

He Shall Feed Them

Ezekiel 34:17-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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Each year, I approach Peace Sunday with a bit of trepidation. I know that this is the Sunday where we, as a historical “peace church” are supposed to assert our “brand.”

I’m supposed to say the expected things about war and peace and about our Mennonite convictions around pacifism or nonviolence.

This is the Sunday that sets us apart from Anglicans and Baptists and Presbyterians and everyone else. This is the Sunday where we wear MCC buttons instead of (or in addition to) the traditional poppies.

This is the Sunday where we can be proudly take our place among those in church history who have clung in word and deed to the conviction that Jesus meant what he said about being people of peace.

And yet, I know that at least *some* of us feel at least *somewhat* conflicted on this Sunday.

Some of us are well aware that our “peace positions” are simply that. Positions. Ideological artifacts that have never really been tested and have been nurtured in the context of privilege and the absence of suffering.

Some among us have people in our families who have served in the military.

Some of us are torn between a profound admiration for the legacy of Mennonite conscientious objectors and peaceable witness and a recognition that very often our “peace churches” have been communities of deep conflict between members and among families even while they talked the talk about “peace.”

(Just yesterday, the Canadian Mennonite's Facebook page re-posted a 2013 article called "Let Nobody Judge Them" which talked about how harshly some Mennonite churches treated those among them who chose to serve in WW2 when they returned.¹)

And then there are some who have private reservations about pacifism. How does a principled commitment to nonviolence in obedience to Jesus fit with other Scriptural themes such as protecting the vulnerable, and the weak? Would massive historical evils have been stopped without violence?

I pondered these things and others as I spent a cold and windy last Wednesday in the Dachau concentration camp just outside Munich, Germany.

Did the skeletal victims of this camp and others like it that I saw in row upon row of images not need the military might of the Allies to set them free from the Nazis? How would my principled commitment to nonviolence sound to one of the victims of some of the world's most brutal regimes?

These are all familiar questions. I imagine you have thought along similar lines at various points in your life. Peace, like so many things in our world, is complicated.

So, what do we say about peace on this Peace Sunday?

Well, the first thing to say is that "peace," like "love" and "hope" and all of the best words, is a word that can quite easily be turned into something less than what it ought to mean.

For many, I suspect that the word "peace" evokes the absence of conflict. Whether we're talking about global politics or about our interactions in our communities (real or online) or family dynamics or our relationship with our spouse and kids, the absence of conflict is a good thing.

But as you likely know, the biblical vision of peace goes some distance beyond the absence of conflict. The Hebrew word we are familiar with is *shalom*, which has more to do with what is present than what is absent.

It is the absence of conflict, certainly, but it is also the *presence* of that which gives life.

¹ https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/let-nobody-judge-them?fbclid=IwAR3sePIWiOxR7QczXwY8sbu6mdAMKSenbPA7MH_p747T-U_cdXbJh1huotY

The presence of flourishing in every aspect—for human beings and for all creation.

The presence of harmony between human beings and God and the created world.

The presence of justice and completeness—of all that God has made reaching the fullness of its potential and collectively expressing God’s creational intent.

It is, to use the language of Jesus, “the kingdom of God.” *Shalom* is when God’s will is fully and finally done on earth as in heaven.

Perhaps you’re thinking that this sounds like an exercise in wishful thinking.

Well, you’d be right. Kind of.

There is a sense in which the biblical vision of peace *is* an exercise in imagination because it is something that our world has never seen. We’ve seen glimpses here and there, and we are grateful for these. But we have not yet seen anything on the scale of what Scripture promises.

The kingdom has come, in part, but we still await its coming in fullness.

For now, our pursuit of peace takes place in the in-between time. It is a time where we don’t understand as much as we would like and where our sin and selfishness invariably weave their way through even our best efforts, where even our loftiest principles can sometimes contribute to the suffering of others.

This is the context in which I have been thinking about our theme of the morning, “Peacemaking through food justice.”

I have to confess that as I read the worship resources package created by MCC I felt overwhelmed.

There was talk of food systems and food security and food sovereignty and how unequal access to these things contributes to conflict and violence.

There were reminders of our Christian duty to move beyond charity and toward addressing some of the structural realities that contribute to persisting injustice.

There were admonitions about the importance of eating locally and growing our own food and warnings about the dangers of “industrial food systems” of Western nations.

After I had finished reading the worship resources, I felt a little helpless at the complexity of it all.

I think we all realize that food is not distributed evenly on our planet and most of us genuinely lament this. We know that we have access to more than our fair share and that we have a duty to do what we can to work for a more just system.

But how?

Should we all eat only what we can grow in our backyards? Should we adopt a hundred-mile diet? Should we only eat seasonally and organically? Is this a luxury afforded to those of us who are relatively well off?

Should we protest against and avoid processed foods or massive multinational corporations that manufacture it?

Should we resist trends toward industrial farming? Is this wise, given that our planet’s population is now north of 7.5 billion people and we live in an increasingly globalized world where our markets are interconnected in ways that most of us can barely understand?

How will all these people be fed?

Should we not celebrate the ingenuity and entrepreneurship that many farmers are bringing to the table, so to speak, in figuring out how to get higher yields out of their land?

How to live and think and act when it comes to the connections between food and peace is complicated.

So, I did what I often do when I am feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of our world and trying to think about what faithfulness to Jesus requires in response.

Instead of focusing on what I can't understand fully when it comes to the connections between food and justice and peacemaking, I tried to focus on what I could.

The first thing I understand well is the importance of simply eating together. I think we need to remember or recover the basic truth of food as a building block of community as opposed to simply a source of fuel.

Peacemaking often takes place over food. I've had the privilege in my life of traveling with MCC to sites of conflict around the world, whether it's Israel and Palestine or Colombia or here in Canada in spaces where reconciliation is being sought between settlers and indigenous people.

I'm struck by the role that food plays, wherever I go. Whether it's refugees in Palestine or displaced communities of farmers on the outskirts of Bogota, or sitting with newcomers to Canada here in Lethbridge, wherever I've gone, we've taken long periods of time to eat together, to listen to one another's stories.

I am convinced that one of the fundamental building blocks of peace is a basic willingness to locate ourselves in the story of someone else whose experience in the world is different from ours.

This is how walls come down. This is how friendship and solidarity are built. This is how enemies can move from the category of "scary, incomprehensible other" to "neighbour."

This is true when it comes to ethnic tensions and political challenges; it is also true when it comes to interpersonal strife or differences in the church.

And very often this happens when we eat together. Jesus modeled this in his own ministry, often eating at the homes of unexpected hosts—tax collectors, Pharisees, etc.

One of the ways that we can seek peace in our world is to recover the practice of treating food not just as fuel to be ingested as efficiently and quickly as possible, but as a gift meant to be shared and to build community.

And that word "sharing" is an important one. In our passage this morning, the prophet Ezekiel expresses God's displeasure with how his people are being "shepherded." There are those among them—those who should know better—who are muscling in and butting out the weak, depriving them of their fair share, failing to look after the vulnerable, the lost, the lonely, the sick.

As Christians—particularly as relatively well-off Christians—we *must* remember that we have a duty to share, to not take more than we need, to receive food as a gift not as something we are entitled to.

Today, we'll have the opportunity to put all this into practice: we'll eat together, and we'll have the opportunity to contribute to the Interfaith Food Bank.

Like every other response to human sin and brokenness and inequality and injustice in the world, it's an imperfect one.

But it's something. It's one small attempt, among others in our city and around the world, to recognize that food is for sharing in a world where some do not have enough.

One final thing. As Christians, it's so easy for us to slide into moralizing mode.

We diagnose a problem, locate our complicity in it, engage in a bit of holy self-reproach, and then set to the task of trying to fix things. We see that food, like so many other resources on our planet is not evenly distributed, so we roll up our sleeves and set to solving things.

This is partly good. And partly not good.

The impulse to want to be more faithful, to pursue a world of harmony, justice, and peace is obviously always good.

But the impulse to imagine that the realization of the *shalom* that God desires is simply ours to implement is not good. History is full of examples of people who believed that the kingdom was theirs to bring about who ended up doing at least much harm as good.

Most of us can think of examples in our own lives where a group of well-meaning Christians or churches believed that they had the one, true, righteous and pure approach to this or that social issue or theological doctrine and that they alone understood what faithfulness to Jesus required. These approaches nearly always end up with division and conflict.

As human beings, we do not see fully or clearly.

It's fascinating to notice what God *doesn't* say in our passage from Ezekiel this morning.

God doesn't say, "Ah, you people of Israel, some of you have been hoarding more than your share and you have been oppressing the weak and the vulnerable among you. You have failed in your responsibility to me, to one another, and to the world that I have made. You should know better! *Therefore*, I command you remember your calling and to live more faithfully!"

This would be an entirely reasonable response. And I think it is implied as *part* of a response to the injustice of Ezekiel's time.

But what God *in fact* says is, "You have been lousy shepherds of one another and of my world, *therefore* I will be your true shepherd.

The words "I will" show up eight times in these short fifteen verses.

I will judge between sheep and sheep... (v. 17)

I will save my flock...

I will place over them one shepherd...

I will make a covenant of peace...

I will make them a blessing...

I will send down showers of blessing...

I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops...

I will, I will, I will. It is God's initiative that takes center stage throughout this passage, not ours.

And to all these "I will's," the prophet also adds a "he shall."

God promises that he will one day appoint one shepherd, from David's line, who will tend to his flock with justice, mercy, and peace.

This is what we will celebrate in a few minutes when we come to the table.

All of these "I will's" and "he shall's" are not a call to passive waiting (ah, well, God will do it all, so I'll just keep feeding at the trough with our elbows up!). We *are* called to be faithful and to pursue justice and peace with respect to food and everything else in our lives.

But our pursuit of these things *always* takes place within the context of God's prior initiative and God's promise to bring about the kingdom of peace that only God can finally accomplish.

So may God give us wisdom as we think about food and peace and justice and fairness and care for creation and everything else that God has entrusted to us and commanded us to tend well. May God help us to evaluate all that we do in life in light of the priorities of Jesus.

And may we continue to pray and long for God's kingdom of peace to come, on earth as in heaven.

Amen.

