

Plans for Peace

Jeremiah 29:7–11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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As you know, our tradition as a peace church is to set aside the closest Sunday to Remembrance Day as “Peace Sunday.”

As you likely *also* know by now, each year I approach Peace Sunday with a little bit of trepidation.

I know that this Sunday is a big one for us. This is the Sunday where we remind ourselves of our historical convictions around pacifism and nonviolence.

This is the Sunday where we take our place among those in church history who have clung to the conviction that Jesus meant what he said about turning the other cheek, refusing to resist an evildoer, praying for those who persecute us, etc.

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

Some among us have people in our families who have served or currently serve in the military (including the person preaching!).

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

Some have private reservations about pacifism. How does a principled commitment to nonviolence in obedience to Jesus fit with other Scriptural themes such as defending the vulnerable, and the weak?

These are not new questions; These are not questions with easy answers. Peace, like so many things in our broken world, is complicated.

I think we can (and must) be honest about this, even on Peace Sunday.

And yet, even though peace is complicated, it remains among the deepest and most abiding hopes of our faith. Peace is what we long for, what we were made for, and what we believe God has promised his groaning creation.

World peace, peace between neighbours, inner peace.

And peace is indeed our calling. We are to be people of peace. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus said, “for they will be called the children of God” (Mat. 5:9).

Peace is more than a wish. This is the theme of the MCC Peace Sunday worship resources that we are drawing from today.

Here’s how the writers introduced the theme:

In our work at MCC, we try to incorporate peace into all our projects, from land rights in Laos to work with incarcerated men in Canada to community construction projects in Bolivia.

We have drawn from stories MCC staff and volunteers have shared from around the world, people who, regardless of their context, are asking important questions:

How do we humanize our enemies?

How do we help others find peace when we’ve been victimized ourselves?

How do we open ourselves to the wonder of forgiveness?

Those questions struck me as among the most vital ones we can ask, and not just around Remembrance Day.

Our world seems to be increasingly characterized by division and suspicion, polarization and overheated rhetoric, hatred and discrimination, resentment and mockery.

Now, in one sense, it has ever been thus. Since Genesis 3, conflict has always been a part of the human story.

But it still somehow *feels* unique. I have lost track of the number of times, in the last few years, where I hear someone say something like, “You know, things just feel so divided. We don’t know how to talk to each other anymore. We don’t seem to be able or willing to tolerate difference. There’s just so much anger out there!”

So, these are timely questions for us to reflect upon.

The MCC resources contained a number of reflections from workers around the world that congregations were invited to draw from in their Peace Sunday worship services.

The reflection we chose to use was written by William Kiptoo. William is the MCC Peacebuilding Coordinator for Kenya and Tanzania.

His reflection is called “**Contentment in enemy territory**” and is based on the passage from Jeremiah that we heard earlier.

I’m going to read William’s reflection and then offer some of my own comments.

There will be an image on the screen during this reflection. It’s the same one as the one on the cover of your bulletins. I was also suggested by MCC and is by Kenyan painter Waweru Gichuhi.

Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare (Jer. 29:7 CEB)

In preparation for many years of captivity, Jeremiah asked God’s people to settle down and do their work while they wait, but more importantly, to “pray for the peace of the city.”

This call to settle was contrary to the speedy return home the false prophets were calling for (Jeremiah 28). God wanted the Israelites to practice contentment where they were, as deliverance wouldn’t come any time soon.

As peacemakers, we are called to pray for our enemies and their prosperity. This is tough to even think about—wishing good on the very person plotting your death.

Daily, I encounter displaced people, communities that have been uprooted by conflict or violence. In remote areas, the terrain is bad and ethnic tensions quickly escalate into violence. For example, many Kenyans have lost hope or are pegging false hope on promises of a better tomorrow.

My family also experienced violence. As he was tending cattle in Marakwet, my grandfather was abducted by raiders and exiled in West Pokot. The raiders sold him to a family in Southern Turkana. In captivity, my grandfather grew up and became a nomadic pastoralist.

My father tended cattle for a white settler who owned 5,000 acres. I grew up in Uasin Gishu County, one of the poorest squatter environments. We lacked clean running water, housing and toilet facilities. It wasn't until I grew up that I began to understand the injustice—the rich lording it over the poor and perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

This shaped my work in justice and peacebuilding.

Even after my family returned to Marakwet years later, the conflict between the Pokot and Marakwet continued to simmer. I have lost countless family members at the hands of bandits. This calls for patience, perseverance and more importantly, prayer.

How do I begin to heal others when I am not healed? Humanizing the enemy requires God. I try to live up to the ideals that I preach—extending forgiveness to all those who may have caused harm to my family members in Marakwet.

This is not easy. I find healing in the biblical stories of those who, like Jeremiah, have lived this journey, celebrating small gains, with the hope that the efforts I put today will one day yield something better.

I want to return to those three questions that framed our Peace Sunday resources.

How do we humanize our enemies?

How do we help others find peace?

How do we open ourselves to the wonder of forgiveness?

These are not idle abstractions for William. He and the communities in which he works have witnessed violence and ethnic tension and social chaos that few of us can imagine.

He honestly acknowledges that peace is really, really hard. Being a peacemaker does not come automatically.

It takes patience, perseverance. And most importantly, prayer.

This is not just a tag-on, the sort of thing that we say because we think it's the religious thing we're supposed to say.

Without prayer, without coming before God honestly, without naming our fears and our sins and our sorrows and seeking to locate these things under the cross and the pattern of Christ, peace as a way of life will remain elusive.

William is clear. We cannot be people who love and forgive and make peace possible with our enemies without God.

Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

It's important to remember Jeremiah's context here. He's not writing these words to suburban Westerners living in comfort who have moved from one relatively peaceful city to another.

He's writing to Jewish exiles who have been forcibly dislocated from their land and hauled off to a very *particular* city: Babylon.

Here's how one theologian describes the Israelites' mindset when it came to Babylon:

Babylon, to an Israelite... was the end of the world. Babylon was the epitome of death, pain, guilt, and isolation. **Death**, because it seemed the dream of the Promised Land had died. **Pain**, because anyone who planned a renaissance for the Jews was going to be in big trouble. **Guilt**, because exile was a tragedy Israel had brought upon itself. And **isolation**, because Israel was like a teaspoon

of sugar, and Babylon was like a huge cup of tea inexorably dissolving each granule until there was nothing left.¹

The most natural thing to do for the people of Israel would have been to simply hunker down and endure. To stay separate. To have nothing to do with their godless captors.

Instead, Jeremiah directs their gaze outward, to the people whose welfare they would be *least* inclined to promote.

Incredibly, Jeremiah says, “Settle down, plant gardens, get married...

“Pray to the Lord for this city. If Babylon prospers, you will prosper. Your well-being is bound up even with that of your enemy’s.”

What is true for Kenya is true for the city in which we find ourselves and is true for every city in which followers of Jesus find themselves.

God has set things up so that our well-being depends on how we live together.

And so, for *our* city, the time and place where God has placed us, I wonder, can we be people in our communities who show a better way? Can we promote the welfare of our city in:

- Humanizing our enemies?
- Helping others find peace?
- Opening ourselves up to the wonder of forgiveness?

I see no way to do this last one that doesn’t involve doing the hard work of extending and receiving forgiveness ourselves.

I see no way to do the first two that doesn’t involve reaching across difference, seeking to understand, interpreting the actions of others as charitably as possible.

I hesitate to bring this up because I know we are all weary of COVID talk over two and a half years.

¹ Samuel Wells, *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011), 28.

But Will Braun has had an interesting three-part series in the last few issues of the *Canadian Mennonite*. It's called "The Sweet Solace of Polarization" (that's a firecracker of a title!).

He's done something unusual. He's some time intentionally talking to people he disagrees with about COVID. He has tried to genuinely understand neighbours who everything around him is steering him to think of him as "enemies."

In his article in the most recent issue, he writes these words:

Rigidity was the spiritual variant of COVID. Questions became unwelcome. A singularity of narrative prevailed, spawning a minority reaction. Friendships withered. Families ruptured. Churches bled members.

The pandemic changed the complexion of society. At this point, can we talk constructively across the lingering divide? Can we find middle ground? Do we even want to?²

These remain crucial questions for us to ask. Particularly the last one: Do we even *want* to constructively talk across the lingering divide?

You may have noticed that public health is creeping back into the conversation this fall. Plenty of people are getting sick, whether it's COVID or normal flus or other viruses.

Some are getting anxious. And, unsurprisingly, people do not seem to be agreeing about what we should do.

I will not add my voice to those who have strong opinions about this. I think you have heard enough from me by now to know that I think that our response to COVID is a complex question with many, many variables and moving parts.

As I look out at the next few months and what they might hold for us, I have a very particular concern.

My concerns is whether or not we as a culture and as the broader church have learned anything over the last two-and-a-half years.

² Will Braun, "The Sweet Solace of Polarization," *Canadian Mennonite*, October 31, 2022, 26-27.

I hope we and pray that we will just slide back into old grooves of demonizing those who disagree with us. I hope and pray that what Will Braun calls the “spiritual variant of COVID” —rigidity—will not once again rear its ugly head.

This is just one area—one of many—where our world, our culture, our “city” is in desperate need of peacemakers, of people who promote the welfare of the place we find ourselves in because God has bound us together.

You may be wondering about the image that has been on the screen for the past few minutes. It is a picture that I took in 2018 when Naomi and I visited Israel and Palestine.

The barrier wall separating Israel from the Palestinian territories is huge and ugly and imposing. And it’s covered with art and graffiti of all kinds.

I was immediately struck by this one. I pondered it often throughout my time over there.

Please don’t forget to find the human in your enemy.

It has been the desktop wallpaper on my computer ever since. Every time I open my computer, I see this picture and I reminded that this is to be among my most basic tasks as a follower of Jesus.

I want to end where our passage from Jeremiah ends. If the Bible had a “greatest hits” album, this verse would be on it. It is well-known and well-loved, and for good reason.

It might sound a bit different than you’re used to because of the translation. I chose the CEB today because I think that sometimes a slightly different version of familiar verses has the capacity to capture our attention in fresh ways:

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.

God has made plans for peace.

God has promised peace.

No matter what we are going through in the present, whether it's conflict and violence in Kenya, or war in the Ukraine, or a pandemic, or a culture where our discourse is ugly and polarizing.

Or whether it's some personal battle that you can't see a way out of—a hurting relationship, a chronic health issue, depression, anxiety about the future...

I know that each week there are people in this room going through private struggles that can easily lead to despair.

Whatever our situation, however bleak the present or the future might seem, whatever conflicts are dominating our attention at this moment, it is ultimately peace, not disaster that God has planned.

It is a future filled with hope. A hope beyond what we can secure for ourselves. A hope that comes only and always as a gift.

I hope that we can hear this promise not just as some nice Sunday morning words, the icing on the sermon cake, as it were.

I hope we can hear these words for precisely what they are. The promise of the Living God.

Amen.

