

The Way of the Leaf

Readings

[Confession of Faith - Mennonite Church Canada](#) (article 22)

Romans 12:9-21

Transcript

Intro: The Centrality of Peace

One of the things I have most enjoyed about this long off-and-on series we've taken through the confession of faith is that it provides us some prompts to talk about things that we don't often talk about. Sometimes we don't talk about them because they're controversial things we shy away from. Sometimes they're things that we don't feel we need to name explicitly because they are largely assumed. Sometimes it's because they don't seem as relevant today as they did 500 years ago.

And then there's peace. This one we do talk about explicitly at minimum once a year with Peace Sunday, but often more than that. If you ask somebody who is aware of Anabaptist theology just what makes an Anabaptist, they'll probably start with peace. Quick aside: for those who aren't aware, Anabaptist is the term for the wider theological tradition that Mennonites are a part of, started out of the 16th century Reformation era. If you're doing the concentric circles, Mennonites are within Anabaptists and Anabaptists are within Christians.

No offence to the avoidance of oaths – Arnold did a great job explaining the history behind that one and what we can still learn from it today – but most people do not think of that one nearly as quickly as they think of peace.

With that said, it can be true that we sometimes take for granted that we all know what we mean when say the word “peace.”

Revelation in Jesus

Early in this series on the confession of faith, I also spoke on the article about Jesus. I will sometimes argue that the most important theological question is what is God like. I don't mean attributes like power or relationship to time. I mean God's character. Is God fundamentally loving? Is God fundamentally peaceful?

The Christian answer – and emphasized by Anabaptists more than most – is that God looks like Jesus. Jesus is the most complete revelation of God's character. This article of the confession hits on that a bit as well. If we want to understand what peace looks like, the best place to look is at Jesus. He taught peace and his whole life, death, and resurrection embodied peace.

This is significant. We can mean a lot of different things by peace. The biggest alternative definition of peace which was prevalent in Jesus' time was the Pax Romana, the roman peace. It was peace through conquest. It was – and still is – a common philosophy that the best way to have peace is to have absolute control. Of course, that control is maintained through at least some occasional violence. At best, it's the “you have to break a few eggs to make an omelette” philosophy. At worst, it's fascism. This Pax Romana brought a lot of positive things to the Empire, like new roads and a massive reduction in regional conflicts.

But the price for that “peace” included subjugating minorities and mass crucifixions of anybody who dared to question the Roman authority. This peace, this wealth, this prosperity, is fuelled by death.

I’m a fan of a lot of superhero movies and TV. This idea was captured the strongest for me recently in the DC character Peacemaker. That sounds promising, right? His name is Peacemaker. In the movie where he was introduced, he summarized his philosophy this way: “I cherish peace with all my heart. I don’t care how many men, women, and children I need to kill to get it.” And now he’s got a TV show that I haven’t seen much, but it does look like it is doing some interesting exploration of how what he calls peace really means authoritarian control.

In the Christian tradition the philosophy like that of Peacemaker could be called holy war. Most wouldn’t explicitly say that they believe in a holy war philosophy. That’s a phrase that carries negative sentiment. But you do hear this rhetoric. In the most extreme forms, it comes out from a vocal minority that you might hear labelled with phrases like Christian nationalist or dominionist. But there are much less extreme versions as well. We all at least occasionally fall into the thought pattern of redemptive violence, that we can make the world better if we just had the right people exercising control over everyone else.

Sometimes peacemaking starts with acknowledging the ways we have fallen into that trap, either individually or as a community. I think of how when I joined staff at Laurier, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the new employee training included a significant course on Canadian Indigenous history. In line with one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action, Laurier wanted every staff member to have some basic understanding of how the relationship between Canada and Indigenous people has been broken and how we can help heal it. And a lot of how it was broken was because Christians believed that we were inherently superior and that “peace” for Canada meant doing a lot of horrible and violent things. We need to own that if we want to make the relationship right.

Even within those comic book stories, the good guys end up solving their problems to some degree with violence as well. The third act of most superhero movies often involves the good guy punching the bad guy really hard until so-called peace is restored, at least until the start of the next movie. The heroes here might map more closely to what is called the just war tradition. In that school of thought – where most Christians and most people in general fall – violence is bad but it is sometimes necessary as a last resort.

[Pax Christi](#)

Jesus’ definition of peace is different. Jesus teaches a peace through justice, a peace through restoration, a peace which is not only an ends to be achieved but also a means to achieve it. The confession does mention this a bit more in one of the footnotes. Citing the use of the Hebrew word Shalom, it explains that peace is more than the absence of physical violence; it is the restoration of right relationships. It is making the world whole again, just again.

If the most fundamental theological question is what God is like, I think the second most important to me at least might be the question of eschatology. What’s the point of all this? What are we moving toward? What kind of world is possible? That’s my little teaser for Scott to talk about the article for the reign of God in a couple weeks, but understanding what Jesus meant by peace I think is a big part of that answer.

These are fundamentally different perspectives on the world, not just a minor ethical question or a new rule that Christians are supposed to follow. To quote Melissa Florer-Bixler's book *How To Have an Enemy*, they are "different and incompatible operating system[s]."

Nonresistance

The other reading today gives us a bit more of what Jesus' alternate operating system looks like. I could have used Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5, Jesus gives some examples of what it looks like to resist evil in a nonviolent way. Those are pretty powerful examples when you understand the context, but they might not be intuitive in our context. Like, that being slapped on the right cheek means you were given a backhand, which is how somebody treats somebody who is lower than them, so by turning the other cheek and forcing them to slap the left instead, you are accepting a hit but also forcing them to treat you like a human equal. At the centre of that teaching is reframing the relationship, with the oppressor and the oppressed seeing each other as an equal.

I think of the peacemakers of the Black Lives Matter movement, much like other anti-racism movements before them. It can be uncomfortable, both for the oppressor and the oppressed, but at the heart of this movement is that simple phrase: Black Lives Matter. It is an assertion of humanity and equality and a call to eliminate the ways our society acts as if that isn't true.

That's as far as I'll go with the Matthew text. There's a stereotype that Anabaptists love quoting Jesus and ignore the epistles, while evangelicals love quoting Paul and ignore Jesus. So I picked Romans 12 instead because I wanted to show that Paul was on the same page.

Romans 12 is loaded with actions. Love each other. Honour each other. Stand your ground. Hope. Contribute to the needs of others. Welcome strangers. Consider everyone equal and associate with people on the margins of society. Feed your enemy if he's hungry. Give water to your enemy if he's thirsty.

Sometimes that is the big activist movement like Black Lives Matter. Sometimes it is much quieter, like volunteering with the Saturday Suppers to make sure those who need a meal can get one. I've never done Saturday Suppers but several years ago I did volunteer a few times with a similar program, Royal City Mission in Guelph. I remember showing up thinking I could do some quiet behind the scenes work washing dishes. Instead I was told they always have no problem with the dishes but what really matters the most is simply having people in the room with the guests. People came to these dinners because they needed food, but they also needed somebody to listen to them, to care about their stories. I saw similar with Queen St Commons Café here in Kitchener, although there I did successfully hide washing dishes most of the time.

This is not what a lot of people think of as "pacifism." A lot of people hear the word pacifist and believe that means passive. If you say you're a pacifist to enough people, you'll eventually hear responses like "so you think we should have just let Hitler conquer the whole world?" It's a misunderstanding of the peace tradition but it's also a profound lack of creativity that believes the only two options are doing nothing or using physical violence. The word pacifism is from pacify, not passive. It's an active verb to make something clean.

That does bring me to my biggest concern for possible misinterpretation with the wording of this article. At the time this was written, the language of "nonresistance" was more common.

The article does later name resisting evil, both in the main text and in the footnotes. So I don't think the authors of the confession meant this, but hearing the term "nonresistance" now usually gets read as not doing anything to resist. If you're going to use the word nonresistance, you have to be clear that you do not mean quiet passivity in the face of evil.

That's why I, and a lot of people much smarter than me, have tended in recent years toward the language of nonviolent resistance instead of nonresistance. We do resist evil. But we do it nonviolently.

As Florer-Bixler says:

"enemies are overcome not through tolerance but by making the world new."

Privilege and Anger

One of the negative consequences that comes from treating peace as doing nothing is that language of peace and pacifism is often used against the marginalized. Whenever you see the slightest resistance to oppression, even when it's not violent in any way, you'll inevitably hear comments about how their cause is good, but they should really protest in a less disruptive way. And yet the same criteria is not turned to ask the oppressors to stop their actual violence that prompted the protest in the first place. That is not peace. It is ironically violence – telling them to shut up and stay in their place of oppression – being done in the name of nonviolence.

I think of someone I've worked with who is relentless about accessibility for people with disabilities. Accessibility is often treated as an afterthought in our culture, a nice-to-have if you have time left over. And sometimes he is noticeably upset when he learns about how it took a blind user half an hour to find the right page on the website, which is more like 5 minutes for the average sighted user. He cares about that justice and right relationship with that marginalized community. But it is an act of peacemaking when he hears the stories, agrees that there is a problem, and gets everyone else involved in figuring out how to fix it. It would not be peacemaking if he tried to sweep it under the rug to make us look better or save us time.

Florer-Bixler also talks about the psalms of lament and even what are sometimes called the imprecatory psalms, where the psalmist experiencing real oppression pleads with God for harm to be done to their oppressor. Some of these texts are hard, like calls to bash the heads of children across the rocks. These are psalms that many churches try to ignore, but they remind us of the extent of human suffering. Sometimes all that a hurting person can imagine is getting vengeance.

With that in mind, it's actually an incredibly powerful decision to be in those depths of pain and choose to release that to God. They do not take violence into their own hands. When they have suffered true evil – more than I have ever or likely will ever experience - they don't take revenge. As much as it sounds like they want terrible things to happen, there's no indication that they ever took any steps to make those terrible things happen. Instead, we get stories elsewhere like David refusing to kill Saul even as Saul is trying to kill him, and advice like that of Paul here in Romans to overcome evil with good while leaving judgement to God. Paul says that's how you heap burning coals on your enemy's head.

Real Victory

Because I am a nerd, I will reference another recent nerdy TV property. In the first season of *The Wheel of Time*, a couple of the main characters – Perrin and Egwene - encounter a group called the Tuatha'an. They're a nomadic people committed to what they call The Way of the Leaf and to finding the song that will heal the world. Not a weapon that will save the world by enabling them to defeat the villain, but a song that will heal the world.

One of the Tuatha'an is explaining their ways and talking about when her family was murdered. Perrin asks her why she didn't want revenge. She clarifies that revenge was all she wanted. In that moment of incredible pain, it was the only thing she could imagine, much like those psalmists. But then she says:

“What greater revenge against violence than peace? What greater revenge against death than life?”

That sounds a lot to me like Paul's heaping burning coals comment. The way to get revenge is to love your enemy, because the real enemy is not the person but the harm they're doing.

The Way of the Leaf says that even if a leaf dies, it feeds new life, planting the seeds for a new tree. Similarly, if they die but more people are called to their way of peace, it's worth it. Responding to violence with more violence does not bring about healing of the world. There's no revenge on the violence there. It feeds the same cycle. But responding to violence with peace, responding to death with life, that plants the seeds of a better world.

Conclusion: Peacemakers

One thing I wonder is what if this Way of the Leaf is already the song that will heal the world. Maybe it's not a flashy magical thing that will dismantle evil overnight. Maybe it's long hard work that takes a lot of sacrifice.

And that makes me think of those I have encountered who are singing this song, the people who are choosing the little ways of getting revenge on violence through peace. I've named a few today.

What I would like to do is invite you to name some of your own in our Zoom time today. Where have you seen peacemakers? Who are the people that you've watched do something and it's made you say, “whoa, the world is really closer to justice because of this?” That could be somebody you worked with directly, a big social movement that inspired you, or it could even be something that you did. Feel free to brag a little.

I will see you all on there soon. Blessed be the peacemakers.