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Jan. 27, 2013

## **“The Contrast Society: From Anger to Peace”**

Romans 12:1-3

When asked what the opposite of “peace” is... many respond with “war”. This isn’t wrong, of course, but I am going to speak today of another opposite of peace... and that is anger.

Let’s think on anger for a moment. It is hard, absolute, cut-and-dry, black or white, unbending, rigid. Just try reasoning with someone who is enraged.

Peace on the other hand requires subtlety and nuance. It’s delicate, pliable, flexible, and soft. It’s neither cut and dry nor black and white. It includes give-and-take, compromise and accommodation. Peace cannot be sustained if one or both parties are inflexible and will not negotiate. In fact, peace is so difficult that Henry Kissinger once quipped that a successful outcome to negotiation means that both sides end up *unhappy*.

*Rabbi John Rosove, 7-31-2011. WordPress.com*

This is a description of what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27) His voice is juxtaposed to our human tendencies. If we are angry, we often want to get even. At the very least, we would like to be vindicated... our opinions heard. We draw lines in the sand with one another. We gather friends around us who agree and support us in our feelings. Even the most mature among us has fallen into the trap of nursing and feeding our anger at another.

But this is not what Jesus taught and it is in direct opposition to what our faith teaches. In the book of Romans, we find words of instruction for the Christians

there. Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” I have included our text in two different versions on the insert in your bulletin. I’ll read the more familiar text (from the NRSV) ...

*“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

*For my the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*      Romans 12:1-3

We’re going to dissect this scripture. First, we must understand what Paul meant by “this world” before we can move to what “transformed” meant. Take a journey with me to the Roman world in the first century, CE. “Pax Romano” is the phrase used for this period in Roman history. “Pax”, meaning “peace” or “treaty” or even “accord” and “Romano” meaning the Roman Empire. Pax Romano began with the accession of Augustus in 27 BC, which marked the end of the Roman Republic. During the Roman Republic, civil war was rampant. But don’t fall into the trap of believing that the next period of Pax Romano was a time without war. This is the time period of Nero (Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus). He was Roman Emperor from 54 to 68, during which time our text for today was written. Nero was adopted by his great-uncle Claudius to become his heir and successor, and succeeded to the throne in 54 following Claudius' death. During his reign, Nero focused much of his attention on diplomacy, trade, and enhancing the cultural life of the Empire. He ordered theaters built and promoted athletic games.

However, Nero’s idea of how to keep peace was this: war and violence lead to victory, which eventually brings peace. During Nero’s reign, wars were waged on other countries – on their land – and then peace treaties were made after the war weakened the country so that they were vulnerable and needed Rome. Since there was no email or telephone-and no CNN-people were initially unaware of the

havoc Nero caused in other places-only that he was continually expanding the Empire and they weren't having civil war.

But, Rome was destroyed in the Great Fire of Rome, which many Romans believed Nero himself had started in order to clear land for his planned palace complex. Nero's rule is often associated with tyranny and extravagance. He is known for many executions, including those of his mother and the probable murder by poison of his stepbrother, Britannicus. He was also known for having captured Christians burned in his garden at night for a source of light.

*-wikipedia*

So, when Paul writes "Do not be conformed to this world", he is speaking of the Romans' government under Nero, where violence, war and victory were thought to bring peace to the homeland.

The rest of Romans 12:2 reads "but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." The Greek here is "*sanky*", which translates to both mind and soul. To be transformed by your *sanky* means to follow the lead of your soul; to surrender ego. The way to peace, says Paul, is to let go of Nero's ideas, the Roman Rule, and even the egos of the readers themselves.

Paul contrasts the rule of Nero during Pax Romano with the teaching of Jesus. And as we have talked the last several weeks, in Jesus' idea of a contrast society, normal ways of human functioning are turned upside down. Nero believed that the way to peace was to conquer others in their own countries, force them into a treaty, and then tell the people at home that peace was achieved. Jesus taught that non-violence led to justice, which ultimately brought peace.

Note the order here: non-violence leads to justice and justice brings peace. So often, we as humans turn to Nero's philosophy of how to bring peace... fight with or badger another person in order to come to an agreement. We fall into the Pax Romano trap of thinking that peace can be achieved through violence. It is not what Jesus taught.

Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Peace cannot be achieved through violence; it can only be attained through understanding."

[www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/b/buddha](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/b/buddha)

Anger is the opposite of peace. Justice is the key to peace.

When we practice leaving anger behind and really work toward peace within and with others, we see the truth in C. JoyBell's quote: "Peace is the number one beautiful ornament you can wear, I really believe that. They say you should always wear a smile, but I don't believe that you should "always" wear a smile; seriously, you're going to look stupid! But peace, you should always carry peace within you, it's the most beautifying thing you could ever have or do. Peace makes your heart beautiful and it makes you look beautiful, too. You want to have perfect physical posture when you stand, sit, and walk, and peace is the perfect posture of the soul, really. Try perfect posture outside as well as inside. Peace creates grace and grace gives peace."

*Goodreads.com/quotes*

For the months of July and August last year, my brothers' family hosted a 16 year old girl from Ireland. This was not a foreign exchange program. It was a program geared to change the face of Ireland in the future. Young Irish people on both sides of the centuries-old conflict there are brought to the United States to experience the cooperation of Catholics and Protestants. There are events designed to bring these young people together and meet their Irish peers of the opposite beliefs. Here, the Irish Catholics and the Irish Protestants find things in common. They experience one another in a non-threatening place. When they return home, they remember the bridges that have been made.

It takes time, but non-violence and justice are much more effective means for peace. In Jesus' contrast society,

1. fear gives way to love
2. woundedness is turned into joy
3. despair is turned into hope
4. anger submits itself to peace

Let me read Romans 12:1-3 again, this time from The Message:

*"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God want from you and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to*

*its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develop well-formed maturity in you.”*

Let us be Christ’s agents of peace in our lives at home, at work, and in our society.