

Faith Mennonite Church
 Series: Seek Peace & Pursue It
 August 5, 2012
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The Root of Justice and Peace is the Power of Agape Love
Romans 12:9-13:1, 8-10

“This is a love movement!”

Those were the words of Cornell West, prominent African American Christian thinker and activist, speaking at an Occupy Seattle event last November. In that context, where the call was going out for justice—for just lifestyles and for just financial and political structures in society—West went on to say, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

That’s exactly what our passage today from Paul in Romans 12-13 is about. Yes, Paul talks about peace, “live peaceably with all,” and yes, he reiterates the central sayings of Jesus on peacemaking from the Sermon on the Mount—love your neighbor, respond nonviolently to your enemy, act transformatively in the face of persecution and evil in order to overcome it. This shows that some 25 years after Jesus’ ministry, the core gospel message of nonviolent peacemaking was still being preached, indeed was given prime real estate right here in the middle of the most theologically developed book of the New Testament—the epistle to the Romans.

But Paul is acutely aware here, like Cornell West, that the call for peace *also* has to be done in a way that addresses the fundamental human need and the desire for *justice*. And further, Paul puts around these teachings of Jesus the frame of love. He infuses this whole passage from beginning to end with the theme of *agape* love—that is, a form of loving action that is offered in a voluntary and unconditional way—a type of giving without any expectation of receiving something in return. Paul grounds the peacemaking lifestyle in a holistic theology based upon the power of agape realized in all dimensions of life.

But if you’re like me, you may notice some funny, paradoxical things in this passage. First, right at the beginning he says “outdo one another in showing honor.” What? Our community life is supposed to be some sort of Olympic sport—where we’re trying to win the gold medal in humility?! Second, “leave room for the wrath of God.” What? We’re supposed to foster an image of a violent, wrathful God as the motivation for our peacemaking?!

And finally, Romans 13:1—“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...[who] have been instituted by God...,” and he goes on to state that the government wields the sword to execute wrath. (I was looking forward to hearing 13:1 read out today—I don’t think I’ve ever heard the passage used on a Sunday morning in a church in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, because the way it has been interpreted in the past just doesn’t fit so well with a pacifist perspective!). So what do you mean, Paul? Are you saying that the government has some natural right to be as violent as it wants to be and we’re supposed to just acquiesce to it? In fact,

this passage in Romans 13 has been used as the centerpiece of Christian accommodation to Empire, to structures of violence and retributive justice, throughout history. Whole political theologies have grown up around this text—be it the medieval doctrine of “two swords,” or the Reformation Doctrine of Two Kingdoms, or the Christian realism “moral man and immoral society” of Reinhold Niebuhr.

And there’s a problem on our side, as well. We actually weren’t supposed to use any of Romans 13 this morning—the recommended “Seek Peace and Pursue it” Mennonite Church USA recommended scripture for this Sunday was supposed to be just the chapter 12 part—just the part about inter-personal peacemaking. We were supposed to stop reading before we got to the bit about government. And that’s just the opposite of the problem that the accommodationist readings give—they start at Romans 13 and chop off all the verses on nonviolence and agape love that come right before it.

I can imagine Paul tearing out his hair and exclaiming, “What have you done to my passage? You’ve turned it into something about competition and vengeance and wrath and Empire-building. Can’t you see it’s all one unit from ‘Let agape be genuine’ to ‘agape is the fulfilling of the law’? I didn’t put those chapter breaks in there—that was all done later in the 13th century!”

I picked up my share of vegetables last Friday from my local CSA farm and was chopping up Kale for supper Friday night, and it occurred to me that a good lesson in this passage for today would be this: *Don’t chop up your agape! Eat it whole!* So I added three more verses, Romans 13:8-10, ones that are also usually chopped out of this discussion, to show that the theme of agape really is woven through this whole section and that the Early Church intended for this passage to be read, and agape to be practiced, in a holistic way—as a lifestyle involving *all* dimensions of life.

When you chop up your agape, it’s a lot easier to reduce it down to a collection of nice moralistic or political soundbites, and you miss the theology behind it. That is, agape love is not just a recommendation of some things to put into practice *sometimes* and not others, depending upon whether it’s convenient or not. No, agape love is recommended to us because *it reflects the very character of God*, the very power of God, reflected in the world through the action of love without expectation of anything in return—as it is modeled for us in the story of Jesus, and in the story of the Spirit at work in the church.

Yes, we are competitive people. Yes, we sometimes desire vengeance. Yes, we get angry at evil. Yes, we want to see rewards and punishments. Yes, it would be so great to view the universe and God as a giant umpire, or a computer program that’s ultimately going to *force* everything to come out just right. “Well, if that’s where you’re at in your spiritual life,” says Paul, “my advice to you is, that’s okay, don’t suppress that desire. But, give that over to God. God will take up that angry energy and that uncompromising desire for justice, and God will give it back to us in the form of empowering us with agape—the power of radical, transformative action that fully reflects God’s being.”

What if we would read this passage holistically, looking at all the different dimensions of agape in our lives, reading as if the agape God were consistently at the forefront of our vision?

First of all, consider the government part—the broadest structures of our common life—the part the Mennonite Church wanted us to chop off. If you knit these two chapters back together, you see right there at the seam Paul writing, “overcome evil with good. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” That’s the way it reads. In other words, the Early Church would have interpreted this as “Yes, the government’s an example of evil, of fallen principalities and powers. Yes, Emperor Claudius expelled our leaders, Priscilla and Aquila, from Rome in the year 49. Yes, in the sixties, Emperor Nero arrested Peter and Paul and executed them. Yes, he persecuted Jews and Christians throughout the empire, and look what he did to Jerusalem after some of the Jews revolted in 66—he raised Herod’s temple to the ground! Yes, maybe the author of Revelation 13 is right, that the Roman Empire really is a rapacious, idolatrous beast!”

“And yet, and yet,” Paul responds, “How is it that we, as followers of Jesus, are to respond to such an enemy? This is my advice: We’re not going to take up arms in revolt. We’re not going to try to set up by violence some sort of system that is even better at domination than Rome is. Neither, however, are we going to run and hide. That’s not what we Christians and Jews are about.” Agape means, for Paul, that we engage nonviolently with the structures of society, through critique from the outside and participation from the inside, in order to work at transforming them, however imperfectly, to reflect the power of agape. We act as citizens within the legislative, legal, commercial structures of domination in an “as if” fashion—*as if* they were on the road to *agape*. What would our foreign policy, domestic policy, security policy, financial policy—our “law”—look like if it genuinely had the perspective of God’s politics of agape at its root—if we really could build structures that could address each person’s needs and aspirations, without any expectation of return? *Don’t chop up your agape.*

Second, there is that dimension of our life that is more local, that deals with the strangers, the enemies, the “others” that are closer at hand in our *polis* and with whom we may need to interact. Yes, sometimes we are wronged—evil is done to us. We respond as a community, as a neighborhood, by building peace through the weapon of agape—through hospitality, restorative justice, taking on the perspective of those suffering at the lowest rung of society. These are spiritual and material weapons every bit as powerful as the military weapon of “heaping burning coals on your enemies’ heads.” Except, of course, our goal is not to injure—not to kill. Our goal is to win over, or at least to live side-by-side, *as if* our bonds of mutual respect and justice could be maintained in a healthy, sustainable way, without fear, and without expectation of return. *Don’t chop up your agape.*

Third, some of Paul’s advice here is directed toward the intimate, interpersonal dimension of life—the sphere of face-to-face “village” relationships that we encounter with family, friends, and in the church. Agape means cultivating expressions of compassion among each other that go beyond individual ego. It means being in touch with the weeping and rejoicing of members of the community in an ongoing way. It means not setting up habits of hierarchy, but rather cultivating working relationships of equality that meet each other’s needs through mutual prayer, sharing, and service. It’s a living together, as he says, in “harmony,” or as our musicians might say, “You can’t have good harmony without good dissonance.” In our communal life we strive for that creative dissonance in which there are processes for working out conflict in a sustainable,

nonviolent way, yet without that calculating, agape-killing mentality that says that an investment of one good deed demands for that investment an immediate return. *Don't chop up your agape.*

Last, Paul includes the personal dimension. “Agape” your neighbor *as yourself*—an idea included right at the end of our passage—a verse all the different interpreters tend to chop off. How would you practice agape toward yourself? Loving yourself without expectations? Sounds like a logical puzzle. The New Testament doesn't really go into a lot of explanation about what agape would look like applied to the self. But perhaps Paul's idea might be something like this: Practice showing compassion toward yourself even if you don't think you deserve it. Don't project habitual, addictive, unhealthy, violent behavior back on yourself just because you imagine you're not perfect enough, or that you need to be punished or something. No, the character of God is pure agape, and God will freely grant to you the power to love yourself as the child of God that you were always meant to be. And when we “agape” ourselves unconditionally, that also resonates throughout all the rest of our life, enhancing all other dimensions of agape that we experience and construct, and those dimensions, those larger relationships and structures, at the same time, can act back upon us to support, nurture, and enhance the agape of our inner life. This is the vision of agape resonance—going out, and coming back in—of the harmony of consonance and dissonance—of the music of the cosmos—of the reign of God. *Don't chop up your agape.*

Back in Seattle last November a member of the crowd asked Professor West what exactly he meant when he talked about using “a Love Supreme” (from John Coltrane—his name for God) to beat back corporate power. West, who had recently been arrested at Occupy protests in New York City and Washington, DC, responded, “When I talk about love, I'm talking about the most difficult, the most dangerous, the most subversive power in the world. Because when you're talking about love that means you have a steadfast commitment to the well-being of others and you're willing to do what it takes to ensure that their humanity is always affirmed.”

May those of us in this room here today be empowered in our commitment to practice the subversive agape of God, as shown to us through Jesus, within ourselves, with one another, and with the whole world. Amen.