

Sermon on Acts 16:9-15, John 14:23-29
Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

“Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life.”
In gratitude to a life of music given to us from Prince Rogers Nelson.

Let me begin by sharing with you a few things that I have experienced or observed this past week, that both show the reality of sin, death and the devil, and at the same time, the power of faith, hope, and love through Jesus Christ our Lord. We began the week learning more details about the death of musical prodigy and rock legend Prince, who grew up in Minneapolis and called it home for all his life. We saw how much he was known around the world, how many persons loved his music, even some of the connections he had with us here at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer. Dez Dickerson, you know, played music with him in *The Revolution*, and Prince actually played our organ at Desmond’s wedding way back in the 80s. I only mention all this because we live in a celebrity culture it seems, and we have only a few celebrities in Minnesota, so when one of our own dies, we feel we have to mention every little detail about their lives that we were unaware of the week before, and try to make our own connections, no matter how much a stretch. But the REAL reason I begin with a Prince reference (outside of the tragedy of his death for his family), is that in our first lesson from Acts today tells of a woman named Lydia, who was a businesswoman in the town of Philippi, where she met the apostle Paul. She was a worshiper of God, who listened to Paul’s words, liked what she heard and invited him to her home to stay, teach and baptize her and her household. Now, Lydia was a dealer of purple cloth – which is Prince’s favorite color and the title of his famous song and movie called *Purple Rain*. I think this is enough of a connection to open a sermon with, don’t you? Say yes.

So, according to the media hype, we are a city in mourning about Prince. Well, the Prince part may be only partly true – it’s sad, but it doesn’t affect our lives all that much. It just puts Minneapolis on the map. But there are other things that have been happening that have affected us so much more, as people of faith.

Early last week, our brother in Christ, Jim Moffat died after many months battling cancer. His memorial service was yesterday. Jim was a very kind, sweet family man – his life centered around his wife, Cathy, their children and grandchildren, and he faithfully worshiped God here at Redeemer, after many years as part of St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church in St. Paul. The death of one of our own, a loving husband, father and grandfather, a member of this body of Christ, of course greatly affects us. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer; when one part of the body mourns, we all mourn. So that is part of what we

live with this week. I learned of his death on Wednesday morning, planned the memorial service later that day with Kathy and the family, and we gathered for a requiem eucharist on Saturday. And here it is, the first day of the week. Life goes on.

Other things of note happened at our State Capitol. A hearing was held in the new Senate office building around proposed criminal background checks for ever gun purchase in Minnesota. It brought out the same arguments on both sides, centered around making people safe from gun violence by keeping guns out of the hands of those who shouldn't have access to them, versus the principle of the rights of citizens to bear arms. The bill wasn't going anywhere in the House of Representatives, so the Senate hearing was "for information only". No vote was taken, though the testimony was long and heart-felt. Meanwhile, there was another instance of a husband killing his wife and shooting himself, leaving their children orphans. And last Sunday, April 24, a man shot another man at Keystone Fellowship Church in Pennsylvania, in an argument after one churchgoer sat by mistake in a seat reserved for someone else. One man came back with a gun, displayed his concealed weapon permit, and shot him in the chest and face – and he died later that day in the hospital. He died over a seat in Sunday worship. Remind me never to let us go to a system of reserving pews, like airline tickets or theater seats. But that's not really the problem, is it? It is our increasingly violent culture, the increased pressures that lead to road rage, lawsuits and lost tempers, and the prevalence of guns in America that make the odds of rage leading to gun violence so much greater. The sins of rage only have greater consequences now.

You want more? I attended a press conference two weeks ago on a hill overlooking the city of St. Paul from Mounds Park, where a young man was shot and killed by another young man because he didn't like the other talking to a girl. Bullets flew, and 300 men, women and children scattered in a park where they had been enjoying a warm spring Sunday evening. That next week the mayor, police, community leaders and clergy gathered in the park to send a message through the press, warning young people to stop using guns to settle arguments, and asking mothers and girlfriends to keep their eyes open and tell the police if they see a gun at home. I don't have a lot of hope in this solution to the problem. Because a lot of young men are shooting each other because they feel hopeless, and don't have other options that don't involve violence, and no amount of warnings or pleadings by the mayor or police are going to change that. We all need a heart transplant!

One last press conference I attended was on Friday, led by prosecuting attorneys, city and county attorneys, defense attorneys, and police chiefs in the metro area. They announced a "great compromise" over new drug sentencing guidelines, proposing that sentences for low level drug crimes be minimal, saving prison for drug dealers, and taking the money saved to create programs to help

people with their addictions. It makes sense. But not one person who has been in prison for a drug offense, not one felon who cannot vote, not one person of color, not one community or faith leader was a part of this public announcement, even though it was the work of a whole coalition which had brought the need for more sensible sentencing to their attention. Just white attorneys and police stood in front of the tv cameras last Friday, saying that they had the solution to the problem, but not one person from the communities most affected by the “war on drugs”. It’s a reminder that we have such a long way to go before we can really address our problem in America over race, drug use, and our broken criminal justice system. I won’t even mention the demonstrations at Trump rallies, or in cities like Baltimore between police and their communities, or the problems we have with race and poverty in Minneapolis and St. Paul.it just gets too depressing.

In this context, which is our experience today, so similar to the context of violence and turmoil in every generation of human beings on earth, we hear the words of Jesus in the gospel, as he said them to his disciples:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

The context when Jesus said these words was at the Last Supper, when Jesus gathered with his disciples for the Passover, and had washed his disciples feet. Judas Iscariot had already left the room, to meet with the High Priests and agree to his betrayal. Jesus had given his disciples a new commandment, to love one another as he loved them. But his disciples were troubled because Jesus spoke of leaving them, going where they could not follow and they were not ready for that. So Jesus said *“Peace be with you.”* Peace. In Greek, the word is *eirene*. It’s a translation of the traditional Hebrew greeting *shalom* – not merely the absence of conflict, but the greater peace that brings harmony, reconciliation and well-being. *Peace – shalom – eirene* – is what the world cannot give by itself, because we are all caught up in the tension and consequences of our sin. We see it in the rage that so many are in today, whether it is from poverty and the lack of equity or justice caused by racism and prejudice, or the rage caused by fear of a changing world, or the rage that comes with missed opportunities or perceived disrespect. The symptoms and consequences of our rage come out in the extremes of road rage on our highways, in gunshots in a church, in the domestic violence in a home – as well as on city streets in Baltimore and Beirut. Our world today is the exact opposite of peace, and the rage seems to only be increasing, sometimes exploding into violence.

To all of this, Jesus speaks a word of *peace and shalom* to each of us. Peace be with you. Not as the world gives – as I give to you. Jesus came to give you and me and this whole world the peace that we need within ourselves, and with one another. It starts with having peace with God, and this is the great gift that Jesus

has given to us all. For Jesus not only came to spend his lifetime teaching, sharing, and being a living example of peace in his time. Jesus came to give his life, willing to challenge the corruption and oppressive power of religions, Temple and Empire - the Roman State – and suffer the consequences of their rage at his *chutspa – his blasphemy* – on a cross. I don't believe that Jesus died on that cross to pay a price to God for our sins, which is how Paul writes about it. Jesus died as a consequence for all our sins, as the focus of the bottled up, boiling over rage of the oppression and domination of religions and governments that twisted the peace of God with that *Roman pax* – peace from a sword, obedience at the threat of death.

Humans crucified other humans as a threat to all others not to resist their power. Jesus died on a cross because he dared to challenge the violence of that false peace with the true peace of God, which comes from repentance, mercy, and forgiveness. Peace can only come when we listen to each other with respect, out of love, when we are willing to reconcile with each other, just as true forgiveness only really comes when we confess honestly to God and each other, and hear the promise of forgiveness. We practice this confession to God every Sunday at the beginning of worship, so that we might use this act as a way of making peace with one another.

So as we share the peace with one another today before the eucharist, let's practice sharing the peace of the Lord so that we might begin to make peace with others out there in the world. This is where true peace begins – you and me with our Lord, and with one another – and then it can spread into the world with acts of love which makes our peace real. So thanks be to God, who sent Jesus to make peace possible with us, and who teaches us all to be at peace with one another, for the sake of the world. *Peace be with you. And also with you.*

And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.