

SERMON TITLE: “The Practice of Peace”

TEXT: Matthew 5:38-48

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today is Peace Sunday and we, as Mennonites, are a “peace church.” This is the first thing that most people think of when they hear the word “Mennonite.”

When I was at graduate school in Vancouver, where there was everything from Pentecostals to Anglicans, I found that while people often didn’t know a whole lot about Mennonites, they knew that we were pacifists.

For them, this often meant that we were “idealists.”

The technical theological term for this is “over-realized eschatology.” It refers to the belief that heaven on earth is attainable before Christ returns. The common refrain that I heard was, “That’s just not realistic.”

But whenever we talk about the issue peace, I think it’s important to remember that the issue is not between those who believe that peace is part of the gospel and those who do not.

All Christians “believe in peace.”

All Christians believe that because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, our future is one of peace.

They disagree upon the extent to which the future—which we all agree will be one of peace, harmony, *shalom*—ought to guide and shape our actions as followers of Jesus in the present.

We agree about the end of the story, in other words, but disagree about the role violence ought to play in the intervening chapters.

As a culture, we are a deeply confused and conflicted when it comes to violence.

This week, in towns and cities around our country, we will pause to honour the sacrifice of the many lives lost during the previous century’s wars. Whatever our position on the ethics of war, on Remembrance Day we pause to remember the tragic reality of violence and its effects.

Yet at the same time as we grieve the necessity of violence in our world and the toll it takes upon families and communities, we are drawn to violence like a moth to a flame.

We entertain ourselves with violence. Our movies and television programs are filled with violent images. We celebrate the heroic conqueror, the rugged individual who is able to overcome enemies with strength and power. We admire those who dominate and impose their wills upon others.

The arena of sports gives us another avenue to celebrate violence in “appropriate” ways.

We rise to our feet when a fight starts in a hockey game; we watch football—a sport whose terminology is borrowed from the military (gaining territory, pushing back lines, breaching defenses, etc.).

Professional wrestling and “ultimate fighting” are not much less barbaric than the gladiators of the Roman Empire, yet we describe them as “sports.”

The best-selling video games on the market, *by far*—for children and for adults—are first person shooter games, which allow people to vicariously experience the “thrill” of combat.

This past Monday was Halloween and I was again struck by how we normalize violent and disturbing images—little children wandering around streets in search of candy dressed up like executioners, vampires, zombies, etc.

Our fascination with the gruesome, the violent, and the shocking is, well, shocking.

Even as nice, peaceful, tolerant Canadians, we are schizophrenic when it comes to violence. We lament it, on the one hand, yet celebrate and affirm it with our choices and our dollars on the other.

I want to suggest that as a culture, and even as followers of Jesus, our problem with violence is not a problem of understanding but one of imagination.

It’s not as though we don’t *understand* that peace is preferable to war, or that kindness and compassion are preferable to violence and force. We understand these things very well.

We simply lack the imagination to see different possibilities

What we need are not more instructions about the nature of peace, or strategies for attaining peace, or even advice about allowing the peace of Christ to become an ever-deeper reality in our relationships, families, and communities.

These are all good things, no doubt, but we need something much bigger.

What we need is a new lens through which to look at the world. We need new ways of reading the events of our world and of our lives.

We need Jesus-shaped imaginations.

Whenever I read the gospels, I am continually struck by how Jesus taught. He came embodying and teaching a new vision of reality, but he didn't haul all of the movers and shakers from Jerusalem into an air-conditioned conference room, and move through a ten step PowerPoint presentation outlining what his vision was, how it was to be implemented, what it would cost, etc.

Instead, he *told stories*. And not to the who's who of Israel, but to mostly uneducated people of little significance or influence on hillsides, in synagogues, in towns and on roads.

He told stories.

Stories that opened up people's imaginations, stories that caused them to ask questions, to challenge assumptions, to reevaluate things.

Jesus knew that stories are what move people.

So today, I am not going to systematically explain what's going on in our passage from Matthew 5.

It's relatively straightforward. Jesus' words are not difficult to understand, even if they are very difficult to put into practice.

I am going to tell a story, and then offer a few concluding remarks about how we can be a people who live with kingdom imaginations.

Someone began singing

Source: Len Desroches, Love of Enemy: The Cross and Sword Trial (Ottawa: Dunamis, 2002), pp. 26-27

As part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, an elderly woman stood in an emotionally charged courtroom, listening to a group of white police officers acknowledge the atrocities they had perpetrated in the name of apartheid.

Officer van de Broek acknowledged his personal responsibility in the death of her son. Along with others, van de Broek shot her 18-year old son at point-blank range. The group partied while they burned his body, turning it over and over on the fire until it was completely reduced to ashes.

Eight years later, van de Broek and others arrived to collect her husband. A few years later, shortly after midnight, van de Broek again appeared and took the

woman to a place beside a river. On a woodpile her husband lay bound. They forced her to watch as they poured gasoline over his body and ignited the flames that consumed his body. The last words she heard him say were, "Forgive them."

Now, van de Broek stood before her awaiting judgment. Vengeance seemed inevitable. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission officers asked her what she wanted.

"I want three things," she said calmly. "I want Mr. Van de Broek to take me to the place where they burned my husband's body. I would like to gather up the dust and give him a decent burial.

Second, Mr. Van de Broek took all my family away from me and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him.

Third, I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him, too. And, I would like someone to come and lead me by the hand to where Mr. Van de Broek is, so that I can embrace him and he can know my forgiveness is real."

As they led the elderly woman across the silent courtroom, van de Broek fainted, overwhelmed. In the courtroom, someone began singing, "Amazing Grace." Gradually, others joined in until, finally, everyone there was singing the familiar hymn.

A kingdom imagination at work.

A few lines from another well-known story where someone went to amazing lengths to love their enemies:

... When they got to the place called Skull Hill, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left.

Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing."

They don't know what they are doing.

Their imaginations are too small.

We still don't know what we are doing.

Yet we are called to be peacemakers and lovers of our enemies in a world simultaneously repelled and intoxicated by violence.

Fundamentally, choosing to be peacemakers is an act of trust.

It forces us to declare, by our actions as well as our words, that we believe that God really *does* stand over our individual stories and the larger stories in which we find ourselves; that he really *does* promise to deal justly with us and those we find ourselves in conflict with, that peace and love really *are* stronger than violence and hatred, no matter how things may appear in the present; that the upside-down way God has of working in the world really *is* right-side up and really *does* point to a future of *shalom*.

If God isn't who he says he is, if God isn't doing what he says he is doing in and through the world, it makes no sense to be live as Jesus tells us to in our passage today, as the woman in the story lived. It makes no sense to give and to turn the other cheek and love our enemies unless we believe that there is more to the story.

Unless we can imagine different endings than those in which violence is repaid with violence in an endless cycle of despair and destruction.

Only if a God of peace stands at the beginning and the end of history does it make sense to be peacemakers in the time between.

This week I was snooping around in the closet, looking at the banners people from this community have made.

The one to my right fits well this morning: "We are people of God's peace."

I don't know who made this banner, but whoever it was, they got the theology **exactly** right.

God's peace. Not ours.

This week a few posters from Mennonite Church Canada arrived in the mail that said, "Live for Peace" on them.

While I think the goal is commendable and appreciate the initiative of those involved, I think I would rephrase it: "Live for Christ."

Peace, in and of itself, is not our goal; our goal is Jesus, our Prince of Peace, who laid down his life for his friends, and for his enemies.

As followers of Jesus, our commitment to peace is not to a really effective political strategy or philosophical position. It is not an achievement that human beings, with the right amount of rational understanding, political savvy, and strategic planning can bring about.

The peace we need—the peace our world needs—will not come about through our efforts.

Peace is a gift of God, through Christ, that is in the process of being realized, and that we get to participate in.

We are called to love our enemies and to be peacemakers because we are children of a God of peace.

God's children do what God does, and there is no more God-like work for us to do in the world than peacemaking.

Is this idealistic? Is it naïve? Are Mennonites, or any followers of Jesus whose eschatology is “over-realized,” deluded?

Maybe.

Maybe that's the point. Maybe the world needs some crazy people—people like the elderly woman in the story we heard a few minutes ago—whose imaginations have been captured by a different narrative, a different way of living and being, a different Saviour.

I close with another quote from Leonard Desroches from an anthology called *Northern Lights*:

Slowly I am unlearning the lie of my culture: love of enemy is not sexy; it does not sell; it is for naïve weaklings. Slowly I am unlearning the lie of the official church: love of enemy is just an ideal, an optional challenge to reach for the impossible in one's private life. At most, love of enemy is presented as a command only, not as a life-giving mystery. Slowly, I am learning that not to live the mystery of love of enemy is to be seriously stunted in spirit, in vision, and in imagination.

May God grow our imaginations, and allow us to live this mystery.

May God help us to love our enemies, to be people of peace.

Amen.