

Glen Ridge Congregational Church  
The Rev. John Sampson  
“Christian Peace”



Luke 12:49 – 56  
August 17, 2025

Will you pray with me? God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Does that sound like the Jesus you know? In that reading we just heard?

Jesus, the one we call the Prince of Peace, says, I didn't come to bring peace. I came to bring division. Jesus, the one who heals, says he has come to bring fire and may it blaze throughout the world. Jesus, the one we consider our teacher of deep wisdom, says, when I come, your families will shatter. Is this the Jesus we know?

It's a tricky passage we hear today.

I'll let you behind the veil of how I make a sermon. If I find an especially tricky passage, I go to my books, my shelves and shelves of books, for any of you who have been in my office, you will know what I'm talking about, stacked to the ceiling. Some of them being commentaries. And I look up the passage and I see what people who are much smarter than me, much more educated than me, have to say about these passages.

I did it this week and I was left cold. Until I read a reference to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And then this passage opened to me, and I want to share the way in which this passage opened to me when I read those words.

Back in the 60s and the 70s, there were many kinds of liberation movements that swept through our nation, swept through the world. There was the women's movement, civil rights movement, the queer movement, on and on, all kinds of different liberation movements. And these movements influenced how we do theology. They gave rise to something called liberation theologies, theologies that are born out of the experience of those who are oppressed in our world.

And these theologies said, don't just listen to the most educated, most privileged theologians that sit in endowed chairs in the divinity schools and seminaries and great pulpits around the world, but also listen to those people who are living marginalized, disenfranchised, desecrated, because their perspective is as important for figuring out what God is up to in our world as that of any great theologian.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., although now an icon of our national story, wasn't born that way. Born in the South in 1929, he grew up knowing all about Jim Crow, knowing all about the segregation and extrajudicial punishments and killings of African American people all around him. He said that his father would talk to him about the history of slavery. Here was a man who in our society had many strikes against him.

His parents also taught him the Bible. He also memorized hymns. He became a man of deep, deep faith. After graduating from Morehouse University, he went on to get his doctorate at Boston University. And it seemed like the world was his oyster, that he would have the choice of any pulpit he might want.

And he chose the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama. And when he said that, it was like saying, I'm going to Timbuktu. For all the people who supported him and loved him, they had higher, what they considered higher hopes for him. But MLK listened to another voice. A voice that spoke deeply within him, a voice that I would like to think is God's voice, calling him not to the great endowed pulpits of the world, but to the place that God's work actually needed to be done. And that was in Montgomery, Alabama. So, in 1954, he moves with his wife down to Montgomery.

He becomes the pastor of this church, and he's not there very long, and he's told about a movement that is brewing, bubbling up to overturn the segregated busing system of Montgomery.

I think we all know this story, but back in the day, if you were black, and you paid your full fare on any of the buses in Montgomery, you couldn't sit wherever you wanted. You had to sit in the back of the bus. There was a sign that said, "For Coloreds." And if you happened to be sitting in front of that sign and a white person came onto the bus, you had to get up and you had to move. Didn't matter if there were no other seats available. You could not sit there.

It's in 1955 that Rosa Parks refuses to get up out of her seat on one of those buses, and she's arrested. That action, along with many others, leads to a full boycott of the busing system. Led by King, and others, black citizens of Montgomery refused to ride the bus. They walk. They ride their bikes. They share rides with those who have cars. They find other ways to get around other than supporting a system that segregates them, shows them that separate really is not equal.

And for 13 months, they boycott those buses. And finally, through preaching, through protest, through legal actions and court cases, they win. And the buses are desegregated. And there is this beautiful picture of Rosa Parks on a bus, and she's sitting right up in the front.

King wrote a book called *Stride Toward Freedom*, in which he gives his perspective on the Montgomery bus boycott. And I want to read you just a piece of it. I've alluded to this previously, but this is the full quotation that I've been alluding to. This is 1954.

“At that time, both Negroes and whites accepted the well-established patterns of segregation as a matter of fact. Hardly anyone challenged the system. Montgomery was an easygoing town. It could even have been described as a peaceful town. But the peace was achieved at the cost of human servitude.

Many months later, an influential white citizen of Montgomery was to protest to me, ‘over the years we have had such peaceful and harmonious race relations here. Why have you and your associates come in to destroy this long tradition?’ My reply was simple. ‘Sir, I said, you have never had real peace in Montgomery.

You have had a sort of negative peace in which the Negro too often accepted his state of subordination. But this is not true peace. True peace is not merely the absence of tension. It is the presence of justice. The tension we see in Montgomery today is the necessary tension that comes when the oppressed rise up and start to move forward toward a permanent positive peace.’

I went on to speculate that this was what Jesus meant when he said, I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. Certainly Jesus did not mean that he came to bring a physical sword. He seems to have been saying in substance, I have not come to bring this old negative peace with its deadening passivity. I've come to lash out against such a peace.

Whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new. Whenever I come, a division sets in between justice and injustice. I've come to bring a positive peace, which is the presence of justice, love, yea, even the kingdom of God. The racial peace which had existed in Montgomery was not a Christian peace. It was a pagan peace.

And it had been bought at too great a price.”

Not from the ivory towers of the most prestigious universities and seminaries and divinity schools did this insight into Jesus' words of conflict and division come. They came from people who had lived, segregated, under Jim Crow, who had to fight just to be able to sit on a bus where there was an empty seat. These words came from the streets, came from a disenfranchised people who struggled for their humanity, who struggled to be seen as sacred. The other commentaries I read were of illustrious theologians.

But they didn't, for me, connect to what Jesus was actually saying. When he said, I am bringing fire, I am bringing division, I am shattering families, he's not giving us a prescriptive insight. He's telling us something descriptive. If you follow me, he says, if you follow my way of love, it will take you to places you never thought you would travel. It will align you and ally you with people who seem so different from you. It will cause you to do things that you never thought you would do.

And just to be explicit about it, one of the things that MLK and his movement are so famous for is their embrace of nonviolence. Their goals were achieved not through violence, through destruction, through murder, not even through the humiliation of the other. Theirs was a movement that used the tools of peace and of love and of acknowledgement of the image of God in the other in everything they did. It was those who were around them that made the decision that they needed to be thrown in jail, that they needed dogs to attack them, that they needed to be shot and murdered and bombed. To those who don't want to give up the powers that be and the dynamics that seem like a natural law in our nation, it can seem like MLK brought fire. It can seem like Jesus brought a sword.

But that's not at all what they were up to. We see, even in our own day, a resurgence of outright, explicit racism. We see young men not wearing hoods, but with their faces being shown marching through the streets with torches saying, we will not be replaced. It's all out in the open. And the question is, that MLK and Jesus are asking us, is who will we be in this moment?

Will we be the ones who rise to the occasion and put ourselves on the line to bring a love that can seem like fire to those who would want nothing different?

Will we do what's right even if it means losing relationships in our lives?

Will we stand up for God's vision of a community based on love even if our actions seem the opposite of peace?

I can't answer that question for any of us, except for myself. It's a question that each one of us needs to answer for ourselves. I pray that God blesses your discernment.

Amen.