



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

Sermon

Author Peter Stucky
Church Colombia, South America
Date July 2003 (Assembly, St. Catharines)

This sermon is part of a larger sermon archive available as an inspirational resource to teachers, ministers and others of Mennonite Church Canada ©2005. Posted by permission of the author. May not be reproduced or redistributed. Permission to quote excerpts is granted.

What if Peace Prevailed?

Scripture: Phil 1.1-11

THANK YOU

Tonight we in Colombia wish to express our thanks to God for the life of Dr. Hector Valencia, who died this week. He was the husband of Mary Becker, one of the founding missionaries of the Mennonite work in Colombia. Hector was a brother who placed his life and gifts at the service of the Kingdom of God both in the Presbyterian and Mennonite churches of Colombia. He served as Secretary for Latin America of COM back in the 80s and many of you probably knew him. We are thankful to God for the gift of Hector's life.

It is a privilege for me to be able to thank you, the Canadian Mennonite Church for your interest, prayer and support of God's work in Colombia.

Back in the 50s, my father Gerald Stucky during his NA assignment would travel, sometimes for weeks at a time in Canada visiting churches with such exotic names as Swift Current, Rosthern, Altoona, etc, sharing with them of the missionary work in Colombia, at that time under the General Conference Board of Missions.

Thank you for the wonderful people you have sent: Alice Bachert, Margaret and George Ediger, John and Alma Wiebe, Ed & Linda Enns, Jack & Irene Suderman, Tim & MaryLou Schmucker, Scott & Mary Brubaker-Zehr, Brian & Julie Suderman, Bonnie Klassen, Rudy & Helen

Baergen all of whom have served as fraternal workers with us; for your support of church planters Gamaliel & Amanda Falla; for the many volunteers that have been with us for short periods under different programs, like the MENNO groups; for visiting professors, like Arnold Snyder, Rebecca Yoder, Titus Gunther, Helmuth Isaac; for folks associated with Christian Peacemaker Teams, and others.

Thank you for your offerings and financial support through the mission agencies as well as directly – seed support that has made possible many church projects.

Thank you for your solidarity in our times of trouble. A few years ago, due to our work in conscientious objection, the army tried to close down our Seminary, which provided a legal peace building alternative to military service for young men. But thanks to the prayers and letters and visits to the Colombian embassies in Ottawa and Washington by Mennonites of North America, the effort to close us down was overturned.

For all these things, and many more, may God reward and bless you.

WHAT IF PEACE CAME.

I have been asked to speak on the topic WHAT IF PEACE CAME... or perhaps better, HOW IS PEACE TO COME... based on Phil 1.1-11.

Please open your Bibles to this passage.

What would it take for peace to come? In Colombia, S.A. we live in a country at war, a 50 year old civil war, but in the midst of that war our churches are planting seeds of peace. The following examples come from our own church life in Colombia & specifically the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in downtown Bogotá, where I have the privilege of pastoring, but you can make your own applications.

The first thing we must realize is that peace is a gift of God. The apostle Paul writes to the Philippians: "Grace to you and peace from God..." (v.2) We need to ask God for this gift, in the same way that Jesus told us in Lk 11.13 to ask the heavenly Father to give us the Holy Spirit.

Ask yourself: "How will God's gift of peace come to me? In the Colombian Mennonite church we pray for God's gift of peace. We continue believing that peace is the will of God. One of our Colombian church members and peace workers told me recently that he was concerned that for the Mennonites of the North, the peace testimony has become a trophy won in the past, which Anabaptists of the North have placed on a shelf or in a trophy case to admire and remember. But he is concerned that they are no longer running the race – peace, instead of being in the centre of the gospel message has become for them a museum piece. In Colombia we continue believing that peace is the will of God, so we pray for it.

We pray for our own attitudes: do we want God's peace? When we pray for peace, maybe we will start believing in peace, maybe we will start believing in God's dream for the world that is expressed in Micah 4 and Isaiah 2 where the people of God start modeling just relations, where the economy is transformed from military industry into productive industries which bring life to people.

We pray for our government: that it may repent and practice justice for the poor and marginalized minorities...

We pray for the armed actors, both the legal and the illegal groups, that they may lay down their arms and abandon their violent ways.

We ask God for the church, that in these treacherous and turbulent waters we may have clarity and discernment and openness to God's purposes. The trick is to tune into what God is doing and cooperate with God and let God use us. When we do that, God may turn our world upside down, and embark us in unexpected

ministries.

We pray for the church's mission, which we understand to be the same as Jesus': "to seek and to save that which was lost".

And we pray for changes in people's lives, because conversion is a gift of God. In our church on any given Sunday morning, when we welcome visitors, it is typical for persons from different departments (provinces/ states) of Colombia to introduce themselves. They are people fleeing the violence in their areas. They have been displaced and have fled for their lives. They have arrived frightened and discouraged to a city of 7 million people to try to hide from their persecutors. Thanks to the ministries with displaced people of the different congregations and institutions, they are invited to church, most of the time by other displaced people. In our church they hear the Gospel, many of them for the first time. And the Spirit of God creates a great openness to the gift of God's salvation in Christ. When we invite them to give their lives to Christ, it is typical that one, five, eight, ten people accept God's gift of salvation and peace.

And it's not the sermon. One Sunday morning a while back, during the morning worship and prayer, before the sermon, the pastor invited people to receive the gift of salvation, and immediately people responded. It happens because God is calling people from all corners of our country and is using our church (and of course other churches too) to reach these people.

This of course has its challenges. In our congregation we are experiencing something akin to what the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians in 2.14: "For he [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

People arrive in our church like Alberto and Mary. Alberto, was a public official, in an outlying town. He was told by an insurgent group that he must give them public monies. He refused, saying that if he did that he would go to jail. They told him, he couldn't live there any more. They also warned him that his ten year old son was a candidate for recruitment for their insurgent forces. So Alberto and Mary fled and became displaced people, refugees in their own country. The insurgency made three attempts on his life. His wife Mary received a bullet in one of those attempts and survived. In our congregation, they learned to know Christ and their lives were changed. Recently they emigrated to start a new

life in a Mennonite Church in British Columbia.

Then there are people like Marlene who was a community leader in a city in the plains. There she and other leaders organized a low income housing project on a land takeover. It didn't take long for the city mayor and paramilitary thugs to come to threaten the people and to start killing the leaders. Marlene received a bullet in her leg and fled with her family. She too arrived at our church, learned to know Jesus and was baptized a few days ago.

So what is the dynamic we see? It is that folks persecuted by opposite sides of the conflict, who might have deep seated hatreds for the insurgents or for the paramilitary, – who are often regarded as working with government forces, – folks who may have even at one time sympathized with one side or another, are all becoming part of the same church, becoming brothers and sisters in Christ, baptized into one body and sharing in one Lord's supper. In a natural setting they might have a deep-seated fear and suspicion of each other. But in the church they have come to be not only sisters and brothers in Christ, but also friends and companions. This is the tangible result of praying for the gift of peace: for enemies to be reconciled in the body of Christ.

If you want peace, pray for God's gift of peace, but also work for it. That's why one of the sayings we have found helpful is this: "Pray as though everything depends on God; and work as though everything depends on you."

SOLIDARITY - What would it take for peace to come? The second thing we discover as we read this passage, in vss. 3-5 and 7 is Solidarity. We can't do it alone. Paul writes: "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now... It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." Paul felt the support and solidarity of the Philippian church in his trials.

In our church we have discovered the gift of community in all our proceedings. Solidarity means standing with, sharing with, participating with.

Due to very precarious economic conditions, we share groceries, work and income, companionship, soup, hardship. In a very hostile environment it is what gives us strength to live,

to laugh, to grow, to make peace tangible.

One of the most moving pastoral experiences we have in our church is sitting and listening to families who have been displaced but who, in this large city of Bogotá, continue to be hunted by killers of the right or of the left. They come looking for refuge, for help. We listen to them, we weep with them, we pray with them. They are very frightened. The first thing we tell them is that no one – the government, bodyguards, or anyone else – can guarantee their safety. Only God can do that. What they must do is place themselves under the spiritual cover of a community of faith. We tell them: we have had many people in situations of grave danger, but to the glory of God, we have lost none of those who have placed themselves under the cover of the congregation. The community of faith protects, advises, orients and prays for them.

And we look for solutions for their situations. It is here we must give thanks to the Canadian people and their gov't, to the Mennonite churches for offering a new home to hundreds of Colombians who due to the conflict and war in our country, have to flee their homes to save their lives. But when they continue to be persecuted and hunted down by hired assassins, the Canadian govt. and the Canadian churches have provided a haven for them by permitting them to have new life here in Canada. Some of them are here tonight. These have not come from Mennonite or even religious backgrounds, but they have fallen in love with the Mennonite Church through the testimony of solidarity. They are joining your churches and by the grace of God they will make important contributions to the life of your churches and to Canada. This is the work of the Spirit of God.

3rd, ASSUME THE RISK – PAY THE PRICE FOR THE GOSPEL OF PEACE – last part of vs 7: "all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." The gospel of peace requires risks, there is a price to pay.

In Colombia, both the Protestant and the Catholic churches have been paying that price. Martyrs Mirror continues to be written in the Christian churches of Colombia. Last year, as far as we know, there were 40 pastors and church leaders killed in Protestant churches alone. This year between January and June, according to Ricardo Esquivia, director of Justapaz, 28 have been assassinated, and another 9 have been reported killed...

Sometimes peacemakers are seen as an

uncomfortable presence. That's the way it should be in a world where violence makes money and brings power. Soon after the new President of Colombia took power last year, we became concerned about what we perceived as an inclination to solve our conflict more through warfare and arms buildup than dialogue, peace talks and changes. So in a public declaration published in the country's four major newspapers, the Anabaptist churches said, among other things, "We will continue seeking peace with justice for everyone, carrying out conversations and constructive action with any armed group which is willing to consider negotiated and nonviolent settlements to the problems of the country, which might lead to reconciliation."

We have felt that it is important to hold talks with all sides, so we do. The various armed groups have told us in different occasions, "We know who the Mennonites are." In Colombia it is important to have a consistent nonviolent witness, because we navigate in very treacherous and dangerous waters.

Can people in Canada say: "We know who the Mennonites are. We know them as committed people of peace who pray and work for peace; who demonstrate peace in the solidarity and unity lived out in their faith communities;; and they are the ones who run risks and pay the price for peace?"

PERSEVERANCE –vs. 6 says: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." What would it take for peace to

come? Perseverance. Paul says that God is not a quitter. Consequently God's children can't be quitters. God is carrying out His purposes in this world.

Our conflicts – and warfare – in Colombia are old. But our church is new. The peace witness is very new. But it has opened up dimensions of thinking and action undreamed of only 15 years ago.

Historically speaking the Gospel of Jesus is very new on earth. Christ is making all things new, and you and I and the Mennonite churches are invited to be a part of this new creation. But we must persevere.

CONCLUSION : How is peace to come? What would it take for peace to come?

- Prayer for God to send His precious gift of peace to us.
- Solidarity, to begin living peace in our own faith communities.
- Risk-taking for peace and willingness to pay the price
- Perseverance

Please stand with me and close your eyes. What would life look like under the rule of the Prince of Peace? Listen:

"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev.7.16-17)

Please join in giving our wonderful Prince of Peace a mighty hand of praise.