

AMBASSADORS OF RECONCILIATION

2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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**NOVEMBER 10, 2013/25TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
(PEACE SUNDAY)**

Today is Peace Sunday. On the weekend that is set aside to reflect upon and remember the cost of war, many Anabaptists around the world also talk about the peaceable kingdom and alternatives to the violence that our world is so familiar with.

As Mennonites, we have historically talked about peace a lot. Peace is, in many ways, what Mennonites are known for, our refusal to take up arms, our resistance to violence, our insistence that Jesus meant what he said when he said things like, “love your enemies,” “turn the other cheek,” and “do not resist an evildoer.”

Peace is a big part of our story as Mennonites, and we rightly speak of it often.

In one of our Sunday School classes, we are reading Rob Bell’s book *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*.

Last week, we read a portion where the author was commenting on the presence of protestors at an ecumenical event he attended that was designed to teach peace and compassion to younger generations.

Who’s against peace? That’s like being against puppies or flowers!

I confess that I feel similar sentiments on this day. Preaching a sermon saying that peace is good and that we should all be peaceful and support peace seems kind of boring.

What can we say on this day that has not been said thousands of times before by followers of Jesus around the world?

We are using MCC’s Peace Sunday resources, and one of the things they suggest is to simply tell stories.

This shouldn’t be shocking. Jesus was a storyteller, after all. Jesus told stories to invite people into a new way of seeing, a new way of hearing, a new way of understanding, a new way of being in the world.

MCC provided a number of inspiring stories, but I only have time to share two that stood out to me this morning. Some of these stories may be familiar to you—one has been published in various Mennonite publications over the past few years, and the other I've referred to in some of my reflections about my experience in Colombia a year and a half ago.

Jonoine, a chief of an Ayoreo tribe in the northern Chaco, Paraguay, carried a spear when he walked onto the stage at the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Paraguay in 2009. The spear was a replica of the spear that he had used in 1958 to kill a missionary, Kornelius Isaak. As a gesture of peace and reconciliation, he presented the spear to Isaak's brother, Helmut Isaak of Kelowna, BC.

Kornelius Isaak was a missionary under the Mennonite Brethren Mission Board, based in Filadelfia, Paraguay, when he ventured into Ayoreo territory in 1958 to preach the Gospel. The Ayoreo did not understand the intentions of Isaak and his companions, and sought to protect their land. In a sudden encounter, Isaak was wounded by Jonoine's spear. He died the following day. His last words were a prayer for the Ayoreo people.

In a letter to the editor published by Canadian Mennonite in August 2009, Helmut Isaak describes his brother's death as an "act of war." He went on to say, "The assembly in Paraguay was my first opportunity to meet the man who had killed my brother Kornelius... and to extend my hand of forgiveness and reconciliation."

"I led Jonoine by the hand onto the stage and I said to him, 'Fifty years ago you were a courageous young warrior of your tribe. You defended your territory against the invasion of the white man and you were a hero of your people. Fifty years ago, my brother Kornelius Isaak, another young man fought the peaceful war of the Lamb of God, willing to give his life for his Lord Jesus Christ. Jonoine, you did what you had to do according to your values and tradition, and my brother did what he needed to do. At that tragic confrontation in 1958, Kornelius lost his life. Today we are not enemies; we are brothers in Jesus Christ and warriors together for the kingdom of God.'"

At the Mennonite World Conference assembly, Jonoine presented his spear to Helmut, a complete replica of the one he used to kill Kornelius. Helmut accepted it as a gesture of peace. He also called on the assembly, in the name of his brother and Jonoine, to establish centres for study, research and training in Anabaptist peace theology and practice.

Today, the spear is on display at the Study Center for Anabaptist Peace and Theology, which Helmut Isaak established in 2006 at the Centro Evangélica Menonita de Teología Asunción. It is a symbol of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

This story was written by David Esau, an MB pastor from Coquitlam BC. Esau went on a learning tour to Colombia that was very similar to the one that I went on a year and a half ago.

As we climb out of the boat and onto the 3.5 hectare parcel of land, the first thing we see is a rice processing plant built on the tailings of a spent gold mine. It looks more like a field of gravel than a field of dreams. But on this plot of land the MB churches and MCC are weaving hope of a value-added agricultural project.

By processing the rice for market themselves, the local farmers are able to sell directly to consumers. This project, however, almost didn't happen. There were numerous obstacles along the way such as buying the land, getting power to the facility, and obtaining inspection approval. But the biggest hurdle was the local para-military group demanding money for protection — a security payment. Known as a “vaccine,” every Colombian knows this is code language for “give us a significant cut.”

After much prayer, the key church leaders went to meet with the para-military commander. They underlined that this project was owned and operated by and for the community. As leaders of MB churches they repeatedly emphasized how they could not and would not support any armed group, period.

Pastor Rutilio Rivas Dominguez said: “Mennonite churches have been committed to nonviolence and peace-building for centuries. We will not support any armed groups, not even the State Armed Forces. We will not support you, even if it costs us our lives.”

After tense negotiations broke off, the pastors prayed yet again. Fifteen minutes later they received a call from “the boss” that they and the community were free to proceed with their project.

In our text this morning, Paul talks about the new creation that is being birthed, the new creation that is the reality for all who are in Christ.

And he talks about our role in this with an interesting term.

In verse 20, Paul says,

So we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us.

We are ambassadors for Christ...

What is an ambassador? An ambassador is an official representative of one state to another. Ambassadors represent the interests of their sending nation in a foreign place.

As followers of Jesus, we are representatives of the new creation in the midst of the old creation. We are heralds of peace and shalom in a world where these things are often seen as rumours or impossible ideals.

We are representatives of a kingdom of peace and reconciliation that is coming.

God is making his appeal through us. It is up to the ambassadors to represent their home country well. This is what was going on in the stories from Paraguay and Colombia. In each case, the ambassadors are saying, this is how things work in my country—the country of new creation, the country of reconciliation, justice, and peace.

As ambassadors of this new creation, Paul reminds us, we don't regard things from a merely human point view any longer.

We see with new eyes now. We see and we hear with new creation eyes and ears. We have our radar tuned to a different frequency. Even though we live in a country where signs of sin and brokenness still abound, we are watching and listening for different news, different stories, sometimes in the most unlikely places (as we saw in the stories above).

But perhaps you are thinking, those stories sound pretty sensational. It's all fine and good to hear inspiring stories of peace from far away places, but most of us will never be faced with situations that dramatic.

What does it mean to be ambassadors for Christ in ordinary situations?

Another story...

Yesterday, a few of us spent the day at the Mennonite Church Alberta Equipping Day at Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary. I and another pastor were in charge of one track of workshops geared toward raising awareness about First Nations issues and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which will be concluding its work next March in Edmonton.

The first two workshops of the day were fairly predictable. We talked about Canada's historical treatment of aboriginal peoples, we looked at what the Bible had to say about loving our neighbours, we talked about some of our experiences at various events. It was good.

But the last session was different. A week prior to the event, I got a phone call from Doug Klassen (pastor at Foothills) indicating that someone in their church was

connected to a woman named Yvonne Johnson and asked if I would be willing to invite her to come and share her story during our last session.

Some of you may be familiar with Yvonne Johnson. She was the subject and co-author of a book written by Rudy Wiebe called *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* written in 1998.

It is a heartbreaking book that talks about Johnson's experience as a native woman growing up in Montana and Saskatchewan, of the racism and sexual, physical, and emotional abuse that she experienced virtually from birth, of being convicted for first degree murder in 1991, and about the long and painful road to healing that she has walked and continues to walk.

So, for the last session, we simply sat and listened as Yvonne told us parts of her story.

It was hard listening. There were tears... occasional gasps... silence...laughter... questions... hugs... conversations afterwards...

It was an inspiring time, a painful time, an incredibly difficult time, and, I think, a vitally *important* time.

To be an ambassador of the new creation yesterday simply meant to listen. We didn't heal any of Yvonne's wounds, we didn't "solve" the problem of and we certainly didn't change the past.

For 75 minutes on a Saturday afternoon, a bunch of mostly white privileged Christian folks sat and entered into the story of a woman whose experience of mostly white, privileged Christian folks has been almost uniformly negative for her entire life.

For 75 minutes on a Saturday afternoon, a woman who has for a good chunk of her life been treated as less than human was listened to and honoured as the precious child of God that she was.

There was nothing heroic about what we did. The only hero in that story was Yvonne.

But simply carving out a space and listening was a small act that said, "We believe that a different future is possible, a future where Canada's First Nations and non-aboriginals can be reconciled, where forgiveness and healing can be more than just words... and we will try to walk toward that future together."

I am convinced that it is through small, simple acts that reconciliation slowly comes.

It is relatively easy to take "positions" on global war and peace on Peace Sunday—especially from our position of security and privilege.

But being ambassadors for Christ and people of peace is about small things, everyday things, ordinary decisions to keep our eyes and ears tuned to newness and hope that spring up even in the midst of oldness, in the midst of heartbreaking stories that we are too familiar with, in the midst of a world where it sometimes looks like things will never change.

As I listened to Yvonne Johnson's story yesterday, I was reminded of the simple reality that is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

We are called to love and honour the person that God brings across our path, every day.

Most of us will never be called upon to address issues of global conflict. But all of us are called every day to love our neighbours, no matter who they are, no matter what they look like, no matter where they've come from, no matter if their views match up with ours.

All of us are called to look at ourselves and ask, *Am I representing the interests of my home country—the new creation—well or not? How can I be an ambassador for Christ in the ordinary, everyday events and circumstances that God places before me? How can I become a person of peace?*

I close with words from the Roman Catholic author and monk Thomas Merton:

So instead of loving what you think is peace, love others and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed—but hate these things in yourself, not in another.

May God help us to be people of peace.

May God help us to be ambassadors of reconciliation, heralds of the new creation being brought about by the God who has reconciled the world to himself in Christ.

Amen.



