

SERMON TITLE: “Seek Peace with Your Neighbours”

TEXT: Genesis 26:12-33

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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For the next 10 weeks or so, we are going to be focusing on peace.

This is not entirely surprising, for a Mennonite Church, but I think it is a very timely theme, nonetheless.

We are a historic peace church—most of us know this. Many of us have spent a lot of time studying and reflecting upon the theme of peace. Many of us have been advocates for peace, whether politically or in other domains of life.

As Mennonites, we are no strangers to the theme of peace.

But I think it is good to periodically revisit and reacquaint ourselves with our core convictions—to take them out of the box, hold them up to the light, turn them around and examine them again.

Perhaps we will notice new things—things we hadn’t seen that way before, things we had perhaps thought of differently.

Perhaps we will be inspired and emboldened to different expressions of what it means to follow the Prince of Peace in our homes, in our relationships, in our city, in our nation, and in our world.

Our summer worship series is called “Seek Peace and Pursue It.” Each week we are going to be looking at a different realm of human life and activity and asking what it means to pursue peace in this realm.

Before we begin, a few introductory comments.

First, I think it is important for us to recognize that peace is a word that is easy to misuse and misunderstand—perhaps especially for Mennonites!

Peace can easily become a cause that we associate with, a brand that we identify ourselves with, whether as individuals or as a church.

Perhaps most importantly, we can come to idolize peace itself rather than the one we trust to finally usher in the reign of peace. Peace can easily become the object of our worship rather than the one true God.¹

An article by Stephen Dintaman in the *Conrad Grebel Review* says:

Peace and justice activism and engagement in conflict mediation can be authentic expressions of faith in Jesus Christ, but for many [Anabaptists] that have become more of a substitute for faith...

I am not calling for us to forsake work for social change, but just reminding us that all this is not the gospel. The good news is not that Jesus has given us peace ideals and we are called to implement them nonviolently. That would make God passive and us the central actors in the drama of redemption.²

Second, it is important to understand that peace is more than just the absence of conflict—whether that’s on the large scale of international foreign relations or the more mundane scale of our everyday relationships.

In the biblical understanding of peace, the *absence* of conflict is important, but so is the *presence* of human flourishing.

The Hebrew word which we translate “peace” is *shalom*—a rich, multi-dimensional word which incorporates harmony, beauty, unity, virtue, safety, security, and justice.

Shalom is more than a lack of hostility—although this is certainly a start and would be welcome in many parts of our world; it moves on to say what the world *should* look

¹ The *Canadian Mennonite* recently published an interesting book review on how our rhetoric around peace has evolved over the last century.
<http://www.canadianmennonite.org/articles/exploring-complexities-peace>

² Stephen F. Dintaman, “The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 10.2 (Spring 1992): 205-208.

like. It presents a positive vision of a all of life where all human beings live as they were intended to live with each other, under God.

Sounds pretty good!

It also sounds completely unattainable!

Life just doesn't look like this, does it?

Our relationships with our families, our colleagues, and neighbours (not to mention our enemies) are, at various points in our lives, characterized by mistrust, envy, defensiveness, and selfishness.

We have competing desires and expectations of each other, and these bump up against each other regularly (as we see in our text today!).

Several hundred years ago, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes described human life together without a strong leader or “sovereign” to regulate their behaviour as “the war of all against all.”

We might not offer quite *that* bleak an assessment of human nature, but an inescapable element of the human condition on this side of eternity is conflict. Why?

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann uses the phrase “the myth of scarcity” to describe what motivates has motivated much of human behaviour throughout history, throughout our long leaving of the Garden.

We fear that there is not enough for everyone—not enough food, land, resources, goodwill, love...—and that we must seize and hoard what we can for ourselves.

When we buy into the “myth of scarcity,” says Brueggemann, *we* become the central actors in the story of the world rather than God.

We decide how much is enough (often on behalf of others), we decide how much we need. *Our* (perceived) needs and desires become the primary factor in how we look at the world and how we relate to those around us.

It is a myth that is easy to buy into, whether as individuals, as churches, or as nations.

It is a myth that is increasingly guiding the policies of our Canadian government—specifically with respect to its immigration policies.

This week I had a conversation with Jim Shantz, an MCC Refugee coordinator based in Edmonton (who happened to be on our recent tour to Colombia).

We talked about the recently-implemented Bill C-31 and how this bill is making it more difficult for refugees to get into Canada.

Whether it is changing the source country qualifications (Colombia, for example, no longer qualifies as a place where Canada will accept refugees), actively seeking to admit only the well-educated, English-speaking, “skilled” refugees, or cutting health benefits that refugees are entitled to once they arrive in Canada, the big picture is, as Jim put it, that for Canada is “open season on refugees.”

The reasons for Canada’s policy changes are no doubt many and varied, but at the root level they are based on **money** and **fear**.

There is not enough money to go around and there is a fear that those who are not like us will take what belongs to us. This is the story.

The myth of scarcity. There isn’t enough to go around. And we do not want to share.

Isaac does not take this route in our text today.

Our story from Genesis this morning is about room—finding room, making room, and enjoying room.

It's a relatively straightforward story. There is a famine in the land, so Isaac heads down to live in Gerar, the land of the Philistines.

Isaac does fantastically well—all of his crops prosper because the Lord blesses him. This doesn't sit well with the Philistines, who block up his wells and send him away. Isaac keeps on moving around and keeps on meeting with resistance wherever he goes.

Even though the text meanders to its conclusion, and even though we might wonder about the king's motives, and even though there are tensions bubbling just beneath the surface throughout, eventually there is peace. Isaac and King Abimelech sign an agreement whereby Isaac is allowed a place to stay.

Isaac names the spot "Rehoboth," which means "room" or "space."

For the time being, at least, the myth of scarcity does not win the day. There is enough for everyone.

Brueggemann contrasts the "myth of scarcity" with "the liturgy of abundance":

The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us at the turn of the millennium. The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being... each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things -- nothing can separate us from God.

What we know about our beginnings and our endings, then, creates a different kind of present tense for us. We can live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for...

Wouldn't it be wonderful if liberal and conservative church people, who love to quarrel with each other, came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God's abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity?³

Fundamentally, choosing to seek peace and pursue it is an act of trust.

If God isn't who he says he is, it makes no sense to seek peace and pursue it in a conflicted and violent world dominated by the myth of scarcity.

It makes no sense for Isaac *not* to stay and fight—to defend himself and his property and the land he has settled against Abimelech and the Philistines if he does not believe that that same God who promised to bless his father Abraham and to make him a blessing to the nations, is also guiding and leading his paths.

Isaac trusts God to give him the blessings promised and doesn't try to secure them on his own.

Isaac does not act the way he does because he is committed to the “cause” of peace and nonviolence.

He acts the way he does because he trusts that God is who God says he is, and that God will do what God has promised to do.

We've come to the “so what?” part of the sermon.

It's all fine and good to reflect upon our nation's immigration policies and what this says about our “neighbourliness” as Canadians.

It's all fine and good to hear inspiring stories of how being good and peaceful neighbours results in (more or less) happy endings with Isaac and the Philistines in Gerar.

But what about us, here in Lethbridge, AB? What does this mean for us? What is God asking of us? How are we to seek peace with our neighbours?

³ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>

A few weeks ago, Daryl and Cindy Byler shared in our church basement about their work in the Middle East. One of the images from their presentation that has stuck in my mind ever since is that of the famous wall that is being built by the Israeli government to separate the Palestinian zone from the Israelis.

It is an ugly wall—a wall whose sole purpose is reinforce divisions, to preserve and even stoke hostilities, to communicate who has the power and who does not.

Walls keep us separate.

Walls are a testament to the power of the myth of scarcity as opposed to the liturgy of abundance.

But there are more than just physical walls aren't there? There is more than one way to enforce and fortify divisions between people, whether these divisions are racial, gender-related, socioeconomic, theological, political, or any number of others.

Even as followers of Jesus, we can be pretty good at building walls.

The question for us, like it was for Isaac, is this: At rock bottom, do we operate out of a worldview of fear or one of love and trust?

Do we believe that God's world is one of scarcity or abundance?

Do we believe that our posture towards others is fundamentally one of competition where we have to fight to protect our own interests and viewpoints, or can we "make space" for others (relational, spiritual, political, conversational, physical)?

Do we, like Isaac, trust the promise and the character of God for the future or do our actions and our words imply that we *really* believe that we are responsible to secure and protect what we need and want for ourselves?

In what ways has the Lord given us "space?" In what ways have we been blessed by God with "room" to grow? In what ways can our lives demonstrate our conviction as Christ's followers that our story is being led and guided by a God of abundance?

In what ways can we seek and pursue peace with our neighbours?

We can give each other space.... And we can recognize that the space that we have is to be shared... Because we know that there is enough.

- physical space
- relational space
- conversational space
- theological space

We don't have to hoard and protect

- our stuff
- our views and opinions
- our relationships
- our denominational distinctives

We can allow each other to be truly “other” and not demand that others conform to our expectations or our preferences or our understanding of what they ought to be and do.

We can live this way **only** if we are convinced that there is God of abundance who wants good—for ourselves and our neighbours—and that this abundant God is pulling our stories and the story of the cosmos along toward a future of *shalom* for all.

Seeking and pursuing peace with our neighbours demands that we give each other room.

Room to grow.

Room to begin to tear down the walls that we erect to protect ourselves from others.

Room to overcome our fears of those who aren't like us.

Room to figure out what it means to welcome the stranger.

Room to make mistakes.

Room to hear and respond to the voice of God.

Room to be changed by one another.

Room to learn and discover what it means to live lives shaped by the liturgy of abundance rather than the myth of scarcity.

May God help us to be a people who share space. Who leave room.

Who seek and pursue peace because we believe that the story we are a part of is, finally, a story of love rather than fear.

Amen