are personal.

If these events have left us heartbroken and weeping, imagine what God must be seeing and feeling: God, the Creator who entrusts us with his creation, with one another's lives, and with his own life. Today, the Creator and the created once again stand together, weeping and brokenhearted.

I no longer see these tragedies as problems to be fixed or behaviors to be corrected. That approach has not gotten us very far. Instead, I view them as symptoms pointing to a deeper issue. Until we are willing to address the deeper problem, things are unlikely to change, and the underlying issue is the human heart. Whether by a terrorist attack, through prejudice and discrimination against a minority group, in our political campaigns, or our personal relationships, the violence and mistreatment we perpetrate on each other arise first from an inner violence that poisons

and fragments the human heart. We need a change of heart. We need a heart at peace.

I cannot help but ask, where is the peace of God today? That is a question many are asking. It is a question I suspect God might also be asking.

While we struggle with this question, let's not project our failings and human imperfections onto God, waiting for and expecting God to fill the void and fix the problems. This is not about God's failings or imperfections. It is ours, and the blood of the victims, the tears of the mourners, and the pain of the world are crying and begging for a different answer. Let's not give the same old answers. Let's not use the same old excuses. Let's not offer the same old solutions. Let's not meet the world with the same old beliefs.

Instead, let's number ourselves among the seventy-two sent to every town and place where Christ himself goes. Let's enter every house, first saying, "**Peace to this house.**" Let's become people with hearts at peace, not at war. Isn't that what you want for yourself? For your children and grandchildren? For your family and friends? For the world? I do. That's what I want. I think we all do. But I think we also struggle with what peace means, what it looks like, and how we attain and keep it. If the events of today's world offer us anything, it is the opportunity to rethink what peace means and reorient our hearts.

So let me ask you this. What does peace mean to you? What comes to mind when you think of peace? What does it look like? What shape does it take?

Now let me ask you this. Are you willing to let go of that understanding of peace? Are you willing to change your understanding and consider something else? Are you willing to pay the price for peace? I am not asking about our willingness to risk the lives of our military men and women or increase the military's budget. We have already proven our willingness to do that. I am asking about our willingness, yours and mine, to change our understanding and practice of peace.

Here is why I asked that second set of questions. Most of us have an understanding of peace that is too small and too narrow. We limit peace to a particular set of behaviors. Usually, they are the behaviors we expect or want from others. We think of peace as an ideal to be attained, and more often than not, we define it as the absence or elimination of conflict. We have convinced ourselves that peace will come when this person or that group changes or stops doing something. Ultimately, we condition peace on our ability to change or control another. We let them determine whether our hearts are at peace or war. That's craziness, and it doesn't work.

The reality is that we don't have the power to change another. And when we do, it is not peace we achieve but more violence. There is a reason so many of us feel powerless amid our world's tragedies. We are powerless. We have no power to change another. The only person over

whom we have any control or ability to change is ourselves. You and I are each responsible for choosing whether we live with a heart at peace or a heart at war.

Jesus did not send the seventy-two out to change the towns and places they would visit but offered them his peace. How often does Jesus instruct us to go and change other people? He doesn't. That may be our way, but it is not his way. Jesus, however, spends a lot of time teaching us to change ourselves and our way of being toward others. That's the change of heart that is at the core of peace.

The struggle for peace begins not between me and another but within myself. So, let's consider what a heart at peace might look like.

What if a heart at peace is about loving our neighbor as ourselves? It would mean that the other person, regardless of who they are, counts and matters as much as we do. A heart at peace refuses to lump masses of unknown people into lifeless categories such as Republican, Democrat, conservative, or liberal and make them objects to be dealt with as enemies to be defeated. A heart at peace encounters everyone as a person. It looks another in the face and recognizes itself. So, tell me, what do you see when you look in the face of another?

What if a heart at peace is about loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, turning the other cheek, giving our shirt to the one who has taken our coat, and doing to others as we would have them do to us? If that's about peace, I must wonder whether I want peace and whether I

am willing to pay the price. Some days, my answer is yes, and other days, not so much. What about you?

What if a heart at peace means being merciful and not judging, refusing to throw the first stone or, for that matter, the last stone or any in between, and taking care of the beam in my eye rather than the splinter in the eye of another?

What if a heart at peace offers forgiveness not seven times but seventy times seven? Are we willing to do that?

What if a heart at peace means feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned? Before we can ever do that, we must first regard the life, needs, and desires of another as crucial as our own.

What if a heart at peace means choosing not to become and act like a wolf when we stand among wolves?

All these “**what ifs**” about peace are not so much prescribing behaviors as they are describing ways of being. Peace does not begin with our behaviors toward each other but with our way of being toward each other, our seeing each other as human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

Our behavior toward one another will be determined by our way of being toward one another. It is a matter of the heart, your heart, and my heart. If our hearts are at war, it makes no difference how polite or friendly we are to each other. Violence is present.

Offering the peace of Christ is more than a friendly handshake, a warm hug, or a **“How are you? It’s good to see you.”** It is the recognition of another’s existence and their value as a human being, regardless of whether they are family, friends, strangers, or enemies.

When Jesus sent out the seventy-two, he did not condition their offers of peace on who the recipients might be, their worthiness, what they had done, or what their response might be. Neither can we condition our offers of peace. Some will receive peace, and others will not. Either way, **“the kingdom of God is at hand”** if our hearts are at peace.

The absence of conflict does not define the peace of Christ, and it is not an ideal to be attained. It is a practice to be lived every moment of every day of our lives, a continual setting of our faces to go to Jerusalem. That means practicing peace with our friends and family. It means practicing peace with our enemies. It means practicing peace with strangers, with those who are different from us, and with those who scare us.

Let’s not forget that when Jesus sent the seventy-two, they went without money bag, sack, or sandals. Now, don’t literalize that. It is a metaphor for the baggage we carry, the baggage that continues to trip us up and deny us a heart at peace. It is the baggage of our past experiences, fears, wounds, grudges, and resentments, as well as preconceptions and assumptions about others, old solutions and beliefs, our need to be right or better than others, and sometimes our desire to play the victim.

So let me ask you one last question. What baggage might you need to leave behind to go into the world fully equipped with a heart at peace?

“Into whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this household.’” Amen.