

*John Docherty, 19 February, 2017*  
**... Resist not the evildoer ...**

We are Mennonites.

Our church is identified as an “Historic Peace Church”, which is to say that we have always tended to self-identify as a church that renounces the use of violence to resolve conflicts; that we have tended to refuse to bear arms in times of war; that we have tended to resolutely stand in support of *nonviolent* acts of justice-making and have as resolutely stood against *violent* acts of justice-making.

I say we've “tended” to be these things, because the overall tendency has had its exceptions. While our church structures have held to these positions, individual Mennonites have sometimes struggled to embody these values, or have questioned and sometimes rejected them.

In our personal lives, we have sometimes used force, if not out-right violence, to resolve conflict. Not all Mennonites have refused to serve in the military in times of war. While some of us might prefer nonviolence as a way of ensuring justice, others of us might be prepared to allow that nation-states / governments have a different set of rules they need to abide by.

The theology of peacemaking as understood by Anabaptists is a complicated one, and clearly not one that has been embraced by all Christian traditions.

It is certainly not a theology that has been embraced by all who self-identify as Christians.

Stuart Murray, in his book, *The Naked Anabaptist*, argues that even within Anabaptism there is room for difference of opinion on the question of 'pacifism'. He puts, then answers, the following question :

“Aren't all Anabaptists pacifists?”

The simple answer, he suggests, is, “... no. Not all Anabaptists in the sixteenth century were pacifists. Not all Anabaptists today are pacifists.”

He does go on to say that “pacifism very quickly became the settled conviction of the Anabaptist movement”, but I remember being highly incensed when I first read that passage in his book. The peace theology of Mennonites was one of the key elements of how Mennonites understood faithfulness that attracted me to this church, alongside the 'flat' hierarchy, the centrality of community, and the integrity of a modest, humble, faithful, lifestyle that seriously attempted to combine personal piety and an active seeking after social justice.

While I can easily get my head around the fact that it is entirely possible to be a pacifist and not be an Anabaptist, it didn't make any sense to me that you could claim to be an Anabaptist, and yet not be a pacifist.

It seemed a little bit like saying “I'm a musician. I can read music, I have a good sense of rhythm,

my fingers are perfectly fashioned – long, slender, nimble – but I don't play an instrument”.

But then, I supposed that Murray was writing for a primarily British audience; an audience steeped in the “Christendom” of the Church of England, of which the monarch is the head; and an audience only a generation or so removed from the direct consequences of the bombings and loss of life of the First and Second World Wars. I reasoned that he was addressing a population that he felt would be highly resistant to any suggestion of an 'unpatriotic' theology like pacifism.

And so, I wondered if he wasn't pandering a little to that resistance, and tempering the core message of the Anabaptist understanding of faithfulness. Was he trying to make it a little more 'palatable' to a church audience that was nostalgic for a time when Church and State were willing partners in governing the nation?

Or, was he trying to acknowledge that a central tenet of the Faith that was built around loving one's enemy is maybe just too large a stumbling block for many?

And, if we're to be honest, I think we have to admit that it *is* too large a stumbling block for many.

I don't think it's the idea of working for peace that's the problem – it's the idea of refusing to use force to contain evil that many ... most ... Christians can't get their head around.

When we first moved to Montreal in 1981, I was a licensed minister with the Missionary Church of Canada, now the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada. That church has its roots in a merger of the United Missionary Church, and a church known as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ. It has some Anabaptist roots, and their confession of faith has a token nod in that direction.

But here's what it says with regard to military service :

“Sincere Christians have conscientious differences as to their understanding of the teaching of the Word of God with reference to their responsibility as Christian citizens to human government both in times of war and times of peace. We are, therefore, to exercise tolerance and understanding, and respect the individual conscience with regard to participation in war.”

I'm all for respecting the individual conscience, but I have to admit that I always found that clause to be a little disappointing.

We could argue, as the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists did, that to be able to legitimately lay claim to the title of faithful follower of Christ one must set aside any other loyalties and be willing to forego the right to defend oneself from evil. The idea of 'nonresistance' was central to Anabaptist thinking – i.e. that we are called to receive violence done to us without retaliating, even if it means losing our own lives.

I think we'd find that any number of counter arguments to that position would still immediately spring to mind for most people who self-identify as Christian.

One argument would be that our peace position is built, in part, on a faulty translation, or a too literal understanding, of the Matthew passage we read this morning. Part of that passage, in the New Revised Standard Version, reads as follows :

“... do not resist an evildoer ...”

The King James Version reads “... resist not evil ...”

The Good News Translation reads “... do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you ...”

Some commentators suggest the sense of the phrase might be better translated as :

“Do not resist by evil means”, or :

“Do not resist violently”

So, in other words, by those readings, we have the right to resist evil (and, by extension, the evildoer) but not by evil or violent means. The following verses in this Matthew passage then give some examples of how to respond to evil : turn the other cheek; when forced to hand over your coat give your cloak as well; when forced to go one mile go two.

That's one reading that's probably very acceptable to most Mennonites : “stand up against evil, but do it nonviolently, using peaceable means.”

One of the writers I consulted in preparing this meditation highlights that idea by stating that “Jesus does not bring a theory of pacifism or nonviolence. Rather, he intervenes in the cycle of violence by exposing it.”

In other words, in his teachings, and in his refusal to prevent his own crucifixion, Jesus is basically allowing violence to play itself out in all its ugliness, placing it in stark contrast to his call to live and to act with love, mercy and compassion – never doing harm to those around you.

This certainly seems to be the attitude of Paul in Romans, chapter 12, when he says “... if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

The thinking, I suppose, is that by so doing, one forces the evildoer to recognize the ugliness of his or her actions, and push him or her to repentance.

Probably the primary argument against *that* understanding of what it means to resist evil nonviolently is that it doesn't always work out in the short term.

Another Anabaptist writer, Alain Epp Weaver has this to say about nonviolence as a tactic in winning the fight against evil : “... nonviolence has at times, by the grace of God, led to

liberating outcomes, but Christian pacifists must soberly acknowledge the real possibility that nonviolent resistance might well lead to tragedy, death, and failure.”

His point is, I suppose, that there are those out there – the sociopaths of this world – who may not be capable of enough introspection or human empathy to care much about what their actions do to others. What kind of success can you expect in the face of homicidal tyrants with unlimited power at their disposal and an unbridled willingness to use that power?

That *is* a sobering picture of the usefulness of nonviolent action under some circumstances.

But what if the point of nonviolent resistance is not always, or not primarily, the repentance of the one who is immediately guilty of the violence?

There is little to suggest that Jesus' death by crucifixion melted the hearts of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, or that the emperor in Rome had any idea of what was going on. It was just another run-of-the-mill execution on just another ordinary day in the Roman Empire.

Even Pontius Pilate, arguably the one in power who seemed most troubled by this execution, simply drops out of sight once he's given the order to have Jesus crucified. He washes his hands of the whole affair and gets on with his life.

What if the injunction to not resist evil with evil is intended more to give space for God's Holy Spirit to slowly seep into the consciousness of those who were witness to the crucifixion, rather than those who were responsible for it?

What if the intended conversion and repentance is not so much of the one whose heart is already filled with rage to the point of being willing to use violence against another?

What if the hoped-for conversion that Jesus has in mind is rather the conversion of the witnesses to the violence?

What if the desired effect of faithful Christians refusing to engage in a cycle of escalating violence, is not so much the effect on the aggressor, but the effect on the bystanders who are witness to what one human is capable of doing to another?

... and witness to the brutality and injustice inherent in inflicting that violence on one who isn't trying to fight back?

What if Jesus' injunction isn't a formula for tactical ploys that will disarm the aggressor, but a strategy for making it clear to humanity that we simply can't go on using violence against each other?

I suppose the fear that most would harbour is that by not resisting evil, we simply allow space for the most ruthless to take control. The sociopaths will win the day. If we don't stop those who are violent, the fear might be that we simply leave the way clear for tyranny and brutality.

Well, that's definitely one possible scenario.

But another possible scenario is that we gradually figure out that we need to address the root causes of the violence and make sure we resist evil in appropriate ways.

Maybe, as we become more and more repulsed by the horrors of war, and poverty, and bigotry of all kinds, we will finally recognize that the sociopaths can't win the day if we refuse to go along with them.

Maybe, as we're exposed to the damage that violence does, we'll finally come to terms with the fact that it matters how we treat each other.

And maybe, just maybe, we'll finally be worthy of being called children of our Father in Heaven.