

**SERMON TITLE:** “Seek Peace as a Lifestyle”  
**TEXT:** Romans 12:9-21  
**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church  
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**DATE:** July 29, 2012/9<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

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We are just over halfway through our summer worship series on the theme of “Seek Peace and Pursue It.”

In last month’s issue of *The Mennonite*, there was an article entitled, “How are We Doing as a Peace Church”—a kind of “state of the union” address or a taking of our temperature. When it comes to our role as a peace church in the context of hugely complex twenty-first century realities, how are we doing?

(The article is addressing the situation in the USA, but I think there are similar realities here in Canada.)

One of the concerns that came through was that peace was often implicitly treated as an optional extra to other expressions of Christianity (i.e., being an Anabaptist is like being an evangelical + peace, or being mainline Protestant + peace). The article said this:

In this way, peace has again become an “add-on,” even if a valued one, rather than one important part of a whole web of commitments of what it means to live in communities which are formed in the image of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, there was a concern that peace was often seen as one of those things that some Christians are into. Some prefer justice, some prefer a particular worship style, some prefer contemplative prayer, some prefer social activism, some prefer... whatever.

Peace, like other “interests,” becomes a way of conceptualizing and reinforcing our “brand” or staking out our “market share” within the broader Christian church.

The article concluded with two “recommendations” or challenges to Anabaptist churches:

- Peace is not an optional part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, but a core conviction that permeates *all of what we do and who we are*
- As a “peace church,” our witness should arise not from a generic socially liberal ideology, but a deeply rooted identity in the person and work of Jesus Christ

Peace is (or ought to be) central to who we are, not just as Mennonites or Anabaptists, but as Christians, as followers of Jesus.

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I think the Apostle Paul would agree.

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<sup>1</sup> “How Are We Doing as a Peace Church,” in *The Mennonite*, July 2012, p. 45.

Our text today comes from Paul's theologically dense and complex letter to the church in Rome. Everything that Paul tells the church about how they are to live in the world depends upon a deep and settled conviction that, above all, Christians are to be people of peace.

It is a text about the proper shape of the Christian life—a text that challenges the assumptions, behaviours and dispositions common to our twenty-first century context, at text that calls us to leave one way of looking at and living in the world embrace a different one.

A few years ago, I attended a series of lectures at Regent College by the famous OT scholar Walter Brueggemann. I don't remember many specifics about the lectures themselves, but one thing that Brueggemann said stood out and has remained with me since.

In speaking about the people of Israel's dramatic exodus from Egypt and the long, complex story that followed, Brueggemann said this:

The life of faith is, in many ways, about “learning the sacred art of departing.” It is about learning how to leave the dominant narratives of our culture.

*The sacred art of departing.*

What does this mean? Well, for Israel, it meant leaving the story of Egypt—a story of oppression and injustice and slavery and dehumanizing conditions and idolatry, and striking out with YHWH.

It meant learning how to live according to a new story—learning how to trust and live in community, how to resist the lure of idolatry in all its forms, how to worship, what it meant to be a “blessing to the nations.”

Of course, this sacred departing didn't always go very well. Israel struggled and sinned and longed for the security of Egypt. They chafed under their leaders and complained against God. They *constantly* wandered off after other gods. They were forced to wander in the desert for forty years and suffered under truly awful leaders for most of their history. Ultimately, they suffered exile at the hands of a variety of foreign empires.

**Israel struggled with the sacred art of departing—they could never fully leave or resist the temptations of other stories, other homes.**

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I wonder if the same is true for us. Specifically in the context of our conviction that the call of Christ is the call to embody a counter-cultural way of peace in a world that is addicted to violence, how is our departing going?

I think our text today gives us a compelling picture of what a good departure looks like.

I am going to move through our text this morning verse by verse and hold up two narratives, two ways of being in the world: 1) the narrative of Christ; and 2) the narrative of our cultural context.

I won't offer much commentary on each—I will invite you to think of examples from your own experience, your own reading of our culture.

At the end, I will offer a few concluding reflections on these two narratives and how we are to relate to them as followers of Jesus.

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So, beginning in Romans 12:9...

- 12:9—***Let love be genuine...*** in a culture of falsity and superficiality, a culture which places more value on the images we portray than our character, a culture where love is fleeting and self-serving.
- 12:9—***Hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good...*** in a culture that so often exalts what is evil—what is violent and degrading and dehumanizing—and mocks what is good as antiquated and irrelevant.
- 12:10—***Outdo one another in showing honour...*** in a culture where “honour” is based on celebrity, and must be constantly earned.
- 12:10—***Do not lag in zeal... be ardent... serve...*** in a culture of apathy, sloth, and ever-increasing attention span—a culture where many are, as University of Montana philosopher Albert Borgmann puts it, “walking around in the dull fog of a distracted and sleepwalking idolatry.”
- 12:12—***Rejoice in hope... be patient in suffering... persevere in prayer...*** in a culture too cynical to hope, too impatient to suffer, and jaded toward prayer.
- 12:13—***Extend hospitality to strangers...*** in a global context of increasing fear and xenophobia, increasing suspicion of “the other,” decreasing generosity toward refugees, and a general assumption that life is a “zero sum game”—in other words, more for you means less for me!
- 12:14—***Bless those who persecute you—do not curse them...*** in a cultural context that glorifies violence and retaliation, and whose popular culture—from sports like “Ultimate” Fighting to television and movies—is saturated with brutality
- 12:15—***Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep***—enter into the joy and the pain of human existence... in a culture that fosters isolationism and detachment from life-sustaining community; a culture that is afraid of getting old and weak and fights against this in every conceivable way, a culture where unprecedented wealth coexists with unprecedented levels of depression.
- 12:16—***Live in harmony... associate with the lowly... don't be haughty...*** in a culture where attitude is admired, where it is good to be bad, where wealth and influence are magnetic, and the lowly continue to be forgotten and neglected.
- 12:16—***Do not claim to be wiser than you are...*** in a culture where with the click of a mouse, our online personas can be altered and modified to make us seem nicer, prettier, smarter, and more compassionate than we really are

- 12:17—***Do not repay evil for evil***... in a culture where “an eye for an eye”—or even an arm and a leg and an ear for an eye—is assumed—a culture where military spending dwarfs money spent on education and healthcare. A culture that daily demonstrates the tragic truth of a comment by N.T. Wright: “Revenge keeps evil in circulation.”<sup>2</sup>
- 12:19—***Do not avenge... leave room for God***... in a culture that has no room for God, whether it is his wrath, his love, or anything else.

Our whole passage this morning could be summed up in two statements:

- ***As far as it depends on you, live at peace with all*** (12:18).
- ***Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*** (12:21).

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The Apostle Paul was living and writing during the first century in the cultural reality that was the Roman Empire—an empire that glorified strength, control, and violence (not much has changed in empires since!).

I think that for Paul’s first readers in Rome, as well as for us, each of these verses presents us with a choice between two narratives of how the world works and what a human being is for.

**The life of peace—the deliberate choosing of peace as a lifestyle—is about daily decisions, daily habits, daily commitments to learn the sacred art of departing the dominant narrative of our culture for the true narrative of what we and our world were made for and where we are going.**

To live a lifestyle of peace is, in a sense, an exercise in reframing reality.

It is a way of saying, “Yes I know how things look. I know

- that Strength and power are often rewarded
- that violence is glorified and glamorized
- that vengeance is assumed
- that pride is celebrated and admired
- that self-promotion and manipulation of others are often very effective ways of getting what we want
- that the movers and the shakers of our world make better company than the weak, the lowly, the neglected and forgotten
- that enemies are best kept at a distance and treated as, well, *enemies!*
- that instant gratification and avoidance of pain feels better than patient and attentive suffering
- that prayer doesn’t reliably deliver effective enough “results”
- that leaving judgment to God isn’t as satisfying as doing it ourselves
- that living at peace with everyone is often far more work than it is worth

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone, Romans: Part Two* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 80.

- that often in our present experience it is good that is overcome by evil, not the other way around

*I know all this... And yet...*

*I choose a different story.*

**I choose to live a life of “sacred departing” from this story because I believe there is a better story out there—a story the world is waiting for, whether it knows it or not.**

I don't think that Paul is naïve. I think that Paul knows exactly how way of life advocated in our text today flies in the face of “how the world really works.”

But Paul is not urging us to adopt a strategy for making the best of the world as it is; rather, he is telling us what the way of Jesus looks like in the world, and how our living of this story is one of the ways in which God is making all things new.

The question is not, “does a lifestyle of peace “work” in a fallen world?” Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't.

On an individual level, I am convinced that the way of life that Paul is advocating here will make us more fulfilled, more mature, more attentive, more full of love and hope than the narrative from which we are departing—a narrative which tends to collapse in upon itself in selfishness, triviality, pride, and bitterness.

But you and I choosing lifestyles of peace will not magically end wars, or fix society or cause those around us to behave as we would like them to.

Sometimes, living a life of peace will mean that we are ridiculed as naïve or idealistic. Sometimes our generosity will be taken advantage of. Sometimes blessing those who persecute us will simply invite more persecution. Sometimes God's judgment will seem to slow in coming to our aid.

Sometimes evil will seem to flourish unchecked all around us, even as we hold fast to what is good.

**Rather than, “does a lifestyle of peace work?” we need to ask, “what is the future to which we are called, and what role do you and I—the body of Christ—have to play in pointing toward and embodying this future now?”**

So may God inspire and embolden us to be people of peace in the truest and most comprehensive understanding of the word—not as an add-on or an optional extra to our faith, but as an expression of our deep conviction that we are made for peace, and that God is leading our stories and the story of the world to a future of peace.

May God help us to learn and practice and delight in the sacred art of departing from the assumptions and expectations and idolatries of our “Egypt,” and joyfully and confidently follow Jesus—our “Moses” into God’s future of peace.

Amen.