

Faith Mennonite Church
Things that Make for Peace
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Love: The first and last word in peacemaking

John 15: 12-21; Micah 6:8

You've no doubt seen the bumper sticker: "If you want peace, work for justice." If the writer of the Gospel of John had made the bumper sticker, it would no doubt say: "If you want peace, love one another." But seldom is peacemaking as easy as a bumper-sticker slogan. Seldom is it a single action. This summer we have visited various Old and New Testament texts that give us a picture of God's intention for peace on earth, peace among people. We began back in June with Jesus' call to love our enemies and we conclude our series today with Jesus' admonition to love one another. In between we've seen God's desire for equality among people and peace for the land as well as interpersonal relationships. We've seen creative peacemaking through shared meals and we've heard stories from ancient Israel and from contemporary Uganda and Israel/Palestine. We've heard of the complexity of peacemaking, but we've been reminded each Sunday that peace, shalom, wholeness and wellbeing are at the center of God's desire for all people and all of creation.

The prophet Micah expressed God's intention for peace in a somewhat longer adage. Perhaps he wore it as a sign on his back, in which case other pedestrian companions who moved a bit slower than our speeding cars on the interstate, would have had a bit more time to read and could take in a few extra lines. Micah said:

⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8)

These words provide a beautiful prelude, an ancient echo as it were, for the words we read this morning from the Gospel of John, words that are part of the farewell discourse of Jesus. Jesus had been living with and teaching his disciples for some three years. They must have surely known his passion for justice. They knew his ability to confront injustice, to expose hypocrisy, to protect the one being unjustly condemned. But now, as Jesus' faces his death, he doesn't seem so concerned about right actions as he is about essence—who the disciples are in relationship to God.

The text that we read this morning is cut right out of the middle of a larger unit, and the bookends that we didn't read are important to fully appreciate the message of these words. Chapter 15 begins with 11 verses that describe Jesus' relationship with God and with the disciples as a grapevine, a familiar image in ancient Palestine. First Jesus says: "I am the vine, and my Father [God] is the vinegrower." This is an intimate relationship even though the words that immediately follow seem somewhat harsh: "God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit." Ouch, we might say, that isn't the kind of intimacy I'm looking for! But all of you who are gardeners know the paradoxical truth of loving and pruning. Plants left to grow at will, will expend lots of energy sending out suckers and branches that don't produce fruit. A loving gardener watches,

prunes, aerates the soil, fertilizes, waters, and gets to know each plant in an intimate way. That is how Jesus described his relationship with God.

The disciples, and by extension, *we* are also part of this picture, because Jesus goes on to say, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” We’re the ones who, because of our connection to Jesus, the vine, have the potential and thus the opportunity and the responsibility to bear fruit—to demonstrate the innate nature of that plant. Jesus says, in verse 9, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.”

Listening to the Gospel of John with contemporary ears can be jarring because of the singular and repeated use of the masculine image “Father” with reference to God. But I don’t think the writer’s intention was to make a case or settle an argument regarding the gender of God, but rather to describe this intimate relationship of parent and child. We are so blessed in this congregation to have many young families and to watch the interactions of parents and children: to see the adoring look in the eyes of parents toward their children; to see the instinctive reaching out of children toward parents for assurance. This is the relationship that the gospel writer is trying to portray. God as Father is not a distant white bearded stern elder demanding respect, but a doting eternally young parent so in love with her children that she sometimes wonders if her love can be contained without her heart exploding. This is the joy that Jesus speaks of.

And this is the basis for Jesus’ call to love. Just as healthy, well-tended vines produce grapes, healthy, well-tended followers of Jesus, produce love. Love isn’t something we do to gain acceptance from God or to prove that we’re disciples. Rather it’s the natural product of our relationship of having been chosen in love by a loving God, through Jesus. Jesus says that our relationship with him isn’t one of master and slave or servant, because the servant doesn’t have full knowledge of the master’s intentions. But the whole purpose of Jesus’ life was to communicate in word and action the ways of God. And the ultimate word-action would be his death: No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

In English, we use the word friend rather casually. Friends can be folks we work with but don’t necessarily associate with otherwise. Friends can be casual acquaintances. We sometimes speak of “fair-weather” friends—people who are there in good times but disappear when things get rough. And then there are all-weather and all-terrain friends, described by the book of Proverbs as ones “who sticks *closer than a brother [or sister]* (Proverbs 22:11). This is the intent of the Greek word *philos*, that is translated in John 15 as “friend.” A closer, more literal translation would be “beloved.” Jesus isn’t casually saying “I like you guys—you’re great pals.” He’s saying “I love you...we’re siblings...we have the same divine parent who engendered us in love. I’d give everything, my very life, for you.”

And this is where the other bookend comes in. At the end of John 15 Jesus promises the coming of the advocate, the helper, the Spirit of Truth, who will be present with the disciples, with us, when Jesus is no longer physically present. More than providing comfort, Jesus promises that the Spirit will continue to help us find the way, to guide us to truth, to God.

But in between the call to love and the promise of the Spirit is a small section that gives us pause. Jesus says we shouldn’t be surprised if “the world” hates us. If we belong to the world, the world will love us, but since Jesus has chosen us out of the world, the world hates us. Historically some Christians have understood this text as a call to asceticism or withdrawal from society. In the Mennonite world of

my parents, “the world” was defined as “drinking, smoking, dancing, playing cards, and cutting your hair” a particular set of actions to be avoided. But Jesus was hated, not because he abstained from such pleasures, but because of the way he participated—eating and drinking with the marginal, giving the woman caught in adultery a reason to dance. When Jesus speaks of “the world” he is referring to the systems and people who do not recognize God’s revelation and intention of love for all—those whose prosperity and pleasure comes at the expense of others and the environment. When we confront “business as usual” we will likely encounter resistance and even hate. When Mennonites chose not to participate in military service during World Wars 1 and 2, they often faced ridicule, and even persecution. When summer volunteers from the north, many of them white Christian and Jewish seminary students, went to Mississippi in the summer of 1964 to help register black voters who were almost entirely disenfranchised at that time, the white community in power resisted with hate and violence.

Jesus is saying, “Don’t be naïve. Don’t think that love is a gentle thing that won’t face resistance! But the sign of the strength of love is that, even against resistance love doesn’t turn to the tactics of the other side, it doesn’t turn to hate, doesn’t repay evil with evil. It continues in love because it’s connected to love—to the taproot, to God.

As Alisa said at the beginning of the service, our fall church retreat at the end of September will be a time of learning some practical peacemaking skills. For many years, Mennonites in North America were known as the quiet in the land, living (mostly) peacefully in agricultural communities, offering material aid and physical assistance in times of disaster. Now we’re much more an urban church and we know that peacemaking must be proactive at all levels of society. As gardeners of peace, we need to learn the tools and tactics of effective action, even as we further ground ourselves in the life of God’s Spirit as God’s beloved children. Let us love as God has loved us.