

“Jesus...Prince of Peace?”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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For the past seven seasons, through 91 episodes, up every Tuesday night until 11:30 p.m., Kim and I, along with four million other viewers, have been watching the very dramatic, and very adult, TV series called “Sons of Anarchy”. “Sons of Anarchy” is a crime drama about a close knit outlaw motorcycle club operating out of the fictional town of Charming. The main character of “Sons of Anarchy” is a guy by the name of Jax Teller. Jax is a strong, good-looking, charismatic and increasingly sadistic leader of the motorcycle club. “Sons of Anarchy”, for the first three or four seasons, was extremely engrossing, not only for the interesting life that the “Sons of Anarchy” lived, but especially for the internal moral struggles that Jax Teller initially went through.

While the motorcycle club that he was the leader of would never be pure and legal in its dealings, Jax Teller was an idealist, who really did not want the “Sons of Anarchy” to get into the hardcore criminal activities related to gunrunning and drugs. Prostitution and pornography were fine but drugs and guns...no way! Despite Jax’s internal moral struggles, gunrunning and drug dealing take over the club. Along the way, many people die and in the second to last episode this past week, Jax Teller ends up killing his mother, who had killed his wife. Practically everyone in Jax’s life who meant anything to him were now gone. Whether or not Jax makes it through the final episode this week remains to be seen.

The “Sons of Anarchy” TV show is about many different things, but one of its main things is the theme of violence. Jax wants to believe that with just one more murder or one more fight or one more shoot out, things will get back in order, but Jax, who wanted to move the motorcycle club away from all the mayhem and violence, ends up in complete bondage to the ethic of violence that he abhors—a bondage that steals his friends, his family, and most of all his soul. Violence, no matter how righteous, cannot save Jax, and the more he embraces it, the more dark and disturbed he becomes.

Last week, I talked about Jesus as The Messiah...Jesus as The Anointed One, and I pointed out that, by claiming Jesus as The Messiah, the early followers of Jesus fundamentally changed the Jewish concept of messiah, which was the concept of Messiah as earthly king with earthly powers, earthly armies, and an earthly throne. Like King David, this was the type of messiah that most Jews of the first century awaited, but Jesus was a messiah of a different kind, and while thoroughly Jewish, Jesus would redefine the essence of messiah, and in redefining what it meant to be a messiah, Jesus would get a new name, and that new name was Prince of Peace.

In Isaiah 9 today that we read as part of our Advent candle lighting, we hear about the birth of a child who, along with a variety of other names, is called Prince of Peace. Originally this passage from Isaiah 9 was about the coronation of the Israelite king Hezekiah, but in Christian tradition we have read Jesus back into the text, which scholars will tell you is a big no-no, but putting issues of responsible interpretation aside, we do want to ask the question, why is it that the title Prince of Peace has largely stuck for Jesus. Why do we call Him the Prince of Peace? Well... was it because Jesus was just a nice, peaceful guy? Jesus wasn’t always that nice. He got angry. He flipped over tables. He was nasty to the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders of His day, and He even got short with His disciples. In the bread scandal, He looked and that and said “Do you not yet understand?”, so Jesus was not always nice and peaceful.

Well, maybe Jesus was the Prince of Peace because he brought peace to families and others who encountered Him. Jesus was not that peaceful about families. If you were to read Luke 14, you would read about Jesus telling people that they must hate their mother and father, hate their brother and sister, and hate their wife and children. There was not much peace there from Jesus. That scripture is not often lifted up among the family values lobby.

Perhaps Jesus was called the Prince of Peace because He was really just a first century hippie who just wanted everyone to get along. Maybe it was that Jesus said let's get together, let's have a nice glass of wine, let's share some bread and we will smoke one of those funny cigarettes, and we will all just get along. Well, Jesus wasn't a hippie, and the Romans certainly didn't think so, so they offered him the cross. So, why was Jesus the Prince of Peace, and why do we continue to refer to him as the Prince of Peace? My sense is that Jesus understood that the people of the first century, like the people of the 21st century, are enmeshed in an invisible web of ethics and allegiances which lead only to destruction. It is a web which we are born into and taught at every turn, but it is a web which we seldom perceive. It is the web that Jax Teller is caught up in in the "Sons of Anarchy". The New Testament scholar, Walter Wink, calls this web the "myth of redemptive violence". I call it the "Popeye ethic".

If you remember from your childhood TV viewing, in a typical segment of "Popeye", Bluto, Popeye's arch enemy, would abduct a screaming and kicking Olive Oil, Popeye's girlfriend. When Popeye attempts to rescue her, Bluto beats him to a pulp, but at the last moment of every episode as our hero oozes to the ground, a can of spinach pops from Popeye's pocket and fills into his mouth, and he is transformed by this infusion of organic, pesticide-free spinach, and he easily demolishes Bluto and rescues his beloved sweetheart, and the format for Popeye never changes. Violence never teaches Bluto to honor Olive Oil's humanity, and Popeye never learns to swallow his spinach before the fight, but the violence of the good guy always wins the day, and the message of the violence is that it is always redemptive. The myth that violence is always redemptive and that violence always puts good morals back into place, this myth lives on, and it is the largely invisible web that we are all caught up in.

To go back to a TV show of the same era, the spy thriller spoof show called "Get Smart" gets at this issue of redemptive violence, and in one of those episodes it ends with a villain in that episode being tricked by an explosive cigarette, and when he takes a drag off of the cigarette, he is blown up and blown off of a cliff to his death on the rocks below, and Agent 99, who was Maxwell Smart's sidekick, watches in horror and then comments "Well Max, sometimes I think we're no better than they are the way we murder and kill and destroy people" to which Maxwell Smart responds "Why, 99, you know that we have to murder and kill and destroy in order to reserve everything that is good in the world", and we keep believing that. We keep believing that if we murder and destroy and kill we can put order back into place.

As we continue in our preparations for the birth of the Prince of Peace, let us not forget that upon His birth, Jesus came into a world that was saturated with violence. Order in His day was preserved by the violence of the cross. Step out of line and that's what you get in Rome, but in willfully going to the cross, Jesus revealed that the Roman death penalty was anything but redemptive and in resurrecting from the dead Jesus revealed redemptive violence to be nothing more than a myth. Life in resurrection is more powerful than death. That's the point, so our Anointed One, our Messiah, we also call the Prince of Peace. He was the Prince of Peace because, although there were zealots and militants and revolutionaries who wanted Him to take up the sword, they invited him to take up the weapon and straighten things out, to use redemptive violence to get order in the world. He said "No I will not go down that road. Love your enemies. Do good to

those who revile you. Forgive not 7 times but 70 times 7. Stop the violence. Go into a mode of peace and pray for those who persecute you”.

Jesus saw in that first century that violence led to nothing more than bigger and more bad and nastier violence. This is what Jax Teller is figuring out, that it is all leading to his own death. The myth that violence can be redemptive has put our world into a death spiral, and we do not know where it is going to end, and it is scary. We read the papers, we watch the news, and we see this spiral, just piling up little by little by little.

We are in the Christmas season, and this season is the opportunity to rededicate our lives to a new way of living. It is the way of love. It is the way of forgiveness. It is the way of hope, and it is the way of peace. The church of Jesus Christ is called to model a peace of reconciliation among humanity. The church of Jesus Christ is called to model forgiveness, and this Christmas we are called to model a community of peace, so the Good News is that Christ is coming, showing us a new way to live. Thanks be to God. Amen.