

**SERMON TITLE:** “Playing Peace”

**TEXT:** Ephesians 2:11-22

**PREACHED AT:** Neighbourhood Church

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A CONVERSATION ABOUT PEACE

Over the last five years or so—ever since the kids were around three—I have learned a very important lesson: conversations with kids are *excellent* windows into theological truth and insight. I’ve learned to pay attention in these conversations—even to write them down before I forget them! They are often an important way in which God teaches me, or gets me thinking about an issue in a new way. Jesus said that we have to receive the kingdom like a little child; it’s been a lot of fun to see how a child’s eye view on life often leads to new insights into the nature of the kingdom.

Well, last week Gil and Shelley were here and we had the opportunity to have some very enjoyable times around the dinner table. And of course there can be some very interesting conversations with five children ranging in age from eighteen months to eight years old all competing, to varying degrees, for the attention of the grown-ups. It can be a pretty frantic and chaotic half hour or so! One conversation from last week, in particular, stands out in my memory. Allowing for the typical exaggeration and embellishment that creep in between the time of an event and the time of its retelling, here's how it went:

*The scene is supertime, after a busy day at the beach and some time spent playing outside with the neighbour kid once we got back. You should also know that my son has recently become something of a Star Wars aficionado, and sees every stick, bat, plastic toy, or any other vaguely long and pointy object as a potential “light saber.”*

*Nicky (rather proudly):* Me and Alan were having a war against the girls.

*Naomi:* Oh Nicky, I don’t like wars. Why do you have to pretend to have wars?

*Nicky (sliding into self-justification mode):* Well, it’s not a *real* war. And we’re not hitting them very hard. We’re just barely tapping them.

*Uncle Gil (wanting to have a little fun with his nephew):* Hey Nicky, I thought you were an “Anabaptist.”

*Nicky (clearly unimpressed by and uninterested in his uncle’s fancy Bible-college-professor terminology):* We’re sneaking around and hiding on them, and then scaring them with our light-sabers.

*Dad (deciding to try a more direct and less-confusing line of questioning than Uncle Gil):* Well Nicky, Jesus loves peace right?

*Nicky (getting a little suspicious):* Uh huh.

*Dad:* So do you think Jesus' followers should love peace too?

*Nicky (probably sensing some kind of a conspiracy to wreck his fun by now):* Yeah.

*Dad:* So do you think it's a good idea to pretend to have wars?

*Brief pause, while Nicky looks things over and picks at his food.*

*Nicky:* Claire started it.

Well, you probably think Gil and I were being unnecessarily cruel by wrecking the (mostly) innocent fun of a young boy. It probably isn't very much fun to "play peace," after all. We need to have "good guys" and "bad guys" to have a game worth playing! There's not much suspense or drama in peace!

Truth be told, we weren't entirely being serious. We had big grins on our face the whole time, and I think Nicky knew that we were just having a bit of fun with him. Nicky knows that war is a serious and incredibly hurtful and destructive thing; when he and his friends are "playing war" they are mainly just acting out some scene from the latest cartoon or kids movie where people joust, there are winners and losers, and nobody really gets hurt.

But there was something important going on underneath the questions Gil and I were asking as well. As Christians we claim to follow the Prince of Peace. As Mennonites, we have historically been known as a "peace church" that advocates non-violent responses to conflict and a "peaceful" way of being in the world (even if we haven't always been great at defining what that means!). As the text Russell just read reminds us, Jesus embodied peace, and made peace a possibility for us.

But what does it mean to be a peaceful person? To adopt peace as a way of life? How can we "play peace?"

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#### SIN/VIOLENCE/DIVISION/CONFLICT AS A VIRUS

One way I have found helpful in thinking about answers to questions like these is to back up and ask this question: **what is the problem for which Jesus is the solution?**

- We say that Jesus is our Shepherd—what do we need to be shepherded through or for?

- We say that Jesus is our Rock—what about our lives requires something solid and immovable?
- We say that Jesus is our Ransom—for what reason and from whom do we need to be delivered?
- We say that Jesus is our High Priest—why do we need someone to mediate between God and us?
- We say that Jesus is our Healer—what is our disease?

Similarly, the statements “Jesus is our peace” and “he came preaching peace,” point to the question: why do we need a peacemaker? Who or what are we in conflict with? What is that conflict like?

I was reading a book this week by Mark Baker, a scholar from our denominational seminary in Fresno, CA. In one of the chapters, the author uses an interesting metaphor for sin: a “virus.” Just like viruses have small beginnings but spread and cause major health problems, so sin starts small, but spreads. It becomes habitual; it takes over everything from the most ordinary daily responses and reactions to how nations handle disagreements. We were created for peace and harmony and goodness, but as the virus of sin has spread down through the ages, division and conflict have become entrenched in our world.

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### BLINDNESS

So as I was thinking about Ephesians 2 and the viral nature of sin this week, I was reminded of a novel I read a while back about a very odd kind of “virus” or “epidemic.”

The book is called *Blindness* and was written by Portuguese author José Saramago in 1995 (in 2008 this book was turned into a movie starring Mark Ruffalo and Julianne Moore).

### ***Spoiler Alert!!***

The story is about an epidemic of blindness that descends upon an unnamed city. Now that’s an interesting thing in and of itself; we don’t often associate the words “blindness” and “epidemic.” Blindness is not contagious—we can’t “catch” it like we catch a cold.

Yet in the story, everyone just goes blind without warning and for no discernible reason. Imagine what that would be like. *Nobody* can see. Imagine what would happen in traffic. In the dentist’s office. In the police station. At the grocery store. Imagine the desperation and chaos that would ensue. Imagine the opportunities for evil and destruction that would be opened up if everyone knew that what they were doing could not be seen.

Well, Saramago does a lot of the imagining for us. The city descends into absolute anarchy, chaos, and violence. The government officials from far away places decide to quarantine all the blind in an empty mental hospital because they don’t understand its

cause or how to cure it. Conditions in the city deteriorate rapidly. The economy basically shuts down, food becomes nearly impossible to come by, and violence and despair begin to take over. It is hard to read at times.

Actually, I wasn't exactly telling the truth when I said that "nobody" could see. There is one character that inexplicably retains her sight. She is referred to simply as "the doctor's wife" and she has the grim task of trying to shepherd a small group of people through the madness that is a city of blindness. She alone can see what people look like, what they are doing to each other, the desperation and depravity that people are sinking into. She sees starvation, theft, looting, and rape. She sees death and violence. And for most of the story, nobody knows that she can see. She keeps it a secret for fear of what people would do to and with her if they knew.

Well days and weeks and months go by and the doctor's wife devotes much of her attention to caring for her new "family"—seven strangers thrown together simply because of where they were when the epidemic of blindness hit, become hers to care for and protect. She helps her "family" escape from the mental hospital and to survive in the streets of chaos and waste on the outside.

Saramago's novel has no obviously "Christian" message. It's not a very hopeful book. There is no glorious happy ending. The doctor's wife could be seen as a kind of Christ figure in that she alone can see clearly in a world of darkness, but she doesn't *save* anyone. She doesn't do anything to conquer or even help cure the blindness. She helps people survive as long as she can.

So how does it end? Well ultimately, the blindness just disappears one day. People gradually regain their sight and wake up in a world gone mad.

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#### BLINDNESS AS A METAPHOR FOR OUR SITUATION

I think that Saramago's novel serves as a kind of analogy to the problem Paul sees Jesus as the solution to in our text this morning. It gives us a picture of our need for a peacemaker, someone to break down the wall of hostility, someone to dispel the darkness in which the human race stumbles around.

The Bible often refers to human beings as "blind" and "lost." The prophets (such as Isaiah) often use variations of this phrase: "they have eyes to see but do not see; ears but do not hear." Isaiah 44:18:

*They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand.*

Ezekiel 12:2

*"Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.*

Jesus echoes this theme, quoting Isaiah in Matthew 13:15:

*<sup>15</sup> For this people's heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them.'*

The prophets repeatedly compare Israel's lack of justice, their oppression of the weak, their clinging to their ethnicity as their identity, their building of walls between them and their neighbours as opposed to living as a light to the nations to blindness—an unwillingness to see correctly.

Last week Gil spoke about the story of the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well in John 4. This very conversation would have been seen as highly problematic in those days. As Gil pointed out, there were old, ancient divisions with deep historical roots. Much like we see in hot spots around the world today—places like Sudan, Rwanda, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and many other places—there are centuries worth of resentment and bitterness about perceived or real mistreatment and injustice that build up and solidify over time. Eventually, they simply *are*.

Around the world, we see numerous examples of people operating with an approach to others that is not much different than the one Nicky resorted to: “Claire started it!”

What about in our own lives? Has the virus taken hold within us as well? I think it has, and in at least three ways.

## 1. CONFLICT WITH OTHERS

I think that if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that in our individual relationships, in our families, and in our workplaces there is division and conflict. We may not resort to physical violence, but there is more than one way to be at war, isn't there? A cutting word here and there. The silent treatment. Emotional and spiritual manipulation. Putting others down behind their backs. Considering others deficient or unworthy of our time because they don't think like us, look like us; because they aren't as spiritual as us, or don't believe like we do. Even as people who like the idea of peace, we do not always live at peace with others.

## 2. CONFLICT WITHIN OURSELVES

We also are often not at peace with ourselves. We have identity issues, we question past decisions we have made, we struggle with confidence and self-esteem. We wonder if we are good enough, competent enough, and smart enough. We know that we make

mistakes. We know that we often settle for less than God intended for us. We wonder if we can be forgiven. We are afraid of being accountable for what we have done and for who we are.

### 3. CONFLICT WITH GOD

Ultimately, of course, we are not at peace with God. Every sin we commit has what we may call an immediate and an ultimate object. We sin against one another and ourselves at the first level. But on the ultimate level, every sin is committed against God because we are missing the mark of what he has created us to be and to do (David and Bathsheba, Psalm 51). God has created his world to be a certain way; when it is not—when you and I contribute to disharmony, pain, violence, and conflict, we are not only sinning against others and ourselves, but ultimately against God.

This is our situation. This is the problem for which Jesus is the solution.

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#### JESUS' PEACE AS THE SOLUTION TO OUR "BLINDNESS"

Back to the novel. Like all analogies, the one between the novel *Blindness* and our situations as conflicted people who are not at peace with God, ourselves, and others breaks down at some point. In the book, the blindness and disorientation are not "cured" or overcome by anyone. There is no cure. It just disappears one day. In that sense, the story has a strange and unsatisfying ending.

This is not the case for us. Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. The blindness we face as human beings does not just mysteriously lift one day. It needs to be defeated. But how? In our passage this morning we read:

*For he himself is our peace, who **has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility**, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. **His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.** He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*

Jesus' work on the cross did not simply provide a way to make peace between God and us. Frequently this is how the cross is portrayed. Jesus died so that God could forgive us. But there is much more to it than this. We are not only saved *from* something but *for* something as well.

Jesus' death breaks down walls between people. In Ephesians, Paul is emphasizing the common humanity between Jews and Gentiles that Jesus made possible. Jesus enables us to walk out of our blindness and embrace our fellow human beings, regardless of their race, their skin colour, their social status, etc.

Jesus helps us to see properly—and he calls us to partner with him in his “vaccination project.”

Our job as those who have seen the light, who are in relationship with the light, is *not* to just grimly hang on until the disorientation and confusion disappear like the woman who can see in the story.

Our job is to show a better way—to show what it looks like to see.

We are to comprise part of the solution in a world stumbling around in darkness and confusion—a world that has eyes to see but does not see properly.

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So how do we move beyond simplistic affirmations like the ones my brother and I gave Nicky—“Jesus loves peace.” Well great, so what? Most people would claim to “love peace.” What does that mean for me? If our role is at least somewhat analogous to the woman who can see in the novel, what are we supposed to do? How can we participate in Jesus’ “vaccination project?”

Well, for at least part of an answer we turn to another one of Paul’s letters to a Gentile church. Listen to what he says in Romans 12:9-21 (this time, from *The Message*). As you listen to this, I want you to think about the people you will come across this week, about the potential conflicts you might face, about the ways in which you will be tempted to live according to the “blindness” of the world, as opposed to the light that Christ has called us into:

*Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.*

*Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.*

*Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.*

*Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."*

*Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.*

That’s a great translation, isn’t it? As good as it is, though, I don’t think the way Peterson translates vs. 18—“if you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody—captures Paul’s intent as well as it could. What Paul says is this: ***If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.***

Not “if it comes naturally to us.” Not “if we can stomach it.” Not “if it’s convenient or not very costly.” Rather, “*as far as it depends on you.*” Whatever contribution we have the opportunity to make in a relationship or a situation, it is to be for the preservation or realization of peace. Whatever comes from our side of the equation, is supposed to have the flavour of peace.

Jesus has accomplished the “big-picture” peace for us. He has healed our conflict with others, with ourselves, and with God. As Paul says, “He himself is our peace.”

But God has left us with something to do—to partner with him in leading the world he loves out of its blindness.

As far as it depends on *you*, live at peace with everyone. Be a part of the dispelling the blindness.

May we emulate our Peacemaker, “playing peace” so that a world stumbling around in the darkness of division, conflict, and violence, can see a better way.

Amen