

It was clear to everyone that John van Zandt deserved to be stripped of his church membership. While he had helped to found the Methodist church in Sharonville, Ohio -- and had served as a church trustee -- van Zandt's immoral behavior became known to everyone following his arrest. Even before the trial, there was no doubt of his guilt; Van Zandt was caught in the act of committing the crime.

On April 23, 1842, nine slaves fled their master's farm in Booneville, Kentucky. Van Zandt stumbled upon these slaves as they made their way north, and he concealed them in his wagon. Slave catchers eventually located and arrested both Van Zandt and the slaves. Though slavery was illegal in the Northwest Territory (which included Ohio), harboring fugitives was against the federal law. Because it was considered un-Christian to resist legal authorities, friends and congregants turned against Van Zandt. When he was officially charged with violating the Fugitive Slave Act, he was excommunicated by action of the church board for 'ungodly and immoral' conduct.

Aside from criminal charges, Van Zandt was also sued by the slave owner and ordered to pay almost \$1000 in monetary damages. Van Zandt refused to comply. 5 years later, in 1847, the case landed before the US Supreme Court where Van Zandt lost again. Once a wealthy man with a large family, Van Zandt's legal battles left him destitute. He died penniless with his children scattered to live with relatives across the country.

163 years later, in 2005, the Sharonville UMC posthumously reinstated Van Zandt as a member, acknowledging that his resistance to the systemic evil of slavery was morally and ethically upright; that the church had been unjust. Van Zandt's actions reflected a deep commitment to his baptismal vow: "resist evil and oppression in whatever form they present themselves."

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We are in the second week of an Advent Sermon Series called: "A Life-Giving Christmas." In the four weeks leading to Dec. 25<sup>th</sup> we are seeking to find how we might embrace a more 'life-giving' celebration of Christmas; a Christmas that enriches our faith without depleting our wallets.

Last week's sermon focused on hope. This week our focus is peace.

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The story of John Van Zandt raises some questions about any declaration that Jesus is this messiah; the long expected "Prince of Peace." If we -- as we so often do -- think of peace as 'tranquility' or the absence of conflict, then Van Zandt's activities were anything but *peaceful*. His illegal behavior upset the serenity of his own life and left his family scattered and impoverished. At the same time his actions stirred conflict in his church, in his community, and throughout the nation as his case spiraled all the way to our nation's highest court.

Over the course of his legal battles, I wonder how often Van Zandt questioned if he should not just pay the judgment against him and be done with it? And how many times did Van Zandt go to God in prayer and Bible study to consider what his faith in Jesus required of him? Knowing that slavery is indeed evil, I wonder if I would have had the moral character to resist such an unjust and oppressive law?

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What is certain is that Van Zandt knew that salvation includes more than just asserting that we believe in Jesus; salvation means embodying what Jesus -- our Prince of Peace -- our Lord, embodied in the world.

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In the OT there is perhaps no richer concept than the Hebrew word 'shalom'; the word we most often translate as 'peace.' Though 'shalom' possesses no single meaning, words like 'completeness,' 'soundness,' or 'wholeness', come pretty close.

In its biblical usage, 'shalom' does mean the end of war and conflict, but it also means friendship, contentment, security, health, prosperity, abundance, tranquility, and salvation. But here is something that is essential for us to know. Scripture asserts that true 'shalom' exists *only* when all these things exist *for everyone*, not just *a select few*, which is why 'shalom' is tied to the biblical definition of justice. (Arnold. *Seeking Peace*. 13)

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John Van Zandt knew that the biblical value of shalom, together with his belief in the lordship of Christ, meant that he could not 'make peace' (as his government had, and as his church had) with the injustice of slavery. Van Zandt had counted the cost of discipleship, and when he had to choose between being at peace with world, with his community, and his church -- or being at peace with Christ -- he chose Christ.

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A number of scriptural citations could be added to this morning's reading from Isaiah 9 to make this connection abundantly clear; that steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, goodness, peace, and justice are intertwined and mutually supportive. In his life, we see how these attributes are intertwined in Jesus' ministry... and until these attributes are intertwined in our lives, our claim to be followers of Jesus will ring hollow.

The angels announced Jesus' birth with words of "peace" and goodwill for all people; because in Jesus steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss.

As we seek to celebrate and share a life-giving Christmas, our preparations must include an intention to do those things that make us ready to both *receive and share* the God's gift of peace – a peace that Jesus gives so that all life may be transformed and reshaped to live under the grace of God's shalom. [Transition]

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Lord make me an instrument of your peace  
Where there is hatred let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope  
Where there is darkness, light  
And where there is sadness, joy

O divine master grant that I may  
not so much seek to be consoled as to console  
to be understood as to understand  
To be loved as to love  
For it is in giving that we receive  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life  
Amen