

Faith Mennonite Church
November 17, 2013 - Peace Sunday
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The ins and outs of peacemaking

Matthew 18: Romans 12:

Peace. It's something we so deeply desire. We long for peace of mind. We pray for world peace. But around the world wars continue. From the barely literate youth soldiers of rural villages to the highly sophisticated drone command centers in the US the ways of war march on. We look on dismayed by the sparring of political leaders unwilling to compromise and by religious groups set on being right. And in our personal lives peace often eludes us as we feel pulled by multiple, competing demands, or as we worry about providing for ourselves and our families, or as we deal with conflict in our families or in the workplace or among neighbors.

Still, the longing remains, as it should. For we live with the vision of our spiritual ancestors: the prophet Micah spoke God's promise that "every person would live under their vine and fig tree with no cause for fear" (4:4) and the prophet Zechariah envisioned "each one inviting a neighbor to come under their vine and fig tree" (3:10). This was the vision of *shalom*—not simply the absence of war, but also the presence of food, shelter, community and safety. This is the peace we long for for ourselves and that we pray for the world.

While longing is important and praying is essential, Jesus said "Blessed are the peacemakers." He taught his disciples and he set an example of an *active* love of enemies. This was not some hypothetical or theoretical teaching. The Jewish community in which Jesus was raised was surrounded by enemies...the religious enemies of the Samaritans down the road upon whom Jesus' disciples would on one occasion suggest bringing down fire...the political enemies of the Roman occupiers. The memory of the Maccabean revolt, during the time of the ruthless emperor Antiochus, less than 200 years before Jesus' birth, fueled a belief in "redemptive violence" similar to the myths alive and well in our country as popular culture celebrates the wars of the past.

As members of an historic peace church, it's not surprising that when we spent time last January identifying scriptures that have shaped and continue to shape our Christian identity, we included the two scriptures we have read today. These by no means summarize or represent the wide array of teachings on peace in the Bible but they provide a complimentary pair for our reflection this morning. The passage from Matthew 18 addresses ways to maintain peace and address conflict within the Christian community while in Romans 12 Paul writes of how Christians are to relate to those outside of the church who would mistreat or hurt us, casting us as their enemy.

I'd like to reflect on these passages in reverse order because it's often easier to make peace with enemies beyond our walls than with those closer at hand. At times it seems easier to offer forgiveness to terrorists we have not met than to be gracious toward brothers and sisters in the church (our wider conference and denomination) with whom we disagree.

The passage from Romans 12 is a general call to peaceable living, and it strongly echoes Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. In commenting on this passage, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright wrote: "when God came to defeat evil, this was not achieved by using an even greater evil, but by using its opposite—namely, the surprising and initially counterintuitive weapons of goodness. To be consumed with vengeful thoughts, or to be led into putting such

thoughts into practice, is to keep evil in circulation, whereas the way to overthrow evil, rather than perpetuating it, is to take its force and give back goodness instead.”¹

A story of the weapon of goodness has been passed down in my family. My parents grew up in a small community in the northern Lower Peninsula of Michigan where a number of Mennonite families had settled to farm. These Mennonites became active in the community and some even held elected office. However, during World War I when young Mennonite men refused to join the military and there was no legal service alternative, and due to the fact that many of these families still spoke German, many in the community turned against the Mennonites. A campaign sign from the period said “A vote for a Mennonite is a vote for the Kaiser.”

My grandfather owned a hardware store and kept dynamite in stock since people used it to clear stumps as they were clearing farm land. He was tipped off that someone intended to blow up the store by igniting the dynamite. Fortunately he was able to remove the dynamite and secure the store. While his property was spared, unfortunately the Mennonite church building that stood not far away was set on fire and burned to the ground.

A young Mennonite woman who worked as a custodian in a municipal building had overheard a conversation among those who had planned the church fire. She alerted the church leaders, identifying the culprits, and they decided they should drive to the county seat and file a charge. However, the day they set out, they encountered one set-back after another. Roads were not paved at the time and tires were not robust. After changing three flat tires before getting half way to their destination, they decided the Spirit must be telling them to return home and not file a charge. They did so and proceeded to act charitably toward the persons they knew had set the fire. No further vandalism occurred and in time, one of the perpetrators began attending church and later confessed to his role. Over time Mennonites gained trust in the community and rebuilt their church building.

The passage we read from Matthew 18 is one part of a whole chapter that addresses human relationships and the ways of peace. The chapter begins with Jesus’ disciples raising a question of status: who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (Isn’t that the beginning of all conflict?) To answer, Jesus drew a child into their midst and said that to be great we need to become like children. Now children didn’t have the protected, privileged place that they have in our midst. They were among the most vulnerable in society, no doubt threatened by the type of servitude that exists in some parts of the world still today.

Jesus said that to be great we need to make ourselves vulnerable. And he went on to speak words of protection for the children, for the most vulnerable in the community. Woe to anyone who would cause them to stumble! He went further to tell the parable about the lost sheep and how the good shepherd leaves the 99 sheep that are safe—those who are enjoying peace and security—to go out in search of the one who has gone astray, the one who has become vulnerable—perhaps by choice, perhaps by accident, perhaps by circumstances beyond its control.

Then the focus shifts slightly as we arrive at the verses we read. What happens when someone disturbs the peace within the sheepfold, within the community? The translation we read this morning says “if someone in the community sins *against you*,” suggesting an interpersonal situation of wrong or conflict. But some manuscripts leave it more open: “if someone in the community sins...” Some transgression comes to light that poses a threat. Sin can threaten the cohesion or the reputation of the community. Sin sometimes affects the community outside the

¹ N.T. Wright, *New Interpreter's Bible: Romans*, 714.

church. Certainly sin affects the spiritual health of the person in question. What does the church do in this situation?

We find a seemingly simple, three-step process: It begins one on one in a very democratic way. Leaders aren't necessarily involved. *Anyone* in the community who feels wronged or senses an impropriety is to go directly to the person to express their concern. If that person raises a challenge and refuses to admit their wrong, then the first person draws another person or two into the process. If this step is not successful, the matter is brought before the entire congregation at which time the group can decide to expel an erring or unrepentant member—to treat them as an outsider—a Gentile or tax collector.

But that's not the end of the story. The very next section addresses the topic of forgiveness. Peter asks how often he must forgive someone in the community who sins against him? He's willing to offer up to seven times. But Jesus replies, seventy-seven times (or some translations read seventy times seven)! And we'll recall that Jesus never separated himself entirely from either Gentiles or tax collectors. But we are left with the dilemma of how and when to offer forgiveness to one who is not repentant.

One biblical scholar writing on this passage noted that “the Christian community as a whole is concerned with the ethics of its individual members, and it intervenes in the spirit of love and forgiveness to take pastoral action that is more than mere advice. The goal is not only to maintain the holiness of the insiders, but to bring straying members to an awareness of their sins, to repentance, and eventual restoration as well. ... Serious and stringent though these procedures are, they are in the context not of self-righteous vindictiveness, but of radical caring for the marginal and straying, and of grace and forgiveness beyond all imagining.”²

What this passage doesn't entirely do, however, is help us discern what constitutes sin in every situation nor how to keep the peace when sincere people disagree regarding the nature of sin. Several churches in our conference sent us letters of rebuke when they learned of our marriage guidelines which would extend the blessing of marriage to same-sex couples. Their letters indicated that they viewed their action as following Matthew 18 and they wished for us to change our ways or remove ourselves from the conference because, to them, we were clearly in error.

When several of us met with the conference Pastoral Leadership Committee in August as part of their review of my credentials, I believe we did so in the spirit of the breadth of Matthew 18. We made ourselves vulnerable, speaking honestly of the joy and the pain of being a community of hospitality that includes persons who have experienced the exclusion of church discipline. We listened to the concerns and fears of those who met with us, responding with hope that we can find a way to remain in fellowship even as we disagree.

We have no choice really. For whether we view those who oppose us as brothers and sisters or as enemies, it makes no difference. Jesus calls us to love, to return good for ill, to forgive and to keep forgiving. It may not be easy but it is the path to peace. Receive the good news!

² M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol 3: Matthew*. 1995, 378-379.