

Faith Mennonite Church  
Things that make for peace  
July 20, 2008

## **Peacemaking: From the Inside Out**

### *Romans 12*

The verses from Paul's letter to the church in Rome that Vicente and Noah read this morning were from the latter half of chapter 12. I would like to read the verses that precede them:

I appeal to you *therefore*, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Romans 12;1-8)

It is after this preamble, in which Paul reminds his readers of who they are in Christ, and the individual gifts and ministries that each has received and been called to, that he continues with the ethical commands: to love, to be patient, to be hospitable, to bless those who persecute; to return good for evil, to give food and drink to one's enemies, in essence to be peacemakers.

And we note in the very first verse of chapter 12, that Paul uses the word *therefore*. So even this preamble, this reminder of who we are in Christ, also has a preamble – the preceding 11 chapters in which Paul lays out his understanding of the gospel, the good news, as “God's power for salvation to all who believe.” According to the Oxford study edition of the NRSV, Paul's gospel in Romans is “expressed especially in terms of God's saving righteousness, or justification by faith, and with a universal concern for both Jew and Gentile.” Paul repeatedly used the words “all” and “every.”<sup>1</sup> Paul understood the Christian call to peacemaking as something that resulted from the transformation that comes in our lives as broken, flawed people, when we encounter God through Christ.

Fifteen years ago, Steve Dintaman, a professor of theology and philosophy at Eastern Mennonite University wrote an article entitled “The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision.” He was not referring to the original vision that drew people to radical faith in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and landed them the derogatory name “Anabaptist” because of their bold desire to be publicly re-baptized as adults as a symbol of their commitment to follow Christ in life, and for many in

death as martyrs. Those original Anabaptists possessed a spiritual richness, grounded in a fervent faith, like that of Paul, that was nurtured through immersion in the Bible, prayer, worship and song. It was a faith that attracted both new members as well as persecutors. It was a faith that could sing, as one Hans Schmidt did, being led to his death:

In you, O Father,  
is my joy,  
though I must suffer here!  
Let me be scorned  
by everyone  
if your grace still is near!<sup>2</sup>

Four hundred years later historian and church leader Harold S. Bender, one of the early leaders and shapers of Mennonite Central Committee, coined the language of “Anabaptist Vision” to articulate the living legacy of the 16<sup>th</sup> century martyr movement. His distillation was largely behavioral: Anabaptists understand Christian life as discipleship; the church as community, and our primary action as the practice of nonresistant love (peacemaking). He assumed, but did not articulate the way Paul or the original Anabaptists did, the foundation for this vision: beliefs in a living faith, “the indwelling presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> And herein, according to Dintaman, lies the spiritual poverty of that vision.

As a result, wrote Dintaman, the way the Modern Anabaptist vision has been handed down to our generation, has been to passionately emphasize Christian *behavior*, while giving only passing, if not apologetic attention “to the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit in the inner transformation of the person.” This tendency isn’t surprising since many Mennonites were trying to counterbalance the mainline Protestant tendency to view faith as “merely assent to doctrine” or the evangelical tendency to focus primarily on the “inner spiritual experience.”

But according to Dintaman, what has developed is a church that teaches the behavioral aspects of Christian faith without “learning equally well that discipleship is only meaningful and possible because it is an answer to who God is and what God is doing in the world.”<sup>4</sup> Without these foundational pieces, we become impoverished as a church in at least three ways.

1) The AV, with its exclusively behavioral focus actually offered little insight into human behavior. In many ways we have lost the ability to talk about “sin and the dynamics of inner bondage to death and violence.” We expect that anyone should simply be able to give up the temptation of wealth, violence, of patriotism, or inappropriate behavior if they just set their mind to do so. We aren’t very compassionate toward human weakness, so we hide it in ourselves and have trouble being hospitable to those who are deeply wounded and trapped in bondage and addiction. This may be one reason that Mennonite Churches have been slow to grow: as a denomination we may be more comfortable ministering to strong people who are in control of their lives, and we feel powerless in the presence of deeply troubled people who seem incapable of change.

2) The vision has given us an “inadequate awareness of the liberating work of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.” “First, foremost, and fundamentally,” says

Dintaman, “faith is not about us and our discipleship. Faith is about God and the work of redemption that only God can and has done for us.” This is the heart of Christian, Anabaptist faith. We have no trouble using the language about the “gospel of peace” or about Jesus’ “teachings about the way of peace,” but the New Testament understanding of God’s peace is that it comes through the “blood and in the body of Christ.” Dintaman does not want us to abandon our actions, our peacemaking, but he fears they can become a substitute for faith.

3) This leads to the third way we have become impoverished: our failure to feel and to know the “spiritual presence and power of the risen Christ.” Dintaman believes that modern Anabaptism has falsely taught a “pre-Pentecostal discipleship,” focused on the way Jesus taught his disciples and tried to create a new community. But, he says, that largely failed. It was only after Jesus’ “redeeming death and resurrection took place, and his empowering presence was poured out through the Holy Spirit, that fruitful apostolic ministry begins to happen. Joyous, healing, empowering fellowship,” says Dintaman, “always precedes fruitful discipleship.”

Which brings us back to our text of the morning. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.... Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

Our peacemaking work begins here in our worship, as we pause from our daily activities and acknowledge God who is our maker and as we invite Jesus, who saves and claims us as valuable and beloved, to transform us through the creative power of the Holy Spirit. But transformation can’t happen until we acknowledge what’s broken. We can’t truly be people of peace if we hide anger and violence within. This anger, this violence, may not be aimed at other people but at our very selves because we feel unworthy of love. Our inability to love ourselves may come from choices we’ve made and actions we’ve taken, or it may come from the betrayal of others, from the actions of others perpetrated against us.

This week I invite you to be a peacemaker toward yourself and toward God. Give yourself the same prayerful attention that you would give to another person or situation that is troubling or conflictive. Invite Jesus into this conversation; there is nothing about the human experience that Jesus, the human, does not understand or is scandalized by. God desires to extend to us the same goodness and forgiveness that we call each other to live out in peaceful living. Take time to bask in God’s love, to feel fully accepted as God’s child, and the resulting peace will flow out in peace toward others.

Joetta Handrich Schlabach

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider, *Mirror of the Martyrs: Stories of courage, inspiring retold, of 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists who gave their lives for their faith*. Good Books, 1990. P. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Dintaman, Stephen F. “The spiritual poverty of the Anabaptist vision,” *Gospel Herald*, February 23, 1993, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2