

“Heavenly Peace”

Historians teach us that two hundred years ago on Christmas Eve, 1818, a song was sung in public for the first time at St. Nicholas parish church in Obendorf, a small village in Austria. The lyrics of the song had been written two years earlier by a young priest by the name of Joseph Mohr. The song is based on Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2. The music was composed by Mohr’s friend, Franz Gruber on that same Christmas Eve day just hours before people began arriving at the special church service. Because the church organ was in need of repair, the song was sung accompanied only by a guitar. That hymn is the well-known and much loved classic, Silent Night! Holy Night! Although the original hymn had six verses, the one that we most often sing during the Christmas season has four—the first verse, especially, many of us know by heart.

“Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright; round yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.” If you listen closely to the rest of the words of the hymn, you’ll find that Joseph Mohr’s focus is not merely on Jesus the baby born in Bethlehem, but on the One who came to bring peace between a holy God and sinners which also brings, “peace among those with whom he is pleased.”

With this in mind, I want to look once again, at an important teaching of Jesus that touches on the topic of peace among men rather than conflict. One of the most famous sermons ever preached was the Sermon on the Mount given by Jesus himself. It’s in this mountain sermon that we have this teaching on the topic of retaliation. I’ve noted for us that Christians are called to a principle of self-denial. In other words, we’re to seek to put others ahead of ourselves. The apostle Paul writes, “...in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” Let’s look at our passage again from Matthew 5:38-42 and we’ll begin to see what it should look like in our lives to practice self-denial. “But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (vs. 39)

This verse could be passed over too quickly, especially if we interpret it’s meaning in a sort of a wooden, literal way. I would dare say that, for most of us, it may have been a long time, if ever, since we’ve been slapped by someone—or slapped someone ourselves—in anger. If that’s true, we may assume that Jesus’ teaching here does not pertain to us. Let’s see if I can help us to gain a clearer understanding of what Jesus is getting at in this verse. Scholars teach us that there’s an important reason why Matthew records for us that the slapping takes place on the right cheek. It’s a well-known fact that the highest percentage of people in the world are right-handed. As a right-handed man, if I slap someone that I’m facing I would normally be slapping them on the left cheek. For a right-handed person to slap someone on the right cheek it would necessarily be a type of backhanded slap. Backhanding someone is an almost universal sign of insult. Jesus is talking about being insulted, e.g., someone who’s seeking to humiliate us and rob us of being treated with dignity. What’s his point? As people made in the image of God,

Jesus is calling on us to accept the loss of dignity, if necessary, rather than retaliate or seek revenge.

Jesus himself is our example of being willing to be shamefully treated rather than retaliate. He left the glories of heaven to come to earth. He was born in the most humble of circumstances, in a filthy cattle stall. His parents were not wealthy and, sadly, he wasn't accepted by many of his own people. Although he never sinned, near the end of his life here on earth he was mocked, cursed, spit upon, and whipped. He was exposed to the most shameful death on a cross for the sins of his people. Jesus understands insult and humiliation. He taught us that it's better to "turn the other cheek" rather than to seek personal revenge or retaliation.

As Christians preparing for this upcoming Christmas day, may we be those who honor our Savior and King, Jesus Christ, by seeking peace with others. "With the angels let us sing, alleluia to our King. Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born!"

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