



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

Sermon

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A Premise for Peace

Scripture: Gen. 1:1-13; John 1:1-5,14,17; Romans 12:9-21

[It has been a discouraging week for the prospects of world peace, and I have too much to say. For one, you may be surprised by the percentage of US Mennonites who voted for the war president.]

Today, in the world of MC Canada, it is Peace Sunday! And, we need to talk about Peace.

We are a peace church, and that choice is dynamic and not static; it is a constant choice, and we need to be equipped and informed to continue making that choice. Thus, we need to periodically hear the message of Peace, and of course, this includes what the Bible declares about peacemaking.

Wes Jackson of the Land Institute, once said that we need to preach to the choir! And, that is what I'm going to do.

Before I begin, I do want to clarify that I define Peace in the Old Testament sense, which is Shalom: wholeness, completeness, wellbeing and living in harmony with creation, *which includes humans*. [Jos. 9:15; I Kings 51:12] Therefore, Peacemaking embraces all aspects of life, including: relationships, the environment, justice issues, and of course war. I'm going to focus on war, because there is an ugly war going on in the world today, and, who knows, we Canadian peacemakers may someday have to face tough decisions. Nevertheless, please

remember Peace means much more than the cessation of hostility. Peace, really isn't the opposite of war. War is destruction, and the opposite to that is construction /creation and art.

Compared to war, the way of peace seems so obvious and simple: we know that war is destruction, killing and horror; we affirm the golden rule, and we teach our children to resolve their differences and to not hit back, so then why do nations use war to solve their conflicts? And, doesn't it make more sense to turn an enemy into a friend, then try to defeat or destroy him or is that just naive thinking?

I guess I was pretty naive during my first year at college when I met George. Now, keep in mind this was a while ago, back in the early 70's, and at that time, in the US, there was still a fair amount of racial tension, and George was black (which was the politically correct designation at that time). In fact George was a militant Black, and a member of a radical Black fraternity, call Alpha Phi Alpha. They weren't recognized by the college, so George lived in a dorm, the room next to mine.

As it happened, one day, I made the mistake of talking to George and laughing at his silly hat. And, I did that in front of his "brothers." *Remember that I was naive*. George didn't want to look bad, so he commenced to do physical harm to my body, in spite of my gushing apology.

George was very huge “incredible hulk” huge! I responded as any nice, middle class church kid would, and said, “okay, I quit; you win.” George, was bouncing on my folded in two body, and yelled back, “What’s this, ‘I quit’ stuff; this ain’t the suburbs.” Fortunately, before my back was broken, others arrived to my rescue, and restrained George. I again offered my apologies, but George answered with the threat, “I’ll get you,” as he walked away.

The next few weeks were very harrowing, full of close calls and intimidating threats. And, to each one, I would respond, “George, let’s work this out; I want to be your friend.” On one occasion, I was playing pool at the student centre when George sneaked up behind me, and broke a cue stick over my back as I was aiming for a shot. I WAS silent after that encounter.

Finally, not long after that, I was in the dorm one afternoon, and it was very quiet and empty, I walked into the washroom, and low and behold there was George, all alone, and very occupied in one of the stalls. I walked up to the stall’s door, and said, “George, I want to be your friend.” I can’t repeat what he said, but the essence was – he wanted me to leave. I stood firm and replied that I wouldn’t leave until we were friends. This banter went on for a couple of minutes, until George, suddenly, in an uncommonly quiet voice asked, “why do you want to be my friend.” I answered, “I was taught that God wants us to love everybody, and I’m trying to; I want to; I want to be your friend.” Again, in a small voice he replied, “will you leave, if I promise to be your friend?”

We became the best of friends. His name is George Dixon. I learned that day, that it may take time and effort to befriend an enemy, but it is possible, and it is worth it.

That story was an appeal to reason, but we are in church and need to hear what the Bible says on Peacemaking.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.

Ah! the opening lines of Genesis; the first verse of the Bible, and already so **much** is said.

From the beginning God created! This is unique. This is very special, especially when contrasted with the stories from other religions on how all things were formed. The Babylonian story about the formation of life is older than the Genesis stories. It is called the Epic of Gilgamesh, and in that account the beginning is a battle between gods, and Marduk, the Sun God, prevails. Instead of God creating out of nothing – Ex Nihilo, the Babylonian world begins with war and

destruction. Quite a contrast, and it is worth noting! In addition, to snub the Babylonians, the seven day story of creation declares that the Hebrew God existed before the sun, and in fact even created the Sun – their god. Wow, what a slam.

In essence it is saying, “you can have your god from war; our God, who creates instead of destroys, is bigger and better.”

Other religions, such as Greek, Roman and Norse have a beginning of time mythology based on a battle or confrontation that all start from war. Even Buddha, declared that he had a dream about the beginning of life, and it was a battle scene between good and evil. The first declaration for Jews, Christians and Muslims is God, and not war, and it is a God who created all things, nothing was destroyed all was made new by God. This we believe and hold dear to our heart, and this essence of God was exposed further by John who wrote:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God, and this word was light for all people, and the darkness did not overcome the light.”

And, we know that this word, this light, is Christ. So, from the beginning there existed the Messianic seed/ an aspect/ a redeeming, loving nature of God that is the source of our redemption. However, we don’t have to wait until the Gospel of John to discover this. In Genesis, God’s compassion and grace is revealed in how God dealt with Adam and Eve. God warned them of the dangers of wanting to claim ownership of the knowledge of good and evil, and that consequence was death! **But, they didn’t die.** This is the first example of grace, and it is only the 3rd Chapter. This is quite revealing of our weakness and God’s nature. Just as fascinating is that we are created in God’s image; we are a reflection of God, and we are to live that reflection.

Throughout the Bible, we are challenged to live by God’s standards and passions, and this way of life is further defined in the New Testament with the examples and teachings of Christ. For example, in Romans 12, Paul exhorts us, to be like Christ. And, those who answer this call to be Christ-like were called Christians. A label we claim, but should claim us.

In verses 9-21 of Romans 12, Paul cites examples of what it means to be Christ like. Listen to some of them:

- Love one another and hold fast to what is good, but hate the evil.

- Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer.
- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. If we take this to heart, how should we respond to terrorists?

Continuing:

- Live in harmony with one another; don't be arrogant, and associate with the weak and powerless. I do believe most wars could be avoided if we practised this.

Paul goes on, as far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all, and do not repay evil with evil. Never seek vengeance allow God to take care of the judgment business, and do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. This, too, is pretty clear, and makes it hard to justify war, because war is very judgmental, as is killing and destruction. **War is evil.**

Paul highlights some of the attributes of being a Christian, and these attributes are the way of peacemaking. Peacemaking is proactive, and not passive. We, by mandate and example, are called to be aggressive and bold in our peacemaking. When there is war, injustice and violence in our world, we do not have permission to be **"the quiet in the land."** Perhaps we can reclaim our heritage of the early Anabaptists who boldly proclaimed what they believed?

Jesus was very profound and confrontational, and Jesus reveals that "violent fight or flight" are NOT the only options to evil aggression; there is another way. Walter Wink called it the "Third Way." The third way is the way of Christ; proclaimed in Isaiah, and lived by many including: Buddha, St. Francis, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. The third way or the **Christ** way is peacemaking; it is being creative and proactive for good. It is confronting evil, exposing evil. Christ's way / peacemaking is striving to transform injustice and the ugly to justice and righteousness.

And, this way most definitely includes the use of force, but not violence.

Jesus stressed in Matthew 5:39, that we are NOT to stand in a battle line and fight as the Roman soldiers do, which is called STENAI in the Greek. But instead, Jesus implored us to do "Anti-Stenai." *Stenai is usually poorly translated using the word "resist."*

When confronted with evil, we are not to "Stand and fight" as soldiers do. In other words, "Don't fight violence with violence." Respond to it in creative ways to confront violent aggression. Then Jesus goes on and gives three examples. We'll look at two of them:

To be struck on the right cheek is another way of saying being insulted with the slap of the back of the hand – it is demeaning affront. So Jesus presents: when insulted with a back of the hand slap to the right cheek don't accept the devaluing insult. Dare the aggressor to treat you as an equal, and hit you with a fist on the left cheek. Mind you this takes a lot of bravery, and faith in God. Don't ever think it is cowardly to be a peacemaker. The way of Christ requires more fortitude and faith in God, than carrying a gun and shooting back. Jesus declares that we not submit to evil aggression, but we stand our ground and demand to be an equal, and thus expose the injustice and assault for all to see. *This is a message for all who have been abused.*

Then Jesus said, be sly and creative as you confront evil. For example, in those days the rich would exploit the poor and legally take all their property, including their coats. *Of course that doesn't happen today.* Jesus suggests if this happens then, give the antagonist you under garments too, rendering yourself naked. WHY do such a thing?

Well in those days, it was shameful to look at someone naked. So, therefore the antagonist will be shamed, and when the rest of the community sees that he took your under garments, also, they will shame him even further for being so cruel. Sly..... and creative!

These creative, proactive responses are often called Transforming initiatives. This is the way of Christ. And, it is the way of being Christ like. It is peacemaking and it is biblical. Nevertheless, many respond with, "well look what happened to Christ, and it is a nice ideal, but it isn't practical, and besides what about all those passages in the old testament that present God doing war?"

About the Old Testament:

To begin with, we must not gloss over the countless passages that demand that we do justice, righteous, and hospitality, and we must recall the re-occurring theme that we seek peace, beat our swords in the ploughshares and adopt God's desire that the wolf and lamb live together. The peace position is very prominent in the Old Testament. However, the books of Joshua and Judges do seem to contradict this with their citations of God leading the Hebrews in Battle.

My inclination is to take these as faith stories, just as a football player credits God for a victory or a great achievement. *I really don't think God cares who wins a football game*, but praising God for a victory is a nice faith gesture. But, let's take these "uncomfortable passages" literally.

Something we really don't do with most of the Bible. For example, it states that it is wrong it wear clothing of mixed fabric, and we respond – oh well.

But for an exercise, let's take them literally. Joshua and Judges present what we would call "holy war." The Bible calls it **Yahweh's war**. And, the Bible presents a clear criteria on how to do a Holy war.

Here are the rules:

God is doing the leading, and arranges all the battle conditions. This is very different than asking God to bless our troops and our cause.

God selects all the soldiers, as seen with Gideon and in "Deborah's Song." And, underline this – there is a strict code of piety and abstinence for all the soldiers to follow, which includes abstaining from sex.

God demands total reliance on God, and not on human instruments of war.

There is a ban on profiting from the victory and no pillage is allowed. No one is to benefit financially from the war. NO oil pipelines.

I dare say, that we have NOT and never will see those conditions met yet - that is how an Old Testament God sanctioned war was done.

Therefore, all others were and are not of God.

Even so, I read the Old Testament with the light that John refers to. I see the Old Testament pointing to a better understanding of God, as clarified by Christ. John Howard Yoder put it this way: "A parent will tell a 4 year old, 'never touch matches,' yet will say to a 14 year old, 'go get the matches to start the fire.'" The element that has changed is the child's competency. Thanks to **most** of the biblical writers and the way of Christ, we are wiser now, than in the times of the Canaanite conquest.

In spite of the Biblical message of peace, most people will concede that peacemaking is not practical. Well, ending violence with violence sure doesn't make sense to me. But, maybe the way of peace isn't easy and realistic? Salvation is not realistic; Grace is not realistic, and our concept of heaven is not realistic. Moreover, we are called to "kingdom" living and to follow Christ's example to love all, and to trust in God. Dare we dilute the Gospel message? Dare we not love everyone and bless those who persecute us? Dare we qualify and limit what God has clearly called us to?

This is my understanding, and what I feel God has led me to believe. And this belief may be costly. It cost Christ his life. The world rejected Christ, and he was killed. Jesus the Christ, was

completely obedient to God; he demonstrated peace on earth, and he was killed. Yet, God did an amazing thing **again**. God created something new: Jesus was resurrected / made new. And, by doing so, God affirmed the way of Christ, and declared, "Evil cannot win." In the end, the way of peace prevails, and this is God's hope and invitation to all people: to discover and receive "wholeness" / peace, and to allow God to create the NEW in each of us.

With that said, let me say a bit more on Peacemaking:

Derived from Matthew 5 and Romans 12, and other passages, here are some basic steps of Peacemaking and conflict resolution:

Repent – acknowledge one's own weakness and sin, and seek God's grace and redemption, and grant grace and redemption.

Go / talk / seek reconciliation. Much can be resolved through honest communication.

[Terrorism decreases when there is dialogue]

Don't respond vengefully and violently, but rather take transforming initiatives. I'll give a couple of examples of transforming initiatives in a moment.

Associate with the lowly, the weak and powerless. By doing so, we can keep things in perspective, and we may learn the value of doing justice and not exploiting the weak. And, we may not be so arrogant and judgmental!

Love your enemies and affirm their valid interests, and this includes praying for them.

[Matt. 5:44; Rm 12:15]. Saddam Hussein tried to negotiate with the US before they attacked. The US wasn't willing to listen, but was willing to go to war—a sad testimony.

And, it should be emphasized that Peacemaking strives to avoid the "flash point." Peacemaking seeks to prevent the planting of seeds of anger and hate that causes war.

Moreover, **I am convinced that every single war could have been avoided**. Yet, the parties involved were blinded by selfishness and lust, which James said, in chapter 4, is the cause of war. If war could have been avoided, then war is horror, the ultimate in destruction. WAR is so UN-God that it is an abomination. Yet, in all fairness to the political powers, I must, say that sometimes violent conflict / war has been avoided, when there has been a willingness to do **transforming initiatives**.

Two examples:

First, in the 1950's Austria was separate just as Germany was. The Soviets controlled 1/3 of it, and the Americans controlled the rest. An advisor suggested to President Eisenhower that

maybe if they talked to the Soviets, and ask them if they would pull out of their 1/3, then the US would withdraw from their 2/3s of Austria, allowing Austria to be free, and the US would promise not to put any NATO weapons there. Secretary Of State John Dulles was convinced that the Soviets were bent on world domination and would never agree to such a thing. The truth was that the USSR was mostly concerned about its own security, and wanted to occupy Austria as a buffer zone. Eisenhower, at first sceptical, decided to give it a try, and the Soviets were given the offer, **and they accepted!** By taking transforming initiatives, Austria became a free country 30 some years before Germany did.

The second example is the time of 1989-90. During that period, 14 nations, 1.7 billion people underwent non-violent revolutions, and all but one were successful; China's didn't succeed. This was the period of the fall of the Berlin wall and the Soviet Union, and the unification of Germany, and it didn't happened because the US made more weapons, as the myth goes. It was the result of years of peacemakers working behind the scenes, using computers, establishing an under ground communication system, developing new leaders for when change came, and by the people calling their leaders to repent and change. *I know this, because I was part of the peacemaking network in the late 1980s that was working with those behind the iron curtain.*

War can be avoided, and must be, because war is horrific, destructive, costly, and totally opposite to the love and grace of God. During the 20th Century, according the International Red Cross, over 90 million people were killed in war, and 2 trillion dollars was spent on armaments - money that could have been used to improve life. In addition, to the raw evil of killing, war is a complete failure. War never solves the problem of the conflict. Even, the Pentagon's war game computer decreed that a war on terrorism would fail. Besides, it is illogical. Terrorism is hate based, and war will only create more hate, thus more terrorism. Moreover, the conflict that caused WW II (which was really a continuation of WW I) was NOT solved by military victory. The generous and gracious Marshall Plan that created FRIENDS out of ENEMIES resolved it.

To be sure, the base evil in war is the killing. People are killed in war, people with names – men, women and children. As we approach November 11th, we hear the message that WAR is a necessary evil, and that those who died paid for our freedom. Let us grieve the deaths / the losses / and honour the fallen by NOT accepting evil as a response to evil. May we never

condone and sanction evil. And, may we not speak for the dead. I wonder, if the war dead could talk, what would they say? What would they say about their death? It seems, we always speak **for** them, **after the war**. And, if there is a cost of death to be paid, then why don't we establish that amount before we go to war?

And to America, today, I ask: how many deaths of your own sons and daughters and sons and daughters of others are worth the oil that is consumed in your monster SUVs? How many more must die? What is the acceptable cost? What is the acceptable cost? Because that is what it comes down to!

And, what about THAT ONE DEATH / the Death of Jesus? Haven't we learned from that death? What does bring peace? What is the source of our security and salvation?

War is NOT of God. God is in the Creating and Redeeming business, not the killing and destroying business. And, if we support war and the tools and agents of war, then we are directly responsible for the killing of the innocents. It is as if we hired someone to kill them.

I am a Mennonite. I am a member of the Peace Church, and I don't believe that God wants me to kill and do destruction, and that is why I'm a peacemaker. I will non-violently fight and die for peace and the love of God, but I won't kill for it, and I choose to trust God to do the judging and the vengeance. In addition, I do believe that Love is stronger than Hate, that we can turn enemies into friends, and that God calls us to be creative and to do love and peace, and NOT give up hope in God's unfolding kingdom.

God's way of peace may not seem practical, but even so, it is my faith, hope, and a passion that God has instilled in me, and besides, God didn't / hasn't given up on me. Dare I do less for others?

Our country may feel the hate of a terrorist attack; I hope not. But, if we do, then attitudes will change and the peace church will be challenged. We must be ready! We must live peace!

I'll end with this brief story: A Cherokee elder sitting with his grandchildren told them,

"In every life there is a terrible fight –a fight between two wolves. One is evil: he is fear, anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, and deceit. The other is good: joy, serenity, humility, confidence, generosity, truth, gentleness, and compassion." A child asked, "Grandfather, which wolf will win? The elder looked him in the eye, and replied, "The one you feed."