

Gary Harder, November 9, 2014

“Following Jesus into peace (Weaving peace threads)”

Texts: Joshua 6:15-21

Matthew 5: 9; 38-45

Ephesians 2: 14-17

Introduction

Today is a good day for a peace sermon, so I want to share with you my own personal convictions and understandings of Jesus way of peace. A whole group of anniversaries and stories converged for me to focus this sermon.

It is one hundred years since the beginning of World War 1, the first war to end all wars, the first war with the technology to leave millions of people dead.

It is exactly 25 years ago today that the Berlin Wall came down – a dividing wall that crumbled without a shot being fired.

In two days we will observe Remembrance Day. We will remember those who died in war. Our Remembrance Day ceremonies in Canada this year will no doubt remember Corporal Nathan Cirillo, shot to death guarding our National War Memorial. And we will remember the bullets flying in our Parliament building.

Canada now has 6 F 18 Jet fighters bombing Islamic Republic fighters. We are again at war, perhaps a rather “safe” war on our part – no ground troops. Is this the only way to challenge the rise of radicalized and brutal Jihadists?

Sang-Min Lee is a South Korean Mennonite. He is now in prison in South Korea, sentenced to an 18 month prison term for being a conscientious objector. Sang-Min Lee comes from a family with a strong military history. But he became a Mennonite, reading Jesus through Anabaptist eyes.

He writes, “Right before Jesus was arrested by soldiers, Peter tried to protect Jesus and cut off a soldiers ear with a sword. Jesus told Peter he could have called the angels to protect him. However, he chose not to. As a Christian, this is the most powerful Scripture for me and the reason I believe in Jesus Christ.”

The October (2014) issue of *The Mennonite* pictures Sang-Min Lee with a big smile on his face; he is smiling despite facing prison and a life-long designation of being a criminal.

Violence and Peace sometimes seem to be at war with each other in the Bible. It isn't easy to navigate the Bible on the issues of violence and peace. There are lots of stories of violence, sometimes extreme violence, in the Old Testament.

Take for example the story from Joshua 6. Didn't you just cringe when you heard the story of the fall of Jericho read earlier in this service? It almost seems as though God demands genocide. "Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys"

The text does say that it was Joshua who ordered this genocide, not God. But didn't Joshua act on behalf of God? Isn't Joshua one of our Biblical heroes? Gordon Matties, who wrote the Believers Church Commentary on Joshua, doesn't sugar coat the violence in the book. But he does place it into the context of its times. The words and phrasings used here are almost identical to that used by all Israel's neighbors and enemies. It was a common language of that context, and that culture, language borrowed from Israel's neighbours. This was kind of like a manual for war which all the nations subscribed to. It was a cultural manual often recited in a time of war – by everyone. Did the order for genocide really come from God? There is actually no historical or archeological evidence saying that this complete destruction ever happened.

None-the-less, reading the Old Testament wouldn't necessarily lead us easily to pacifism. And yet, there are also so many peace stories throughout the Old Testament to. Think of Elisha telling the King of Israel to feed the entire enemy army now at their mercy rather than killing them all as the King wants to do (2 Kings 6). Israel's king wants to slaughter them, now that they are at his mercy. Elisha throws them a banquet. The story ends with these words; "And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel." (2nd kings 23). They were served a banquet. They were no longer enemies.

Paul, in Romans 12, may have had this story in mind when he said, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them to drink" (Romans 12:20).

In my mind, there is an ongoing tension between the violence themes and the peace themes throughout the Bible. But I believe that the trajectory of this tension moves in the direction of peace, and culminates there with Jesus. There are threads of peace all through the O. T. that become woven into a beautiful peace quilt in the New Testament.

Jesus

We do need to look to Jesus to find our way to peace, and to find our way to a deep enough peace position. Our Anabaptist forbears did this. They looked to both the teaching of Jesus and to the life of Jesus to form their extremely radical peace position, a position which so deeply challenged both state churches that both the Catholics and Protestants persecuted them. What was behind their understanding of Jesus way of peace? And why was this such a threat to other Christians?

We start with the words of Jesus, the teaching that he left us. The central text for the Anabaptists was the Sermon on the Mount. For over a thousand years the church had said that Matthew chapters 5-7 did not apply to how Christians lived out their public responsibilities. Yes, perhaps the teachings of Jesus could apply to their personal lives, but certainly not to their public lives and their responsibilities to the state. The words of Jesus could not be taken literally. How in the world can you be a responsible citizen if you do what Jesus says? Surely that was not what Jesus meant.

But the Anabaptists said yes, these words should be taken literally, and yes, they did apply to how they lived as citizens, and yes, they would try to live by these words. They said that Jesus really did mean what he said. And so they refused to take up arms to defend themselves or to defend the state. But they took it a step further. Jesus had said, “blessed are the peacemakers”. It wasn’t enough to be peaceful, to avoid being violent. Followers of Jesus are called to make peace. How do you make peace? By loving your enemies and praying for them, further words from Jesus.

The old “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” bromide of the Old Testament is now fully replaced by dealing with an adversary in a totally new way. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also”. Theologian Walter Wink has opened a new insight on this text. (Let me demonstrate?) To strike you on your right cheek I have to use my back-hand, not meant to hurt you as much as to humiliate you. To hurt you I would hit you on your left cheek. If you turn your other cheek, to expose your left cheek, you have not given in in weakness, but have confronted me with strength. I, the aggressor, am humbled, and will ponder deeply what I have done.

Likewise when Jesus says “If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well”. This one is kind of humorous. Just think of that culture.

The cloak is your final body covering. Giving your cloak also would make you naked. But it is the one suing you for your cloak who would be humiliated and embarrassed, far more than you standing there naked. You have not given in. You have claimed your strength and your dignity, very peacefully, and your “enemy” is left humbled, and perhaps open to a more peaceful way of living.

So to when you willingly walk a second mile with a Roman soldier who forces you to carry his pack one mile, which by Roman law he is allowed to do. Instead of a sullen, angry giving in, the Roman soldier is met with cheerful second mile. The tables are turned. The soldier is non-plussed, no longer in control, no longer the superior. The follower of Jesus has not grudgingly given in, but has instead stood up to the soldier, but in a peaceful way.

We should not misunderstand Jesus as a pushover. He often confronted and challenged people, especially Israel’s religious leaders. He named sin. He named hypocrisy, often enraging the temple leaders. But he did so non-violently.

Being a peacemaker is not for the faint of heart.

There is so much in the Sermon on the Mount that challenges me so deeply. Not only does Jesus challenge us to love our enemies, he also challenges us to love our neighbours, those within our own community. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’.., but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council...So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

This strikes almost too close to home, doesn’t it? Paul will pick up on this aspect of peacemaking in our last text for this morning.

The Anabaptists did keep going back to the Sermon on the Mount as a central text for them in the face of a very violent world, a violent church, and a very violent persecution. This is the teaching of Jesus. But we need also look to the life and death of Jesus, not only his teaching.

The Life and death of Jesus.

I think that Sang-Min Lee, the South Korean Mennonite now in prison for his peace convictions, is right on by rooting his peace convictions in the life and

death of Jesus. Jesus did refuse to call on the angels at his disposal to save his own life. He did choose to love instead of to fight. I believe that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are at the heart of the way God works in the world and in my life. The crucifixion claims that Jesus will choose to suffer and to die rather than to use violence to save himself and or to bring in God's Kingdom. Love, not violence, is God's way.

The resurrection proclaims that such profound love cannot be forever killed, that it will triumph in the end. My understanding of peace is rooted centrally in this Jesus story of crucifixion and resurrection. That is what gives the impetus and power to following Jesus and his way of love and peace.

I am aware that many of us are a bit uneasy about too much Jesus language, especially too much cross of Jesus language. I think this whole death of Jesus story has been captured and held hostage by theories of atonement that do not come from the text itself. And so we hear that Jesus was sent to this earth specifically to die to save us from our sins, a sacrifice God planned and needed. Jesus would die as a substitute for us, somehow satisfying and appeasing an angry God, thereby saving us from the consequence of our sins.

I am moved and persuaded far more by this story as demonstrating once and for all the awesome power of love. God is love. God loves me. God loves the world. God wants to love me-us into communion, not force us or threaten us to be good. The Jesus story of death and resurrection is the ultimate example and model of love triumphing in the end.

Somehow the suffering Jesus of the Gospels was transformed, in the 4th century, into the image of the conquering Christ of the Constantinian church; this at the cost of totally ignoring the Sermon on the Mount. Somehow the story of the suffering Jesus was transformed, in the longer church history, into theories of atonement telling us how to appease an angry and vengeful Father God, totally ignoring the centrality of love in the story.

My own basic understanding

“Most compelling to me is that Jesus chose to die rather than kill. He chose to love his enemies to the end rather than to bring down his legions of angels to destroy them. In choosing to die rather than kill, he demonstrated the ultimate kind of loving – God's kind.

Jesus' resurrection is the ultimate vindication of his choice to reject violence as the answer to evil. It is the ultimate statement that the power of love is greater

than the power of evil and violence. This love, and this resurrection, is loosed on the world as the great saving power.

Central to my understanding of the Gospel is that Jesus' message was one of love and non-violence. He was willing to die rather than violate this essence of who he was – and who God the Father is. Jesus came to earth, not to appease an angry God, but to show us the true heart of God's love and God's way.

And that is my commitment, as a follower of Jesus - as a husband, as a father, as a pastor, as a fellow church member. I will always try to live out of this fount of love and of peace. I will try to reject any kind of violence – physical or psychological - any kind of coercion. This does not mean that I will not challenge, or confront, or name what I think needs to be named.

Do I always live up to this commitment? No, I don't. I would have stories to tell and confessions to make. But that is still my commitment.

Conclusion – Ephesians 2:14-17

Paul takes to heart both the teaching of Jesus and the life and death of Jesus. In Ephesians 2 he speaks directly to the biggest conflict the early church faced – how can Jews and Gentiles live together in one church as one family? “For Jesus 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. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near...

Jesus is our peace. This means for me that every sphere of my life, every sphere of the life of the church, is centered on Jesus way of peace – in my/our personal and family lives, in our church life, in our community life, and in our way of being responsible citizens. I do believe that love is more powerful than violence, even though it may take much longer to bear out.

Jesus is my peace. Jesus is our peace.