MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE

AMOS 5:18-24
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
NOVEMBER 12, 2017/23RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
(PEACE SUNDAY)

As Mennonites, many of us feel conflicted each year around Remembrance Day. We are a "peace church," after all. We don't want to participate in glorifying or romanticizing war. Our ancestors were often (although not always) among the conscientious objectors to war because of their commitment to Jesus' teachings on nonviolence.

At the same time, we are grateful for the freedoms we enjoy and we recognize that these freedoms have been purchased at a high price. We don't in any way want to minimize the importance of remembering those who have lost their lives in war.

We want to join our neighbours in in honouring sacrifice, in lamenting, in feeling sorrow for a world where war is and has always been so prevalent.

But even if we might feel conflicted, Mennonites tend to think that Remembrance Day is the moment in our cultural calendar where our peace witness is most necessary because we're convinced that peace is an important *who we are* and how we understand the gospel.

Maybe even the most important part.

C. Arnold Snyder was a professor of history at Conrad Grebel University. In 2013 he wrote an article on the origins of our Anabaptist peace witness for *Vision* magazine. In it, he remarked that in his experience,

> [P]eace—in its biblical, theological, ethical, and practical aspects—has come to occupy the center of Mennonite conversation and identity as no other denominational conviction has.[1]

This rings true to my observation and experience, as well. Mennonites love to talk about peace. We have strong convictions about peace.

And we are convinced that this the time of the year when the world needs to hear it.

On Tuesday morning, the first email I opened was a letter from MCC's national office advising me of steps that I could take "toward nuclear disarmament." The second was a link to another Mennonite publication itemizing "ten reasons to oppose war." More articles followed throughout the week.

Many of the pieces I read were written by people I know and respect. Many expressed a "peace position" in compelling and articulate ways—ways that I am inclined to agree with! I do think that nuclear disarmament is a good idea. And I could probably have added ten more reasons to the list of reasons to oppose war.

But as I read these headlines and as I thought about the kinds of conversations and articles and headlines that we tend to see from Mennonite sources around this time of year, I confess that my first thought was, "Who really cares what my 'position' is on war and peace?"

I am anti-war. OK, fine. I am also anti-cancer, anti-poverty, anti-racism, anti-bad-things-happening-in-the-world. So what?

I can't really do much about nuclear disarmament or world peace. I can't stop wars from happening. Neither can you.

Are there steps that can be taken politically, pressures that can be applied? Sure. And we should. But it's relatively easy to be against things "out there" that we can't do a

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[1] C. Arnold Snyder, "Anabaptist origins of Mennonite commitment to peace" in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, vol. 14, No. 2* (Winnipeg: CMU, 2013), 17.

great deal about. It's relatively easy to have a "peace position"—particularly in our contexts of relative wealth, comfort, and peace.

It's much harder to actually *be* people of peace in the domains that we do have influence in.

It reminds me of a Charlie Brown cartoon: "I love mankind, it's people I can't stand."

In the same way, "I love world peace; it's being a person of peace as a husband, a father, a friend, a neighbour that I often have less energy for."

This brings me to our text from Amos this morning. Perhaps you thought it was a strange reading for peace Sunday. At least I hope you did. Because on the surface, it is a text that has very little to do with peace.

But it does have a great deal to do with the all-too-human phenomenon of being eager to make public proclamations that don't match lived reality.

It is a stinging indictment from God to the people of Israel, delivered through the prophet Amos around seven and a half centuries before Christ.

You love to have your festivals and solemn assemblies. You love to offer your sacrifices and sing your songs. You say all kinds of impressive things about me. But I look at your lives and I see little of what I want to see: righteousness and justice.

And so you're in for a surprise. You say you can't wait for the Day of the Lord. You think I'm going to come and give you a gold star for all your lovely words and songs and festivals. You think that public statements and proper worship and theological precision is what I've been after.

But for you the Day of the Lord is going to be darkness, not light. You're going to see that you had it wrong all along.

It's a harsh reminder of how seriously God takes the connection between what we say and what we do.

Can we make some connections to our Mennonite rhetoric about peace? Are there some parallels? I think there are.

If, as a Mennonite/Anabaptist family of faith, we find ourselves loving to talk about peace, congratulating ourselves on being a "peace church" or embracing a "progressive social ethic" or being "antiwar" and all the while ignoring or neglecting the peace that God has called us to in the relationships closest to us, then I think that we can expect the same response that God delivered to the people of Israel via the prophet Amos.

I'm paraphrasing here, but we might hear something like: "You can take all your lovely words and shove them. I don't really care what you believe about war and peace and nuclear disarmament. I want to see peace in your character, your attitudes, your relationships.

I want your marriages and families and schools and workplaces and churches to be more peaceful places because you are in them. I want you to assume the best in your neighbours rather than the worst. I want you to refuse the easy paths of polarizing discourse about those who don't think like you.

I want you to be agents of *shalom* right where I've placed you. I want peace not to be a "position" you talk about but a way of being that you are practicing, daily, in imitation *of* and love *for* my Son."

In the article I quoted earlier, Snyder reminds us that for the early Anabaptists, peace wasn't a "position." It wasn't what marked out their brand as unique. It wasn't the motivation for political or social activism.

It was a personal expression of discipleship to Jesus Christ.

A favourite text for early Anabaptists was John 15:5:

> I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

It was only this "remaining in Christ" that allowed the early Anabaptists to refuse violence. For the early Anabaptists, peace was personal and it was a direct expression of Christian discipleship.

I suspect that they would have been puzzled by the headlines that I mentioned earlier about nuclear disarmament and anti-war positions. They would have *assumed* that war was the way of the kingdoms of men, but that their task was simply to embody a different kingdom in obedience to a different king.

They would have pointed to the fact that Jesus spent no time whatsoever lobbying the Roman Empire to embrace his teaching and practices. His teachings about violence were relentlessly personal, communal, local.

Peace was not a "position." It was not an agenda for modern nation states. It was a path for individuals, families, churches and communities.

And lest we're tempted to romanticize our Anabaptist forbears, they didn't live it out perfectly either!

Snyder points out that it didn't take long before Mennonites' beliefs *about* peace to stand in stark contrast to their actual *practice* of peace.

Gradually, peace became detached from "the spiritual underpinning of connection to the living vine." Strident legalism began to emerge. And of course, Snyder is not the first to observe that often Mennonite churches were characterized by a stark "absence of peace among the churches and the members themselves."[2]

Mennonites may have always been hesitant to take up the literal sword on behalf of the ruling powers; but we have often been quite willing to take up the metaphorical sword in response to perceived moral transgressions or ideological impurity within their families and communities.

We see this even in our day. Just open the letters section of the Canadian Mennonite. Or think about how fractured the Anabaptist branch of the Reformation has become. We have been as good at dividing and excommunicating and tearing each other apart with our words as anyone else.

Jesus calls us to peace on the ground and close to home.

[2] Ibid, 20.

Anyone can be against nuclear disarmament. It's far harder to deal with person across the pew whose politics you don't like.

Anyone can be antiwar. It's far harder to be a person of peace in you marriage, in your relationships with your kids.

Anyone can have a theological "peace position"—and articulate it quite brilliantly. I've done it. It's far harder to cultivate peace as a state of being, as a settled inner attitude in the places of workplace and home, around kitchen tables, in community life when people irritate you and are insensitive to your needs, or seem deliberately difficult.

The world needs peace. This is absolutely true. A world full of refugees and famine and economic exploitation and injustice is in *desperate need* of the peace of Christ. We do well to work and pray for peace around the world. We will do so later in the service.

But peace starts at home.

If we as Mennonites spend most of our time talking about peace "out there" and neglect the peace we have been called to "in here," we might accomplish some limited good in the realm of politics and social action. But we might also one day find ourselves on the end of a divine rebuke like the one in Amos.

So, on Peace Sunday 2017, can I urge you, me, all of us who call ourselves "Mennonite" or are connected to this "brand" in any way, to consider some hard questions.

1. How can peace become a description of our inner attitudes, our way of being—not just a theological doctrine that we pull out from time to time to say that we're against war and violence?
2. What domains of your life are in need of a peacemaker? Your marriage? Your relationship with your kids? Your church? Your parents? Your friends at school?
3. Where is God asking you to take the difficult step from peace as a "position" to peace as "lived reality" where God has placed you?

The answer, as C. Arnold Snyder says in his article, goes right back to how the first Anabaptists understood peace. Peace was (and is) the spiritual fruit of abiding in Christ. He is the vine, we are the branches.

Peace should *not* occupy the center of Mennonite understanding and identity. Jesus should. We are people of peace because we follow Jesus not people who like Jesus because we're pro-peace.

We will *never* be people of true peace unless we are sinking our roots deep into Christ's love, and his promise before he left the world (John 14:27):

> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

I want to close with a well-known prayer, one that we will be singing shortly. It is a prayer that is (probably incorrectly) attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

> Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
> Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
> Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.
> Where there is discord, let me bring union.
> Where there is error, let me bring truth.
> Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
> Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
> Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
> Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
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> O Master, let me not seek as much
> to be consoled as to console,
> to be understood as to understand,
> to be loved as to love,
> for it is in giving that one receives,
> it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
> it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
> it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

A couple of words stood out to me in this prayer.

ME: Make *me* an instrument of your peace. Not my nation or any other collective of which I am a part. Jesus' call to peace is directed to me, personally. It is not something I can demand from others on Jesus' behalf. The prayer—and Christ's summons—is personal.

INSTRUMENT: Peace is practical. It's used for getting stuff done. It's not a set of principles or doctrines that we keep at arms length. It's for everyday situations where we need to forgive and love and extend mercy and foster faith and hope.

YOUR PEACE: *Your* peace. God's peace. Not my peace or your peace, because we reduce peace to less than it should be. We need God's peace, *shalom*. The absence of violence and conflict, yes, but also the *presence* of all that contributes to human flourishing and the flourishing of all that God has made.

Lord Jesus, make each one of us instruments of your peace.

Amen.

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