

**Heiwa**  
Mark 12:28-34  
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Could you use help in figuring out how to live with challenging people? How to defend yourself and love yourself with integrity without bringing harm upon other people? How to speak truth in difficult times but still in a way that advances peace and love?

Today's Gospel lesson is a familiar passage, wherein Jesus engages in a conversation with a scribe about what are the core teachings of the faith.

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'God is one, and besides God there is no other'; and 'to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

For the Word of God in scripture,  
For the Word of God among us,  
For the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God.**

No surprise that Jesus puts the focus of the faith on love. He draws upon the ancient teachings of his Hebrew faith that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love neighbor as ourselves.

The curriculum for this year's summer camp, which Katie and I are drawing from for this worship series "Peace Works: Summer Camp at First Central," focused on how we balance the love of God, others, and self and how this balancing is itself essential to peacemaking.

One of the fun features of the camp's curriculum was that every day focused on a word and concept from a different culture in order to highlight aspects of peacemaking. Today's word is *Heiwa*. Please say that with me, "Heiwa."

Heiwa is a Japanese term that means peace. The two characters that make up this word can be translated “smooth” and “harmony.” So peace is a smooth harmony in Japanese thinking. The camp curriculum described it this way: “The Japanese concept of *heiwa* invites us to . . . look within as we work for peace, putting harmony over competition . . . .”

Last week we focused on how peacemaking begins with acknowledging that our own humanity is intimately connected with other people, and how that acknowledgment leads us to treat every other person with kindness, generosity, and respect.

Peacemaking also begins within our own personality, as we cultivate an inner harmony and balance that is not easily knocked off center. This personal development is difficult work for most people. Consider questions such as “What are the tools we need to develop in order to be more peaceful people?” “How do we engage in actions that create more peace?”

Raleigh Freeman died this week. He wasn’t a member of our congregation for very long, and he had spent the last couple of years in a nursing home. I first met Raleigh out on the sidewalk. He lived in an apartment here in the neighborhood and since I too live in the neighborhood, we had met as neighbors. He was a kind, friendly, soft-spoken, gentle man. And a great example of neighborliness. One of my fondest memories of him was on a spring day a few years ago when our church participated in a neighborhood clean-up effort. Raleigh and I ended up on the same crew, walking Harney and Dewey streets picking up trash.

A couple of years ago Raleigh surprised me. He came to my office one day to talk about how angry he was. His loss of hearing had robbed him of vibrant interactions with other people. He missed conversation and was lonely. He had just been diagnosed with cancer and feared that this meant the beginning of the end. Rightly, as it turned out. When I told him I always thought of him as gentle and kind, he informed me that yes he tried to be that. But as an aging, ill African-American man he had much to be angry about. Being gentle took work.

Preparing this sermon, I thought of Raleigh. To me, he was a peaceful soul, a peace maker even. Yet his own testimony was that this came out through personal effort to overcome anger and be kind, gentle, and loving.

In the Gospel lesson about faith, love, and neighborliness, we might miss a crucial aspect of the story—the way Jesus responds when challenged. Quoting from the camp curriculum,

Jesus is challenged by a lawyer—one who has been listening to previous questions and answers between Jesus and the religious leaders. He has heard the give and take and comes to challenge Jesus. Is he coming to learn or show how much he knows? Is he trying to win the battle or grow deeper? The context seems more combative than curious. The lawyer seems to be raising himself up by pulling another down.

So, how does Jesus respond? The curriculum’s description of the story continues:

Jesus does not attack the man’s motives, but instead restores balance. Jesus calls on the deep wisdom of the Jewish tradition, . . . then lifts up loving neighbor as self. The response critiques the lawyer’s actions and motives without attacking him personally.

Jesus has no need to win, but neither does he retreat. Jesus holds his own center and invites the lawyer to grow . . . .

This story of the disputation about the core values of the faith can serve for us as an example of how to remain peaceful in the midst of conflict. Of how to keep our balance, our *heiwa*.

To explore this idea further, I recommend a Christian thinker who wrote about how we find integrity in the midst of conflict—the theologian Howard Thurman.

Thurman lived and worked and wrote in the first half of the twentieth century. He was a deep influence upon Dr. King and the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. His major work is a small book entitled *Jesus and the Disinherited*. He proclaims that “fear, hypocrisy, and hatred [are] the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited.” Fear, hypocrisy, and hatred each attempt to knock us off balance, to rob us of our peace, our harmony, our integrity. What can we do?

Thurman believed that the teachings of Jesus provide the answer for how not to be overcome by the hounds of hell. Even in the worst cases of oppression and suffering, we can draw upon Jesus’ example and learn not to be fearful, not to be deceived, and not to hate. In a situation that attempts to rob us of our integrity and our dignity, we can learn to love.

Thurman wrote of Jesus, “He recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny.” He continued, “If a man knows precisely what he can do to you or what epithet he can hurl against you in order to make you lose your temper, your equilibrium, then he can always keep you under subjection.”

Wow, those are powerfully wise words. Let me repeat them. “If a man knows precisely what he can do to you or what epithet he can hurl against you in order to make you lose your temper, your equilibrium, then he can always keep you under subjection.” Let us take those words to heart in this age when we are easily angered.

Thurman was aware that we can only develop inner peace and the love that flows from it with “painstaking discipline.” It is “made possible only by a personal triumph.” Nor is it something intellectual and abstract. It has to be discovered in real life situations.

Our good friend Raleigh expressed the same wisdom.

On Tuesday morning the world learned the sad news that Toni Morrison died on Monday night. She was the greatest American novelist of our time and a perceptive voice in understanding our flaws and calling us to our better selves. Her death this week was particularly painful, in this climate of rising white supremacist violence. A vital voice, a wise leader, was taken from us at this critical hour.

I was directed to an essay she published in *The Nation* in 2015, in which she described our troubled times and how we should respond. Way back in early 2015 (*and how long ago that now feels*), she described our political discourse as “shredded by an unreason and hatred so deep that vulgar abuse seems normal, disaffection rules. Our debates, for the most part, are examples unworthy of a playground: name-calling, verbal slaps, gossip, giggles.”

She had felt unable to write, but a friend had admonished her that “This is precisely the time when artists go to work—not when everything is fine, but in times of dread. That’s our job!”

Toni Morrison came to agree with the friend. She concluded her 2015 essay by saying, “I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art.”

And so we face the challenge of peacemaking—not to succumb to the malevolence of the times in which we live. To maintain our smooth harmony, our *heiwa*. To remain people of integrity and dignity who do not succumb to fear, deception, and hatred. To be agents of love, especially in the midst of conflict. To be gentle, despite our justified anger.

I close with this prayer:

God, help us find our center. Help us find our balance. When we are too wound up, settle us down. When we are apathetic, set our hearts on fire. When we are too self-centered, remind us of others’ needs. When we are not taking care of ourselves, remind us how precious we are. Amen.