

## **Faith Mennonite Church**

June 8, 2008 ~ Things that Make for Peace

### **Loving Enemies: As natural as sunshine and rain**

*1 John 4:7-12; 20-21; Matthew 5:43-48*

Back in the 1860s and 1870s as European settlers, including Mennonites, pushed west into the Great Plains, their homesteading activities forced American Indians to vacate their ancestral lands. As we know, this did not occur without violence and loss of life. One of the Plains tribes caught in this violence, the Cheyenne, tried to find a peaceful settlement. Their prophet, Sweet Medicine, had taught Chief Black Kettle, that as a Cheyenne chief he must act in peace: If you see your mother, wife, or children being molested or harmed by anyone, you do not go and seek revenge. Take your pipe. Go, sit and smoke and do nothing, for now you are a Cheyenne chief.

Black Kettle tried to follow Sweet Medicine's advice. Four years after the 1864 massacre at Sand Creek in eastern Colorado, Chief Black Kettle paid a visit to Colonel William H. Hazen at Fort Cobb, requesting his assurance of peace and safety. It was November and snow was already on the ground. Black Kettle had been given a peace medal by Abraham Lincoln and he flew a US flag and a white truce flag above his clan's encampment. He had signed two peace treaties and he had not retaliated after the Sand Creek massacre. He thought this would find favor with the white people.

But he returned with bad news; instead of offering safety the colonel had informed him that the federal government had already started a winter campaign to punish Indians for attacks on Kansas settlers. As the tribal leaders gathered to discuss their options in Black Kettle's tent, his wife, Medicine Woman Later, had a premonition that they should move their camp immediately. But it was already late and cold and the group decided to stay another night.

That night 800 troops approached, encircling their camp and at dawn the 7<sup>th</sup> US Cavalry, under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, began to play their marching song, "Garry Owen." This signal of an imminent attack terrorized the Cheyenne. Custer ordered an attack from all sides. Other nearby Indian groups came and joined the fight when they heard the sounds of battle.

Custer's men torched the village destroying the 51 lodges, clothing, winter food supply, and over 700 Cheyenne horses. They captured 53 Indians, mostly women. Black Kettle and Medicine Woman Later tried to escape on horseback but both were shot off of their horses. Custer was pleased to receive Black Kettle's scalp from one of his Osage guides and he reported the outcome of the battle to his superiors as "the most complete and gratifying success."

One hundred years later, the town of Cheyenne, Okla. decided to include a massacre reenactment as part of their centennial festivities. They invited the Cheyenne descendants to participate. Although they were hesitant to do so, they finally agreed, with the provision that in exchange, they could bury the remains of a Cheyenne child that was on display in the local museum.

On the day of the enactment the local townspeople and ranchers dressed up as the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. Some of the Cheyenne huddled in a mock village of teepees, portraying their ancestors. No one had told them that a California group called the Grandsons of the Seventh Cavalry, Grand Army of the Republic, had also been invited. They arrived dressed in authentic 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry uniforms. They began singing "Garry Owen" and rushed the teepee village, shooting

blank cartridges from authentic Spencer carbines. For the Cheyenne who were in the mock village and among the onlookers, the event brought old memories and raging hostility to the surface.

Somehow the day's activities proceeded. The final event was the burial of the victim's remains. As the chiefs, including young peace chief and Mennonite pastor Lawrence Hart, brought the small bronze casket from the museum they chanted special burial songs. Snow was falling as it had 100 years earlier. All at once the voice of one of the Grandsons of the Seventh Cavalry commanded: "Present arms!" The Cheyenne were infuriated that these men would salute someone their grandfathers had killed. In the midst of the charged atmosphere, a Cheyenne woman took off her beautiful blanket and laid it over the coffin. Everyone knew that, according to tradition, this would be given as an honored gift.

When the burial was complete, the chiefs gathered to decide to whom to give the blanket. Young peace chief Lawrence Hart thought it would go to an Oklahoma state dignitary. But the older wiser chiefs had another idea: they asked Lawrence to give it to the captain of the Grandsons of the Seventh Cavalry. Lawrence paused with his heart burning in his throat. This man was his enemy. Hart's own great-grandmother had narrowly escaped the massacre by hiding in a snow bank. His muscles and his nerves froze.

The captain came forward in military fashion and drew his saber in salute. The young peace chief Hart asked him to turn around. He returned his saber and did an about-face. With trembling hands, Hart draped the beautiful blanket over the shoulders of his enemy.

At this ceremony the older peace chiefs taught the younger one, Lawrence, to follow the instructions of their prophet Sweet Medicine. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the Grandsons fired volleys to honor the victim just buried. There was not a dry eye in the audience.

The Grandsons returned to the museum with the chiefs and there they embraced. Some broke down and cried. Others apologized. The captain took off his "Garry Owen" pin and handed it to Hart. He asked Hart to receive it on behalf of all the Cheyenne people and promised that they would never again hear the song "Garry Owen."<sup>i</sup>

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. 'But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

Loving our enemies is much easier to hold as an ideal than to actually do. When Jesus spoke these words, his Jewish audience no doubt had feelings of loathing toward the Roman occupiers equal to the pain and anger that American Indians have had toward the Europeans that invaded, massacred, and sent their children to boarding schools in hopes of stripping away their culture and languages. Many American have this same fear of terrorists.

But Jesus' words are clear: if we want to be children of our heavenly Parent, we must emulate that Parent, practice the ways of that Parent. And God's way, according to Jesus, is to send good—the sun and the rain—to all, the evil and the good. How can loving the enemy become as ordinary as sunshine and rain?

The example of Lawrence Hart and the Cheyenne suggest several things: 1) We must *remember and remind* each other of Jesus' call to love and pray for those who persecute, just as the peace chiefs passed down the words from their prophet Sweet Medicine. 2) We must *practice* this call even when it's the last thing we want to do. There's a saying that "practice makes perfect," and Jesus final words at the close of this scripture section are "Be perfect, as

your heavenly Parent is perfect.” Scripture scholars and translators aren’t sure what Matthew intended with this word “perfect.” Mark and Luke by contrast use the word “merciful.” Some suggest that Matthew’s intention is the concept of “wholeness”<sup>ii</sup> or “truthfulness.”<sup>iii</sup> Certainly young Lawrence Hart became a more whole person when he followed the instructions to give a gift to his enemy, thus opening the door to apology and reconciliation.

Finally, we must *trust* that we are living in a new age, an age in which God’s kingdom has already begun. We love and pray for our enemies because that is the way of this new age. It may seem weak and futile to others, but we view our reality through the story of the cross and the resurrection.

Joetta Schlabach

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<sup>i</sup> from Lawrence Hart’s account “A Cheyenne Legacy at the Washita River” in *Gathering at the Hearth: Stories Mennonites Tell*, edited by John E. Sharp, Herald Press, 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> *New Interpreters Commentary: Matthew, Mark*. M. Eugene Boring, ed.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Anchor Bible Commentary: Matthew*. W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann.