**Being People of Peace - Peace Sunday**

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**NPMC, Nov. 12, 2017**

**Scripture: Matthew 5:39-48 and Jeremiah 29:4-7**

This weekend, we mark Remembrance Day in Canada – a day to remember those who sacrificed and lost their lives during times of war. As an Anabaptist-Mennonite and as a parent, I always get a bit nervous around this time of year, especially now that our son is in preschool, because I’m not sure what kinds of messages he’ll get at school about war and peace. For some, Remembrance Day and wearing the poppy is about names the tragedy of war and the hope of “never again” – the hope of an end to war, but for others, Remembrance Day can be about glorifying war and only seeing honor in military might. As a member of the Mennonite church, one of the historic peace churches which has been pacifist for 500 years, the latter message makes me profoundly uncomfortable.

Though not all early Anabaptists were pacifists, it was established as a common belief among many of them quite early on in the movement. In the Schleitheim Confession of 1527 – the first statement of shared Anabaptist beliefs, written just two years after the first adult baptisms marked the beginning of Anabaptism – there is already an article stating that the use of “the sword” is “outside the perfection of Christ.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The prominent early Anabaptist leader Menno Simons also wrote often about how Christians are called to follow Jesus’ example and teachings to love their enemies rather than fight them. He writes, “The regenerated do not go to war, nor engage in strife.  They are children of peace who have beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning forks, and know no war.” “...Christ is our fortress; patience our weapon of defense; the Word of God our sword.  ...Iron and metal spears and swords we leave to those who, alas, regard human blood and swine’s blood of well-nigh equal value.” Strong words, and perhaps all the more so when one considers that these were not written to a people in a time of peace, who were unfamiliar with violence, but to a group which was being fiercely and cruelly persecuted and martyred. Elsewhere in his writings, Menno spells out how even in that context, Mennonites – and really, all followers of Jesus – were not to respond to violence with further violence. They were to be people of God’s peace (and we’ll sing a hymn with Menno’s words by this title following the sermon – HWB 407). As he puts it, “All Christians are commanded to love their enemies; to do good unto those who abuse and persecute them; to give the mantle when the cloak is taken, the other cheek when one is struck. Tell me, how can a Christian defend scripturally retaliation, rebellion, war, striking, slaying, torturing, stealing, robbing and plundering and burning cities, and conquering countries?’ … ‘Therefore we desire not to break this peace, but by [God’s] great power … to walk in this grace and peace, unchangeably and unwaveringly unto death.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Now, given the context of persecution and martyrdom, this understanding of pacifism as nonresistance to evil and violence makes some sense. Being a small, politically powerless minority facing condemnation and death for their convictions, they essentially had little choice but to place themselves in God’s hands and submit to their fates. For this group at this time in history, Jesus’ call to love enemies was seen as a call not to resist when they encountered violence and unjust death. That’s how they understood peace – but is that what Jesus’ teachings and example really call us to?

I want to return to Menno’s statements about loving enemies, giving one’s garments, and turning the other cheek. These statements are references to Scripture – specifically, to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. There, as we heard, Jesus counsels his listeners, saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you” (Matt. 5:38-42). Now these famous words are found among the so-called “hard sayings” of Jesus’ – teachings of his that are really difficult to put into practice – they really call us to go above and beyond, to go the extra mile, so to speak. We often understand these as calling for a passive response when we are wronged – to allow the person to continue to hurt us, as a kind of masochistic call to prolonged suffering. But biblical scholar Walter Wink had a different interpretation which filled in the cultural or contextual nuances that Jesus’ original audience would have heard between the lines here, but which we have forgotten.

Mennonite theologian Denny Weaver summarizes Wink’s position in this way: “The teaching and life of Jesus show that the objectives of the reign of God are not accomplished by violence. Rejection of violence, however, need not be interpreted as passivity. Walter Wink has suggested that far from counseling passivity, Jesus’ statements about turning the other cheek, giving the cloak, and going the second mile … actually teach an assertive and confrontational nonviolence that provides an opponent with an opportunity for transformation.” Let me explain:

1. Turning the other cheek was not about asking for more violence. – if someone struck one on the right cheek, they were striking one with the back of their hand, which in that context, was meant to humiliate and assert the superiority of the striker over a person. To turn the other cheek was to assert one’s personhood or humanity, since turning the other (left) cheek forced the aggressor to use his/her right hand, which was a sign of equality within that context.
2. Giving one’s cloak was not about sacrificing one’s own needs for an enemy. – Similarly, giving one’s cloak to the one who sued for one’s coat had a specific meaning in that context. Hebrew law allowed a creditor to take the coat as promise of payment from someone who had no other way to pay their debt (Deut. 24). Giving one’s cloak left one naked in court, and “in that society, the shame of nakedness fell more on those viewing it … than on the naked person.” This had the effect of publicly exposing and shaming the exploitative injustice of a wealthier person suing someone whose most valuable possession was a coat.
3. Walking the second mile was not about “being nice” to the Roman occupiers. – Finally, walking a second mile with a Roman soldier’s “burden” put the soldier in the awkward position of begging for it to be returned, since he was only legally permitted to make a civilian carry a heavy load for one mile.[[3]](#footnote-3) Going the second mile was thus an act of civil disobedience, causing the soldier to break the law.

Read this way, we can start to see that these instructions of Jesus’ are not about passively allowing violence to be done – they’re actually strategies to interrupt patterns of violence through nonviolent resistance and creative confrontation in the spirit of reconciliation and restorative justice. Seen in this light, Jesus’ previous words to “not resist an evildoer” are understood as meaning, do not *violently* resist an evildoer – do not take “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” in the spirit of vengeance. In other words, do not respond to evil with further evil – “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,” as Paul says in Romans 12:21. This emphasis already takes us away from nonresistance as passivity in the face of violence, to a more active understanding of overcoming evil through nonviolent means. In this way, Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies, which follows the teachings about the cheek, cloak, and second mile, is likewise not about submitting to one’s enemies, but about actively responding with love, not hatred or retaliatory violence.

Jesus ends this section by calling his followers to imitate God’s love for everyone, saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Perfect? Really? No wonder many Christians have dismissed Jesus’ call to love enemies as unrealistic! But perfect in the original Greek here did not mean flawless, but rather had more of the sense of being “complete” or “full-grown” or mature.[[4]](#footnote-4) Those who have matured in their Christian journey would thus go beyond the bare minimum of cultural or social custom to imitate God in loving not only their neighbours, but also their enemies. In other words, Jesus here calls us to go beyond our own comfortable circles of family and friends, and love those who are different from us, whom we are told to consider our enemies.

But as much as I value the peace theology of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and the seriousness with which it takes these “hard sayings” of Jesus’, I think they remain “hard sayings” – they’re certainly not easy to put into practice. Mennonites have struggled with this, too, with feeling torn between responsibility to resist violence and the call to be people of peace. As Anabaptist-Mennonites migrated to various places, their peace stance mainly took the form of refusing military service, often making this a condition of coming to settle in a given country. But questions about responsibility and pacifism became more complex as Mennonites ceased being a politically/economically powerless or persecuted group, and instead became an isolated, mono-ethnic group. Was it enough to simply refuse military service for our Mennonite men – to only ensure peace for ourselves and our communities? Did we have a responsibility to contribute to peace in our wider society? In my own extended family in southern Manitoba, these questions became central during World War II, during which two of my great-uncles chose to enlist in the Canadian military and two chose to serve as conscientious objectors, after defending their Mennonite pacifism in court.[[5]](#footnote-5) Maybe there were similar splits among Mennonites here in Saskatchewan. This was a key moment in Mennonite history when the former stance of nonresistance started to seem inadequate and simplistic.

Even by biblical standards, nonresistance seems like an abdication of our responsibilities to the wider community and society. The Israelite people are constantly being called to stop worrying so much about “insiders” and “outsiders” – to expand their view beyond family and clan and tribe alone. When the Israelites are in exile in Babylon, they are pining for the time when they had their own nation and their own land – when they had peace and security for themselves alone. But through the prophet Jeremiah, God sends them a message that they are to settle in Babylon and contribute to the peace of that society. Jeremiah writes, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Some other translations use the word “peace” in place of “welfare” in that final verse, so that it reads, “But seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its peace you will find your peace.” The word in Hebrew is of course shalom,[[6]](#footnote-6) that all-encompassing word meaning peace, health, right relationship, and meeting everyone’s needs. Imagine, being called to seek the peace or shalom of a people who conquered your nation and carried you off into exile! Here we again have love of enemies spelled out – and in the Hebrew Scriptures, no less. And it’s not something passive, but an active seeking of peace for the whole city. It’s a call to make one’s life in diverse community and seek shalom for all people, not just those belonging to one’s own clan. It’s a recognition that, as Friedrich Buechner wrote, “there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Mennonite theologian Denny Weaver comes to this realization too, and calls himself “a recovering nonresistant Mennonite.” [[8]](#footnote-8) He remembers conversations in the late 1950s and 60s among Mennonites in the U.S. over whether or not Martin Luther King Jr.’s activism during the civil rights movement was faithful to Jesus’ call and example, which most Mennonites still believed was one of nonresistance. Was King going too far with his nonviolent resistance to and confrontation of racial injustice? Weaver concludes,

The recognition that there are systemic forms of violence such as racism (as well as sexism, patriarchy, poverty, and more) makes clear that why the principle of nonresistance is no longer an adequate peace stance. . . . Nonresistance can have a powerful impact when it constitutes a refusal to reply to evil and violence with another evil and violent act. It means little, however, in the face of systemic violence such as racism or poverty. In fact, to refuse to resist in that context is to accept the status quo and its violence.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In other words, Weaver believes that King’s nonviolent resistance is absolutely faithful to Jesus’ call to love enemies, because Jesus calls us not to passivity in the face of evil and violence, but to active peacemaking. Through his nonviolent resistance, King was seeking the peace of the city.

What Weaver, King, and other advocates of nonviolence and peacemaking call us to do is to expand our definitions of violence beyond war alone, to encompass other forms of injustice and harm, which in turn call us beyond simple refusal of military service to the creative and dynamic work of peacemaking. Mennonite theologian Carol Penner points out, for instance, that despite being a historic peace church, Mennonites have not historically considered abuse or violence against women a peace issue. Most of the focus has remained on conscientious objection to war, which has been an exclusively male experience. She invites us to expand our Mennonite understandings of violence and peace to address violence within families, writing, “Some writers have characterized patriarchy as a ‘war against women.’ In the face of this violence, who will be the new conscientious objectors?”[[10]](#footnote-10)

So while we may not be facing the military draft these days in our country, there are other ways in which we can and already do conscientiously object to various forms of violence – or rather, in which we take on the responsibility to make peace. Some of it is simply through our dollars going to support peace education work through Mennonite Central Committee, or Christian Peacemaker Teams in various places of conflict. Some is through our ongoing efforts at participating in the reconciliation process between settlers and Indigenous peoples, or supporting the Micah restorative justice program here in Saskatchewan. Some of it is through building relationships with our Muslim neighbours here in Saskatoon, or modeling and teaching peace to the children in our lives. These efforts are not easy. They require us to pay attention to society and the world around us, to be able to identify and name injustice and violence. They require us to no longer be satisfied with peace just for ourselves, but to courageously insist on peace for everyone. Perhaps most difficult of all, they require us to cultivate peace within ourselves, so that we act not only out of rage against what is broken (though there is a place for anger), but also out of a hope for the peace, the shalom, that could be. In these ways, with God’s help, we can honour our Anabaptist history as a peace church and yet reinvent and reimagine it for our time and place. And then we will truly be people of God’s peace. AMEN

1. See http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Schleitheim\_Confession\_(source)http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Schleitheim\_Confession\_(source)#We\_have\_been\_united\_as\_follows\_concerning\_the\_sword [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Menno Simons quoted in: Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1973),56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. J. Denny Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 37-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://biblehub.com/greek/5046.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Two of my great uncles are interviewed in the film, *The Pacifist Who Went to War* (National Film Board), http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/en/our-collection/?idfilm=51136 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://biblehub.com/text/jeremiah/29-7.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quoted in: https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/risk-of-birth-2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J. Denny Weaver, “Response to Reflections on *The Nonviolent Atonement*,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity* (Telford, PA: Pandora U.S./Scottdale: Herald Press, 2000), 140-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Carol J. Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women” (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael’s College, 1999), 180, 14, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)