

CROSSING OVER

PSALM 46; ROMANS 12:9-21

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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NOVEMBER 8, 2015/24TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (PEACE SUNDAY)

When I saw this passage from Romans listed in the MCC Resources for Peace Sunday that we are using, I did a bit of digging around in my sermon archives and discovered that I had already preached on this passage twice here at LMC.

I thought, “Well, I probably shouldn’t use it *again*...”

And then I read it.

And I thought, “This passage is too good *not* to use again!”

Our theme for Peace Sunday 2015 is:

Crossing to the Other Side: Living as People of Peace in a Time of Fear and Terror

It’s hard to imagine a more relevant topic given our cultural moment.

The Syrian refugee crisis that dominates the news headlines nearly every day, with all the geopolitical realities that have led to it.

We read of suicide bombings and planes crashing into the desert. We read of beheadings and acts of unspeakable violence perpetrated by militant groups.

We see images of horror and suffering that make our heads spin and our hearts hurt.

And we see a lot of anger and uncertainty, a lot of suspicion.

I have encountered this regularly over the past few months as our Syrian refugee project has gained a higher profile in our city and beyond.

Perhaps you've seen and heard some of this, too. Fear and terror are everywhere. Fear *of* terror. Fear of the *other*. Fear of where the world is going and what it all might mean.

We hear the whispers (or the belligerent shouts!) from those around us...

We don't want those people to come to Canada...

On this Sunday before Remembrance Day, how do we as a historic peace church "*cross over*" to the other side?

We know all about the fears that dominate here on *this* side.

How do we make our way to somewhere better? How do we practice what OT scholar Walter Brueggemann calls "**the sacred art of departing**" from the dominant narratives of our culture?

How do we live as people of peace in times when peace seems impossible and when fear dominates so many of the headlines that daily shape our perceptions and perspectives?

This is the part of a Peace Sunday sermon where a Mennonite pastor is supposed to make the turn toward pacifism – the part where I'm supposed to say, "we depart from our cultural norms and assumptions about how to deal with fear by renouncing violence and pointing to a better way.

I confess that this is a move that I don't find easy to make. Perhaps a story will illustrate why.

I remember sitting at a kitchen table with Naomi and her grandfather fifteen or so years ago.

I don't remember how we got on to the subject, but we started to talk about war and religion. I possessed all the misguided, naïve confidence of a guy in his early twenties who had done a bit of reading—just enough not to know how very little reading it actually

was.

I proudly said something about being a Mennonite pacifist, and the floodgates were opened.

Naomi's grandfather had spent half a decade tramping around the mud and blood of WWII Europe, hiding, starving, spending time in POW camps on both sides of the conflict, lying and begging for his life, wielding a gun for whoever had their boot on his neck at the moment.

He had lived through horrors I could barely contemplate.

"You Mennonites are a bunch of cowards! he roared, angrily pounding his frail fists on the table. You are happy to accept the benefits that come through the blood of others, but you won't fight for it yourselves!! Cowards, all of you!

He was shaking by the end. So was I.

We never spoke of religion or war again. And I resolved from that point on that I would never be so casual with words like "pacifism."

I realized, then, how words like this can sound to others—especially those who have seen, heard, touched, and smelled the kinds of atrocities that are mediated to me through televisions, computer screens, and words on a page.

I realized that I had not earned the right to be pro- or anti- anything that big or complicated.

I realized that it was far too easy to say that I was a pacifist when it demanded nothing of me beyond lofty words and theological principles.

And I remember that conversation each year around this time.

It's not that I am not convinced, deep in my bones, that Jesus calls us to peace and nonviolence. I am.

Violence begets violence. Always. Human history demonstrates quite ably that there is a cyclical nature to all retributive violence.

This is why Paul (and Jesus, before him) is so insistent that followers of Jesus are not to repay evil for evil.

But I also know that it's pretty easy to say, "Make peace not war" or "I'm a pacifist" when such responses require very little of me.

For me, the "sacred act of departing" is not primarily about adopting "stances" or "positions" to take in the realm of geopolitics.

It's not primarily about making grand statements about being pro-this or anti-that.

It is not about wearing a peace button *instead of* a poppy or *in addition to* a poppy.

Each of these things can have meaning, but I also know that we live in a bumper-sticker culture where we are increasingly becoming experts at shouting slogans past one another, and failing to acknowledge the complexity of most issues.

In my view, before peace can become anything like a national policy or a response to the threat of terrorism, it must begin within the hearts and minds of individual human beings.

This is why I think that Romans 12 is one of the most marvelous passages in all of Scripture. This is almost a manifesto for what it means to be a person of peace.

It shows us how to "cross over" to the other side.

I want to read some of these statements again, and as I read them I want you to think of how they might apply in your every day life, in conversations with neighbours, family members, in response to some of the fearful whispers that you hear out there.

- 12:9—**Let love be genuine...** in a culture where love is fleeting and self-serving.
- 12:9—**Hate what is evil and cling to what is good...** in a culture that so often exalts what is evil—what is violent and degrading and dehumanizing—and mocks what is good as antiquated and irrelevant.
- 12:10—**Outdo one another in showing honour...** in a culture where "honour" is

based on celebrity, and must be constantly earned.

- 12:10—***Do not lag in zeal... be ardent... serve...*** in a culture of apathy and ever-decreasing attention spans—a culture where many are, as University of Montana philosopher Albert Borgmann puts it, “walking around in the dull fog of a distracted and sleepwalking idolatry.”
- 12:12—***Rejoice in hope... be patient in suffering... persevere in prayer...*** in a culture too cynical to hope, too impatient to suffer, and too jaded to pray
- 12:13—***Extend hospitality to strangers...*** in a global context of increasing fear and xenophobia, increasing suspicion of “the other,” decreasing generosity toward refugees, and a general assumption that more for you means less for me!
- 12:14—***Bless those who persecute you—do not curse them...*** in a cultural context that glorifies violence and retaliation, and whose popular culture is saturated with brutality
- 12:15—***Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep—***enter into the joy and the pain of human existence...
- 12:16—***Live in harmony... associate with the lowly... don't be haughty...***in a culture where attitude is admired, where it is good to be bad, where wealth and influence are magnetic, and the lowly continue to be forgotten and neglected
- 12:16—***Do not claim to be wiser than you are...*** acknowledge that there is much that we do not know, that we have much to learn...
- 12:17—***Do not repay evil for evil...*** in a culture where “an eye for an eye”—or even an arm and a leg and an ear for an eye—is assumed—a culture where military spending dwarfs money spent on education and healthcare.
- 12:19—***Do not avenge... leave room for God...*** in a culture that has no room for God, whether it is his wrath, his love, or anything else.

This is what a life of sacred departing looks like. This is what it looks like to be people of peace in a time of fear and terror. This is what it looks like to “cross over to the other side.”

This is what it looks like to live lives that agree with the psalmist,

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea

These are the kinds of lives that our world needs. This is the way that Christ makes himself known in a world of fear.

Through a people determined to *cling to what is good*.

One of the ways we do this is by choosing to focus on better stories than the ones that dominate the fear-based narratives on *this* side.

I want to end with one such story.

Many of you know that our broad refugee sponsorship group in Lethbridge is working to bring two groups of Syrians here.

The first, the one our church is a part of, is bringing a family of Syrian Orthodox Christians here.

The second, comprised of several Anglican churches and university and hospital groups, is reuniting a Muslim couple here in Lethbridge with their extended family. She is from Syria, he is from Iraq.

I've been meeting with this woman regularly over the past few months, helping with her paperwork, going to MCC Alberta with her, helping her understand the process, etc.

It's been wonderful to get to know her.

Last week, she came to us and asked about the Christian families who the first group is sponsoring. How old were the kids? What did they need?

She told us that she and her friends wanted to begin gathering some toys for their children. She told us that she wanted to be available if we needed help with translation. She told us she wanted to help in any way she could.

This is a “crossing over” story. A Muslim woman who is sick with worry for her brothers and sisters and parents and nieces and nephews who are languishing in camps in Lebanon extending a hand of welcome to Christian refugees. And Christian families working to bring a Muslim family together here in Lethbridge.

One small story. But these are the good stories we need to cling to in a context of so many stories of fear and suspicion of “the other.”

It is in small stories like this that we begin to cross over from the side of fear to the side of love.

Some time next week, I will go to this woman’s house for lunch. She and her husband have invited a few of us over for a “real Syrian meal” to celebrate the completion of the paperwork that we sent to MCC this week.

I can’t wait.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

This is how we cross over to the other side.

I mentioned Walter Brueggemann earlier. I close with a prayer from his marvelous collection called, *Prayers for a Privileged People*:

There is a long list of threats around us:
terror
cancer,
falling markets,
killing,
others unlike us in all their variety,
loneliness,
shame,
death—
the list goes on and we know it well.

And in the midst of threat of every kind,
you appear among us in your full power,
in your deep fidelity,
in your amazing compassion.
You speak among us the one word that could matter:
“Do not fear.”

And we, in our... fearfulness, are jarred by your utterance.
On a good day, we know that your sovereign word is true.
So give us good days by your rule,
free enough to rejoice,
open enough to change,
trusting enough to move out of new obedience,
grace enough to be forgiven and then to forgive.

We live by your word. Speak it to us...
that we may have many good days through your gift.

Amen.

