**Blessed are the peacemakers**

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

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*Scripture: Matt. 5:9; I Samuel 25:2-42*

Hymns: HWB 407 or 411, StJ 66 or 77 or 87 or 94

We’re fully in back-to-school mode at our house. This Fall, our son is going into grade 1, and as someone who went to school for an embarrassingly long time (ahem, 12 years of university…), it doesn’t take much to get me into the Fall back-to-school spirit! We’ve got almost all his school supplies ready and the indoor shoes and we’ve even practiced a bit of reading over the summer. It’s an exciting time!

But in the midst of the excitement, I came across a sobering article from *The Washington Post* about what back-to-school involves in the U.S. these days. It’s becoming more common for parents to buy their children a certain kind of backpack: namely, a bulletproof one, in case of a school shooting. The article stated,

This is America in 2019, where mass shootings have become so commonplace that consumers are buying bulletproof backpacks, clipboards, and even three-ring-binder inserts, that they hope will protect them from gunfire. Retailers across the country say they have seen growing demand for bullet-resistant products for children – as well as for doctors, teachers, flight attendants and taxi drivers – giving rise to an industry of ballistic goods for everyday Americans…[[1]](#footnote-1)

Imagine. There are so many shootings in public places in the U.S., that even little schoolchildren are wearing bulletproof school supplies for protection. A mother whose child was going into grade 1 – just like mine – said, “What we really need is gun reform. But our lawmakers are not moving at the speed parents need them to, so this is the best we can do.” She recounted having the conversation with her six-year-old son about why he needed a bulletproof backpack and what to do in case a shooter entered his school. What a heartbreaking conversation! What a horrible thing for young children to have to be aware of! How many school shootings will it take before the bare minimum of reforms are made to the gun laws in that country? Lord, have mercy.

This is just one reminder that we live in a violent world. I’m sure we could name issues of peace and justice closer to home. Even though we have a better record of gun control and fewer mass shootings here in Canada, there are other forms of violence that we grapple with as a society, such as child poverty, which often unfolds along racial lines. Our world today is crying out for peace. And our beatitude today calls us to make peace: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Matt. 5:9, NRSV).

Now thankfully, this beatitude doesn’t contain any old-fashioned words like “meek” or “pure in heart” that we need to unpack and update for today. But it is worth asking ourselves what we mean when we talk about peace, which can mean everything from an inner sense of calm to the absence of war to withdrawal from the world to biblical *shalom*, meaning a holistic sense of safety, equality, peace and right relationships between God, human beings, and all of creation. So which is this beatitude referring to?

Well, according to our handy alternate translations or paraphrases, the beatitude focuses on peacemaking, which is something we have a hand in building or promoting or creating. Janet Morley puts it this way: “Blessed are those who take action to bring about peace, for they shall truly be called God’s own.”[[2]](#footnote-2) She highlights that this is about acting for peace, not simply waiting or hoping for it. This is a peace that requires something of us. And Brian Walsh, in his “correction” to this beatitude, illuminates its meaning by stating its opposite:

Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they shall be called children of God.

*Blessed are the bullies,  
those who will control the world through arrogance,  
through an economics of privilege,  
and, if necessary, through war;  
they shall be called empire builders.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

For Walsh, peacemaking is the opposite of bullying and control, of arrogance and inequality, of war-mongering or using whatever means necessary to build empires of domination. So peace would be: respect and kindness, the sharing of power, and using nonviolent means to dismantle harmful systems and build communities of peace – not a bad definition of peacemaking!

Our biblical passage for this morning from I Samuel 25 is a bit of an obscure story, but one of my favourite biblical stories about peacemaking.[[4]](#footnote-4) Partly this is because it’s rather unexpected and surprising. This story takes place before David is king of Israel, but after he has already been anointed by the prophet Samuel. So he is known to be the next king of Israel. As we heard in our Scripture reading, Abigail, a woman described as “clever and beautiful,” is married to Nabal, a man who is reportedly “surly and mean” (I Sam. 25:3, NRSV). Not-yet-king David is travelling through Nabal’s territory with a small army, and he sends a message to Nabal. It begins, “Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have.” David continues by asking that since he and his army have protected and provided for Nabal’s shepherds and sheep while travelling through, could Nabal provide them with a feast? In other words, having acted honourably toward and protected Nabal’s property and servants, David and his men ask for his hospitality in return – something very common in their hospitality-based culture. But Nabal refuses to provide a feast for them, since they are strangers and nobodies as far as he’s concerned. Upon hearing this message, David is furious, and issues his orders: “Every man strap on his sword!” And his 400-person army obeys.

But one of the servants lets Abigail know about her husband’s insulting behaviour towards David, the way he returned “evil for good,” and she acts quickly to right the situation. She gathers a feast’s-worth of food, loads it onto donkeys, and rides out herself on a donkey to meet David and his soldiers. She apologizes profusely, asks for David’s forgiveness, and reminds David that Nabal lives up to his name (which means “folly”). She assures David that she did not see the messengers he sent—otherwise, the response would have been much different. Interestingly, she makes her case theologically, telling David that God “has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand” and that God will bless him in the future because he “shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself” (vv. 26, 30-31).

And Abigail’s ingenious speech (or is it a sermon?) – one of the longest uttered by a woman in the Old Testament – about how it would be against God’s will for David to carry out his plan of violently attacking Nabal’s household is so masterfully argued and delivered so diplomatically that he’s immediately and wholeheartedly convinced. He even speaks of Abigail as God’s own emissary.

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today!” David says to Abigail. “Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from bloodguilt and from avenging myself by my own hand! For as surely as the Lord the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there would not have been left to Nabal so much as one male” (vv. 32-34).

So instead of slaughtering Abigail and her whole household, David and his army share the feast that she provides for them. David’s farewell words to her are: “Go up to your house in peace; see, I have heeded your voice, and I have granted your petition.”

Abigail returns to her house and eventually tells her husband about how she made peace with David and prevented his army from unleashing violence upon them. Nabal is so shocked that “his heart died within him; he became like a stone.” He dies ten days later, leaving Abigail free, in a strange twist, to become David’s wife—or rather, one of David’s wives. She clearly made quite an impression on him!

I find that this story surprises us in a few different ways. For one thing, Abigail, a woman, is held up in this story as a wise, courageous, and defiant peacemaker – even David praises her “good sense.” She takes initiative (and defies her husband) to prevent the disaster which her husband’s foolishness (i.e., macho posturing) has brought on their entire household, and she takes the considerable risk of meeting David and his army of 400 in person (which her husband never did) to speak convincingly about peace and to offer a delicious feast (of bread, wine, mutton, raisins, and figs!). Armed only with words and food, Abigail faces an army! What a beautiful example of the love of enemies in action! In this way, amazingly, she makes peace and she ends up feasting with David and his army instead of becoming a helpless and tragic victim of their violence.

It is she who teaches David about peace in this story, and peace is here understood as a sign of good leadership. Remember, David was waiting to be king, and this story is sandwiched between two of his encounters with Saul, the present Israelite king who feels extremely threatened by David and is out to kill him. This is why David is wandering around the countryside. He’s hiding from King Saul. But in both stories of encountering Saul, David actually spares Saul’s life. He has a chance to kill him, but doesn’t. Even Saul recognizes that this reveals David’s good character, saying to David, “You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil” (I Sam. 24:17). Perhaps David needed a reminder from Abigail in between that violence is not the answer – perhaps her influence can be credited for David sparing Saul’s life that second time.

Of course, this isn’t to say that David was a fully nonviolent king! No, there was plenty of violence and war in his life, not to mention his later abuse of power and deplorable treatment of Bathsheba and her first husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11). But isn’t it interesting to see a story of peacemaking – of violent vengeance averted by feasting – with a woman as the protagonist correcting the future king David in this part of the Bible, during this era of ancient Israelite history? Our assumptions as Christians are sometimes that the Old Testament is a bit of a bloodbath, and then we get to the New Testament where peace is introduced as a new concept. Well, that’s simply not true, and slips into Christian supersessionism (the belief that Christians replaced Jews as the chosen people of God). This story and others like it reveal that “Old Testament” and “peace” is not an oxymoron, but that there is a thread of pacifism, nonviolence, or peace theology that is unquestionably rooted in the Jewish tradition (and thus runs throughout the entire Bible, not just the New Testament). In this way, we can think of Abigail as a forbear in faith—a fellow peacemaker in the tradition of Jewish pacifism—to Someone in the later lineage of David who also rode on a donkey, feasted instead of fighting, spoke eloquently of peace, and (admittedly, much more famously) advocated the love of enemies. Someone who declared, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

So how might we live out this story and this beatitude today? How can we make peace in our time and place, which includes the tragedy of bulletproof backpacks for little schoolchildren? Well, this story teaches us a few things about peacemaking that can help us think of ways to make peace in our own lives.

1. **Peacemaking takes imagination.** You can see the spiral of violence at work in David’s initial reaction to Nabal in the story. David’s reaction to Nabal’s rudeness is violence – they have to avenge their honour! – but Abigail convinces him that another way is possible. In his book *The Moral Imagination*, peacebuilder John Paul Lederach talks about peacemaking as engaging our creativity and imagination: we “must have a foot in what is and a foot beyond what exists” that allows us to take the “risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.”[[5]](#footnote-5) We have to be able to step outside of the assumption that peace is not possible, and to imagine a world beyond violence.
2. **Anyone can make peace.**

Abigail’s story teaches us that peacemaking is accessible to anyone and everyone. We can all be peacemakers wherever we find ourselves. If she, as a woman in a patriarchal context, can prevent violence through hosting a feast – armed with only a generous hospitality, then we are capable of similar acts of peace. As important as it is to promote global peace and to support government policies and legislation that make for peace, we are also empowered, like Abigail, to make peace in our daily lives, using ordinary means. I’m reminded of that saying, “If you have more than you need, build a longer table, not a higher fence.” That’s everyday peacemaking in action.

1. **Peacemaking means we resemble God.**

We haven’t spent much time this morning discussing the second half of our parable – “for they will be called children of God.” There are actually a couple of layers of meaning to this phrase. In one sense, it means that those who are peacemakers will resemble God, the way that children resemble and take after their parents. But, in another sense, to be “children of God” or “sons of God” ties into an ancient way of speaking about kings or those in leadership. We saw this in the story of Abigail as well, in that her initiative in making peace leads to a position within what will soon be the royal household of Israel. For our context today, I take this to mean that those who make peace are good leaders, good examples for the rest of us as to following God’s way of peace or shalom. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will become children of God.

Please join me in a closing prayer from Joanna Harader, Pastor at Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, KS:

From the violent actions of others,  
From the violence of our systems,  
From the violence within our own hearts,  
Prince of Peace, save us.

For our weapons and our walls,  
For our raids and our cells,  
For the fear and hatred we harbor,  
God of love, forgive us.

In our exhaustion,  
In our confusion,  
In our anger,  
Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.

By your wisdom,  
With your love,  
In your power,  
Holy Spirit, lead us forward. Amen.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Benediction from Pastor Anna Blaedel:[[7]](#footnote-7)

blessed are we when we stay tender.  
blessed are we when we stay fierce.  
blessed are we when we dare to imagine repair, and transformation.  
blessed are we when we labor together to make it so. AMEN

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/08/12/covered-disney-princesses-bulletproof-inside-booming-business-everyday-ballistic-gear/?noredirect=on> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, Third Ed. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brian Walsh, <http://empireremixed.com/2017/07/19/beyond-smugness-beatitudes/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://canadianmennonite.org/blogs/susie-guenther-loewen/abigail-peacemaker> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 2005), x. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Joanna Harader, pastor of Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, KS, <https://revgalblogpals.org/2019/08/10/saturday-prayer-25/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2018/10/10/blessed-are-you/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)