

December 13, 2023 – Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 10:34-39

By now, you probably have your plans for Christmas set in place. We are at T-minus 12 days until December 25, after all. You can't be guessing and wishing anymore. You need some planning.

Who is coming to your house for Christmas? When are they getting there? Is everyone staying with you? What are you eating? How are you going to balance the four different diets that are coming together? All these people are going to be sitting at your table for the same meal. That takes some planning.

Of course, all of this depends on you getting them to the same table at the same time. But of course, you've got the guests who always come a half hour early and then there are the ones who think that 1:00 p.m. means 3:30 p.m. And don't forget what happened last time Cousin Mary sat next to Uncle Frank. Plan your seating chart carefully.

When there's this much potential for chaos, the thing we often look for the most is control. Maybe peace can come if we can just get these people to the right place and at the right time. It's like the ringmaster at a circus who directs jugglers, acrobats, lions, dogs, and elephants. If everyone would only listen and do what you tell them, there would be peace. This is the hope of every grandmother who plans Christmas dinner for the whole family.

But this feeling goes beyond grandmothers at Christmas too. It's something we all try to achieve throughout the year. I think we've all, at one time in our life or another, looked at a chaotic situation and thought, "Everything would be so much more peaceful if everyone just did what I told them to do."

For the past three weeks, we've been examining the false gods we worship to bring us false peace. We've looked at the idol of possessions, giving us the illusion of safety and stability. We've looked at the idol of escape and the temptation to run from our responsibilities through apathy and avoidance. Today we look at a new idol. The idol of control.

If we can just control the situation, then we'll have peace. If we can just control all the people around us, then everyone will be at peace. It can be cloaked in such good intentions. I know how to solve this problem. I know what's best for them. I should be running the show. I should be in control.

And so we set ourselves up as god over everyone else. And I'm not just talking about Christmas gatherings and family festivities. We tend to look at everything from that perspective.

I wish the church would just do things my way. It would be so much better. I wish my boss would just do things my way. He doesn't know what he's doing. I wish the government would just do things my way. I would clean up Jeff City. I would drain the swamp in Washington D.C. I would get things done. And then we would have peace and prosperity in this country.

We're so convinced that we know best that we forget that it was in trying to be like God, knowing good and evil, that Adam and Eve did something terrible with disastrous consequences, for them and for all of their descendants, including us. Trying to be like God, trying to control the world like God controls the world, always has a poor outcome.

Because we are not God. We are not wise, like God is. We are not all-knowing, like God is. We are not all-seeing, like God is. We are not all-powerful, like God is. Most of all, we are not holy, like God is. And so our attempts to be god of this earth always come up short.

At best, we fail. We try to control everyone and everything and we just can't do it. We lack the wisdom. We lack the insight. We lack the power. And we simply fall short in the attempt.

Of course, we won't ever admit that. We'll blame someone or something else. Convince ourselves that it wasn't our fault. And vainly try again the next time the opportunity presents itself. And fail just as badly that time too. That's the best case scenario.

The worst case scenario is that we not only fail, but we do something truly hurtful in the attempt. Because we are not holy, like God is holy. We are sinners. We have an old Adam inside of us, selfishly seeking his own sinful desires. We are creatures of flesh driven by our flesh to seek out the lusts of the flesh.

And when a sinful human tries to control sinful people, the results are usually disastrous. We want control because we think it will give us peace, but there is no peace when selfishness, pride, and arrogance clashes with selfishness, pride, and arrogance. All you end up with is conflict and misery and frustration. And people getting hurt: physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

You do not always know what's best. I know that's a disappointing thing to hear. But it's true. You are not as smart as you think you are. You are not as strong as you think you are. You are not as good as you think you are. You need to hear that. We all need to hear that.

That's really St Paul's entire message to the Romans in our Epistle lesson. Because this passage is a lesson in humility. Love one another like brothers. Outdo one another in showing honor to each other. Contribute to the needs of others. Show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Live in harmony. Don't be haughty. Never be conceited. Don't get revenge.

And then he concludes the whole list with this statement: "live peaceably with all." Which comes at the end, I think, because the things that came before it, lead directly to it. To live in humility is to live in peace.

That's how you have peace. Not by taking control, but by losing control. That is, of course, counter-intuitive. It's counter-intuitive to our sinful flesh, that so desperately wants to be like God and control everything around us. And it's counter-intuitive to the world, that would like nothing more than to push us around and force us to do it's bidding. The world looks at Christians humbling themselves before God and their neighbor and says, "They're an easy target."

But, you know, that's how they looked at Jesus too. They wanted to make him king by force, but he walked away. They gave him a king's welcome in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday morning, but he refused to lead a revolution. They mocked him as he hung on the cross, *"He saved others, but he can't save himself. If he is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him."*

Jesus was born into absolute humility. Is there any creature on earth who has less control than a baby? He lived in a family of humblest means. A poor carpenter and his wife, who couldn't even afford a goat for a sacrifice. People with that little money have absolutely no control over their own lives, let alone the lives of others.

His ministry was one of humility and selflessness. He gave of himself to others, without any thought to his own needs. And in the end, he emptied himself to the point of death, even death on cross, all while they mocked him for his lack of power and control.

Jesus was capable of controlling everything and everyone around him. He could command wind and waves. He could heal with a word or a touch. The very demons obeyed when he spoke. But he had no desire to control anyone. For he was doing his Father's will. And that was more important than anything. For it meant your salvation.

That is what we are doing as well. In Holy Baptism, we are called as children of God. And as God's children, we do our Father's will. And doing God's will means losing control. All control. As Jesus says in our Gospel lesson, *"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

Live this life in search of control, and you will lose your life. For you will die having sought for only the false god of yourself. And you can't save yourself, anymore than you can control the people and events around you. But live this life in for the sake of Jesus Christ, and you will find your life. For you will die having sought the will of your Father.

And he will bring you peace. Not necessarily peace with the world. As Jesus also says, he didn't come to bring us that kind of peace. Giving control to God means bringing yourself into conflict with a sinful world that still wants to control and overpower you, just as it sought to control and overpower him.

No, your peace comes from knowing that, just as Christ overcame the devil and the world through his resurrection from the dead, he will give you victory over the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh through your resurrection on the last day. Thus, you live with the same peace that Jesus had. The peace that comes from submission and obedience. From humility and sacrifice.

Christmas can be such a time of busyness and chaos. A time when we try to take control of everyone and everything around us, for fear that if we don't, everything will be ruined. But maybe that just shows where our priorities have gone astray. For there is nothing in this whole world that can ruin the birth of Christ or the work he did for us on the cross. That is completely outside of our control. It always has been. It always will be. And for that, I am eternally grateful. Amen.