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Peace With God

Matthew 10:34

There are times when we discover that peace with God is no peace at all. Jon Meacham, editor of *Newsweek*, was reminded of this truth when he received a phone call from the late Tim Russert in the summer of 2006. He describes that conversation in these words:

‘Hello brother,’ the baritone rumbled on the other end of the phone, ‘I’ve got a great deal for you.’ It was Tim Russert, and there was a twinkling in his tone—the kind of twinkle that suggested what was in the offing was anything but a good deal. ‘Have you read Hitch yet?’ My stomach tightened: Christopher Hitchens, the terrific provocateur, had just published a sulfurous attack on religious faith, and I feared what was coming. ‘You gotta come down and defend the faith, Brother,’ Russert said. Hitchens was slated to come on Russert’s weekend cable show, and Russert wanted a countervailing voice on the program. A devout Catholic, Russert knew I was an Episcopalian, but I had an old rule that I would never debate Hitchens about anything—he is one of the great intellects and wits of the age—since there was no chance I would ever win. I tried to demur, but Russert closed in as though he were cornering a politician on a Sunday morning. ‘It’s the *faith*, Brother,’ he said. ‘I can’t do it—I’m the moderator. But it’ll be great.’¹

Meacham reported that against his better judgment he said yes to Tim Russert because everyone in his business always said “yes” to Russert. The show wasn’t “great” for Meacham because Hitchens as usual had the better of the conversation. Meacham remembers that Russert grinned through the whole thing.

In the 10th chapter of the gospel of Matthew we find Jesus warning the disciples that they will have days like that as they perform ministry on his behalf. In this passage Jesus is instructing the disciples before sending them out on a mission in Galilee. This is a mission in which they are to preach, heal, and cast out demons in his name. Jesus warns them that their ministry will be carried out in the context of controversy and conflict. Families will be torn apart. A man will be set against his father. A woman will be set against her mother. Serving Jesus will put in jeopardy their deepest loyalties and most precious relationships. Jesus says, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34).” The peace with God which Jesus offers does not look like peace at all.

Why does Jesus use the language of strife to describe the journey of faith? The coming of the kingdom of God means that there are two worlds that exist side by side in tension with one another. We all must decide which of these worlds has the primary claim on our lives. The issue is never as easy as it seems because we are all enmeshed in the old world. It is the old world of power and greed which shapes the values of our culture. The old world exploits a network of relationships through work, friends, and family. The old world encourages exaggerated notions of national pride. The old world provides a well defined sense of meaning and structure, but it is the new world of God’s kingdom that provides life.

When we seek to follow Christ while clinging to the old world the kingdom comes like a sword that cuts away at our lesser loyalties. The language of strife describes the human struggle to come to terms with the presence of God. Peace with God means giving up the peace of our comfortable ties to the destructive world that is passing away.

On July 11, 1847, the pastor of this church challenged the congregation to affirm that its primary loyalty was to Christ. In his Sunday morning sermon Albert Hale pointed out that the New Testament law of love sets a very high bar for the justification of war from a Christian perspective. In his evening address he took the position that the Mexican War, then in progress, did not reach that bar. Since that war was not justified Hale said to his people:

we should humble ourselves before God, and seek his forgiveness, and ask his interposition, to enable us to retrace our steps and thus ‘bring forth fruits meet for repentance.’²

The message contained in those sermons echoed beyond the walls of 2nd Presbyterian Church. A constitutional convention was meeting in the old state capitol building. At its session on July 12, the day after Hale’s sermons were preached they became a matter of debate in the convention. Several witnesses described what happened in these words:

On Monday, the 12th of July, Mr. G. W. Akin, delegate from Franklin county, introduced the following in the Convention: ‘Whereas, Mr. Hale, in a sermon on the 11th day of July, in the 2nd Presbyterian church, denounced the existing war with Mexico, as being unjust; and whereas, *such declarations ought not to be tolerated*, more especially in a republican government; and whereas, it is unbecoming a minister of the gospel to use such language in a gospel sermon, or before the young and rising generation, therefore ‘*Resolved*, That said Mr. Hale be excused from holding prayers in this Convention for the future.’ It was moved ‘that the Rev. Mr. Hale be excused in future from praying in this Convention.’ After considerable debate, these resolutions were laid on the table. On Monday morning, July 19th, Mr. Hale being about to open the session of the Convention with prayer, as requested was, during the ceremony, interrupted by hissing and clapping of hands, by Mr. Akin, the member from Franklin, who then left the hall. After Mr. Hale had concluded his prayer, he left the hall, and was retiring from the Capitol, when Mr. Akin took occasion to insult him, by saying to him that ‘if he did not wish to be hurt, he must not come there again.’³

That is the peace which Jesus promised his followers in the 10th chapter of Matthew’s gospel. Albert Hale learned about the strife that comes when Jesus’ kingdom threatens the old world of power and greed. Hale understood what Jesus meant when said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34).”

The struggle between these two worlds is played out in the hearts of people like us. We are sustained in this spiritual struggle by powerful signs that help us learn to live in the peace which is no peace at all. One of those signs is the journey of our youth and adult sponsors to Birmingham, Alabama next week. There they will practice the law of love that Albert Hale preached about so many years ago. Their work will be a witness to the new world of God’s grace.

The One who comes to bring a sword is preparing a place for us in this new world. And in the words of Brother Russert, “It will be great!”

Endnotes

1. Jon Meacham, "God, Politics, and the Making of a Joyful Warrior," *Newsweek*, June 23, 2008, page 31.
2. Albert Hale, "Two Discourses on the Subject of the War Between the United States and Mexico Preached in the Second Presbyterian Church in Springfield on Sabbath 11 July 1847," by Albert Hale, Pastor of the Church, published by the *Sangamo Journal* in August of 1847.
3. Silas W. Robbins, Joseph Thayer, Benjamin S. Edwards, E. B. Pease, E. R. Wiley, J. L. Lamb, W. Dillard in a tract published with Albert Hale's sermons on the Mexican War, August 10, 1847.