

Defending Hope

Isaiah 61:1-3

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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November 7, 2021/24th Sunday after Pentecost/Peace Sunday

For each of my ten years here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church, I have felt somewhat conflicted when preaching on Peace Sunday.

On the one hand, I believe deep down in my bones that to be a follower of Jesus is to be a person of peace, from one's personal relationships to one's politics to one's theology to one's hopes for the world to come.

I believe that we are called to embody peace and nonviolence in imitation of Jesus' teaching and example. We are to be those who love enemies, who turn the other cheek, who refuse to perpetuate the endless cycles and systems of violence that our world knows far too well.

On the other hand, I also believe (and have learned from personal experience) that one should be very careful about speaking too easily and too confidently about peace when one has never known the threat of violence and war.

It's too easy to be one of those rebuked by the prophet Jeremiah when he says:

from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.

The word "peace" can at times roll off the tongue too easily, to become a "position" or part of the Mennonite brand. It can be easy to speak about peace carelessly and complacently.

This is why I appreciate the emphasis of MCC's Peace Sunday worship resources on learning from those in places of conflict who don't have the luxury of being careless about peace.

As Ernie read earlier, “we don’t have all the answers.” We do have an obligation to listen and to learn from the church beyond our borders. Especially those of us who have known only peace in our lifetimes.

So, I’m not going to preach much of a sermon this morning. I’m going to share a short parable. I’m going to offer a few reflections. And that’s it.

The parable comes from a man that I met when I traveled to Colombia in 2012 with MCC. (I actually met the Palestinian woman who Joani voiced earlier in the service as well. It is so cool to be able to visualize some of the people and the places from our stories this morning!).

His name is Ricardo Esquivia, founder of MCC partners Justapaz and Sembrandopaz in Colombia. I took the picture on the screen during a visit to the village of Macayepo on our learning tour.

Sembrandopaz is translated “sowing seeds of peace,” and this is what Ricardo has been doing for over three decades. He is a human rights lawyer, community organizer, and a peace activist. He is also a recognized lecturer, mediator, and professor.

He’s mobilized tiny villages to stand up for their rights in the face of foreign multinationals who would take their land. He’s started an organic farm, a training center, a forest reserve, and an art school.

Ricardo is a remarkable man. I remember thinking this when I met him, and it has been confirmed in everything I have heard and read about him since.

He tells the following parable:

They say that once a man was being chased by bandits who wanted to kill him. Desperate, he entered a network of caves and hid in one. In anguish he asked God to protect him, to send angels to his aid.

Suddenly a little spider appeared at the entrance of the cave and started to weave a web. Distressed and fearful, the man told God that he didn’t want a spider, he needed a wall that prevented the bandits from entering the cave!

Meanwhile the spider continued weaving its web. The bandits, in hushed voices, talked among themselves: “Let us go into this cave, he could be in here.”

“No, he isn’t in there. Don’t you see the spider web covering the entrance? No one has been in there for years.”

And the bandits left.

God has many ways to respond to the suffering and anguish of our people, and it is not always in the ways we think or expect.

In this little story, the man asked for protection, and he thought this would come in some spectacular way, like a miracle of angels descending or a great wall appearing. But God responded with a spider, whose weak web fooled the bandits.

And so, I think of a beautiful saying, “If you ask of God a tree, God gives it in the form of a seed.”

I love these metaphors that Ricardo Esquivia uses for how God grows peace in our world and in our lives.

Peace comes incrementally. It comes in small and surprising ways. Ways that may even seem weak and ineffectual.

Like the spider and his seemingly unimpressive web, all over the world God is working in the hearts of minds of ordinary people, inspiring tiny actions, everyday choices for peace.

All over the world, sometimes far away from the limelight, God is working through courageous dispositions of patience, hope, and resilience.

All over the world, God is cultivating faith and conviction that peace is the future that God has promised for his world and for his people, that it is worth working and waiting for.

Faith that one day there will be, to use the language of Isaiah, beauty instead of ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of a spirit of despair.

And then there is the metaphor of the seed and the tree. *If you ask of God a tree, God gives it in the form of a seed.* This rings true when I think of how peace grows in our lives, our communities, our nations, our world.

We ask for a tree, fully formed. We instinctively long for the quick fix.

But this is not how God has seen fit to work.

God does not impose his peace upon us, much as we might wish he would. Not yet, at any rate. Rather, God starts small, working with human beings as they are and the world as it is, sowing little seeds of peace, allowing them to grow together with the weeds this side of eternity.

And so, every year on Peace Sunday, Mennonite churches and other peace churches around the world continue to stubbornly insist upon the centrality of peacemaking, peacebuilding at home and around the world as core expressions of the gospel of Christ.

We water the seeds that God has planted and in so doing we defend the hope that God has placed in our hearts.

I want to give the last work to Ricardo Esquivia. I'm relying on Google translate, so this will likely be less poetic in English than Spanish. It is a quote that I found on the website of Sembrandopaz:

You have to have so much faith that one can sit under the shade of the tree that has not yet been born.

This is what it means to be people of peace in a world of violence. We are those who sit under the shade of a tree that has not yet been born.

But the key word in that sentence, it seems to me, is "yet." The tree isn't fully born. *Yet*. But it will be. Because God has promised that it will be so.

Until that tree is fully grown, we pray, with our words and with our lives, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven."

Come, Lord Jesus. We long for your peace.

Amen.

