

**“Siding With Jesus”
Romans 5:1-5
Rev. Steve McCoy
First United Methodist Church
Marquette, MI
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This morning we observe several things that are happening in the life of our church. In our community it is graduation Sunday, which we recognized a few moments ago. In the church this is Trinity Sunday, acknowledging the unity of God in three persons. In the United Methodist Church we mark this Sunday as Peace with Justice Sunday. And as chairperson of our Detroit Conference Board of Church and Society, I want to spend our time focusing on our role as peacemakers in this world.

Bishop Will Willimon tells the story of attending General Conference. During that gathering, his church debated a number of controversial issues, one being the question of whether United Methodists ought to own handguns. During one of the coffee breaks during the debate, Willimon was discussing with a fellow delegate how he voted on the resolution. The man said, “Well, I voted in support of the ban against handguns.”

“How did you decide to vote that way?” Willimon asked.

“Jesus,” the delegate replied.

“Jesus?” Willimon asked.

“Well, sometimes I really wish,” the delegate continued, “when those soldiers came to arrest Jesus that night, he’d pulled out a gun and defended himself, or at least he would

have let his disciples defend him with their swords, but you know, he didn't."

That's how it is, concludes William Willimon. As Christians, we're just "stuck" with Jesus. "To be a Christian is to be about Christ, listening to Jesus, judging ourselves by him, asking for the grace to see him more clearly, follow him more nearly, and love him more dearly, day by day."¹

In my own words when we accept the gospel we choose to side with Jesus.

As chair of the Board of Church and Society, I have received email, snail mail, and hate mail. The board and I have been called radical, un-American and un-Christian. Others have complained as to why we get to do things and get the funding that their groups and organizations don't. The reason is we are an official Board, and the central tenant of the Christian Faith is to be peace makers, and to ensure as the prophet says: that Justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. To break the systems and cycles that are oppressive and let the love of Christ be made known in the midst of a world that is in need of hope.

While I was returning from vacation in April, I caught a blurb on the news in the airport about what turned out to be the worst episode of gun violence in our nations history. Naturally it preoccupied the news for the next several weeks. Stories of heroism and courage were reported and then the second-guessing began. People began looking backwards for the signs of the young man's potential to commit such an act of violence. We were left wondering could this have

¹ Willimon, William, "Christ the cornerstone." *John Mark Ministries Web Site*, jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/2489.htm.

been averted? Would better gun laws, better follow up with school administrators etc. have helped us avoid this tragedy?

What I found interesting was the immediate response from some that if we in fact had less stringent gun laws; the students would have been able to “protect” themselves. What I find disheartening is that immediately we begin talking about staving off the threat of violence with the threat of more violence. The truth is we never know how we will react to a situation unless we are in it. Even trained soldiers in the heat of combat can react in unpredictable ways.

More disappointing is that once again we seem to look at the symptoms rather than disease. Let ask the question of why we people driven to such violence. Why do 3 times as many people die every day in our cities and towns as a result of gun violence? What in our society drives people to have such disregard for human life?

Ultimately with apologies to Al Gore, sometimes siding with Jesus brings up against an inconvenient truth. One that we do not want to acknowledge, that our lifestyles, are not always in line with the gospels. Who wants to suffer, but there are times when we have to make choices. Siding with Jesus means that we might endure sufferings as Paul suggests, but we boast in those sufferings. It means that others will disappoint us, and those who we thought were our friends may not be on our side after all.

In 1987 Bishop Judith Craig preached a sermon to about 4000 youth in the State of Michigan at Boblo Island. In that sermon she called upon what was then the next Generation to be Peacemakers for Christ. She was bold enough to say that it was anti Christian to lead us anyone by his or her own

volition toward a path of violence. My friend immediately dubbed her the "Peace Preacher." He called it unrealistic and said that we must confront evil in this world, and because there is evil the reality is that there are people who deserve to die.

Unfortunately that is many people in the church's attitude. I challenge anyone to show me in the gospels where Jesus promotes this notion. As Christians Peace is always our goal, Justice is always our end. And it is not the Justice that lands people behind bars or the Peace that makes us feel warm inside but it is the Justice that transforms lives not shuts them out and it is the peace of Christ that is made real in this world that we as Christians are commanded to work for, not just hope for, but must work for, as members of the body of Christ.

Now here is the good news folks. There is hope! As Paul reminds us because we are heirs with and we have the grace of Jesus Christ, we remember that when we suffer for the Peace of Christ, we build character and produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. So when we call for justice and call for Peace, we can endure because we have the Spirit of God, and it is God's will for us to side with Jesus and God will not disappoint.

I know that at times the task can seem overwhelming. But the good news also is we are all not called to be Martyrs. We all do not have the gifts to be Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King or Bishop Desmond Tutu or Dietrich Bonhoffer. We don't all need to demonstrate in front of the courthouse or March on Washington. However, we all have the call to be peacemakers, in our own way, through our words, our

actions, and our witness, to individuals and to others. We know that we have the strength of Christ, the Prince of Peace, which will guide us through our time.

Jesus the Prince of Peace taught us to love our enemies, to love one another as he loved us, and to be instruments of peace in this world. On this Peace with Justice Sunday, let us keep in mind the call to side with Jesus, the call that all of us have to make disciples of Jesus Christ. This calls us to love one another and to break the binds that tie us down into systemic violence and attempt to make real the Kingdom of God's Peace here on Earth. Amen.