

## **Keep Calm & Love Your Neighbour**

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In our current sermon series we are asking "Who is our neighbour, and what kind of neighbour are we?"

In the lead up to worshipping with other Mennonite Churches in the GTA, we are examining our understanding and experience of being a neighbour.

Two weeks ago we asked "who is my neighbour" with reference to the Good Samaritan parable. Last week we asked "what kind of neighbour are we" in the context of the Toronto area Mennonite churches. I want to ask "what kind of neighbour are we" in the realm of peacebuilding. How do we as neighbours create peace? I am intentionally leaving the 'we' somewhat vague. I am simultaneously talking about us as individuals in our geographic context, as a church in Toronto, and as Mennonite followers of Jesus in the world. So hopefully there is something here for everyone.

Our question "Who is our neighbour, and what kind of neighbour are we?" is indeed a single question, not two distinct and separate inquiries. Who I am affects who my neighbour is. And who my neighbour is affects the kind of neighbour I am able to be. So it is valuable to address these questions in a group, because I am always changing, and you are always changing, and a group, or neighbourhood, holds us both as we change, and gives us a framework to continue relating. If it works well.

We will return to this point later when we look at the Philippines text, but for now let's notice simply that whoever my neighbour is, and whatever kind of neighbour I am, these roles naturally and continually shift over time, and that means the neighbour relationship, when it functions to build peace, adapts and adopts these changes.

Before we go much further, I want to say a word about love of enemy. When I think about peacemaking and the works of Jesus (and I often do) I usually jump to what Jesus says "you have heard it said, love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemy".

Love of enemy is something to get excited about, or infuriated by. I can do something with love of enemy. Love of neighbour feels like just being a good person. Love of enemy is risky, weird, disturbing. It is a way to resist the dehumanising forces and divide and conquer tactics of Empire.

There are pitfalls to this approach. We can start to act as though Jesus has replaced the old law with a new law. It can fall into a certain kind of Christian antisemitism that considers the existing law "you have heard it said" to be less evolved than what "we" practice, or preach. My understanding is that Jesus is widening or deepening the law, plumbing it for its universal essence, but not cancelling it or negating it.

When he is asked 'which commandment is the greatest' Jesus offers "Love God and love your neighbour - on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets". Jesus is not unique in this. Rabbi Hillel, who was teaching towards the beginning of Jesus's life, was challenged by a Gentile to explain Torah in one sentence. Rather graciously, he accepted, and

suggested "what is hateful to yourself, do not do to your neighbour - this is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary".

My point is that it is a good thing to put aside our ideas about loving the enemy for a time and acknowledge and explore this concept of love of neighbour. I want to show and suggest some ways that love of enemy, as a peacebuilding concept, comes out of love of neighbour and relies upon it. Jesus is not inventing a new concept but is drawing out what was always present, what has always been essential, fundamental.

Maybe it takes a former fundamentalist to focus on the fundamentals of faith. We find these here in Leviticus. These verses are an outline in how to build a neighbourhood of generosity, as Marilyn named it last week. These verses command provision for the poor and landless, protection and respect for those with disabilities, impartiality of law and equality of personhood, fair payment of workers, and where there is neighbourly discord, an ethic of honest disagreement and correction. These commandments are anchored by "love your neighbour as yourself"

Can we do this? Why would we do all of this? God does not offer many reasons in the text. There is no reasoned argument about building good neighbourhoods as a common good, although I believe that this is part of the purpose of this. There is also no loophole for ignoring these commandments if other people are not keeping them. This is why they are commandments not agreements. God's attitude is that love works preemptively, proactively, without being deserved.

And that is the sole reasoning given in the text. the common thread 'I am the Lord'. God's presence is the reasoning for these commandments of love. But I look at this text and think 'but this is social justice!' Indeed. Love of neighbour is social justice, and a fundamental foundation of faith. This helps me understand what Cornel West says "Justice is what love looks like in public". And I know that the just distribution of resources, righteous and respectful treatment of vulnerable people, and Honest disagreement rather than private feuding among neighbours are all intimately connected with peace.

For one thing, justice prompted by love reduces internal conflict and helps us deal with it. The commandment is very clear about that as a route away from vengeance and grudges, and I do not propose to spend much time on it. What we can also see is that stable, secure neighbourhoods with this neighbour-love-justice model at their foundation creates the ability to actively seek peace. I want to talk about some of the ways I see that working.

I spoke already to the children about my immediate neighbourhood. Youth and sponsors who have attended my workshops might remember my talk about how my neighbours enable my peacemaking habit. They form a community of reliable, resourceful, dependable, loving and supportive neighbours and I know that they have my back.

The workshops I have done used a neighbourhood as a metaphor for relationships between indigenous and non indigenous peoples in Canada. I was trying to establish that Christian Peacemaker Teams was primarily trying to be a good neighbour to our partners who face violence and oppression. What is true of a metaphorical neighbour might also be true of a real one. I want to tell the story of the most recent time I have found is to be true.

(Short account of being able to intervene in a situation of verbal violence with the confidence that nearby friends and neighbours could support the intervener if needed)

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a parable about a woman who has ten coins, loses one, diligently searches for it, and when she finds it, calls to her friends and neighbours to celebrate. Each coin is one day's wage. She is not rich. This is not a horde of wealth. One commentary suggests that Jesus is referring to a widow's veil, weighted with ten coins that would not have been spent except at dire emergency. Perhaps a widow, she certainly seems to be alone. Sometimes I wonder, why didn't she call her friends and neighbours to help her search? My sense is that here is a woman who is impoverished but maintaining her dignity. She does not invite her neighbours to witness her despair as she crawls around in dusty corners, but to participate in her joy. She shares the truth of her financial vulnerability with her neighbours in a joyful, life-giving way, that perhaps reminds them of their Torah obligation to care for her - of the command of God to love their neighbour.

This vision of neighbour-love-justice is not simple. It may even be costly. The landowners find their profit margins affected by leaving gleanings for the landless. Managers lose their ability to control their workers by paying them at the end of the day instead of holding onto their wages until they return the next day.

I said earlier that Jesus was not creating a new commandment when he said 'love your enemy'. He was deepening our understanding of love of neighbour, expanding that category. Jesus also expanded the expectation of love of neighbour in the neighbourhood of believers who became the church.

This is so significant that he even names it as a new commandment - love one another as I have loved you. Love your neighbour as yourself, for I am the Lord. Love your enemy also. Love one another, as I have loved you.

Ryan Dueck, in the most recent Canadian Mennonite is reading some of the Bible's texts on Love. "I regularly lament the fact that 1 Corinthians 13 is viewed by many as a wedding text about romantic love, because it isn't. At least not primarily. It's a manifesto for life together as the church.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a is among the most well-known passages in all of Scripture: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

Unpacking this is where our Philippians text comes in. We see the early church working out practicalities of the costly neighbour-love-justice model, as renewed in Jesus.

Paul writes - is there is any encouragement in Christ, the believers are to commit to a total radical neighbour-love-justice process. Leviticus called landowners to leave portions of their excess crops for the landless. Paul calls believers to abolish these class distinctions. Elsewhere he says that this has been accomplished already! It is enacted, not in a one-off donation or in jubilee cycles of wealth accumulation and distribution, but in a perpetual system of promoting justice based on the simple, practical exercise of humility.

Paul explains. Jesus was in the form of God was equal with God, but intentionally sought the lower role of the servant, even as low as a human being, as the crucified humiliated mock king of a conquered people. Costly indeed. So now that we are born again in Christ, freed into equality, not arranging each other as higher or lower based on bodies, backgrounds, educations... we have to establish this equity.

Because people are always changing. People grow, learn new skills, get older, get ill, have children, have crises, get married, get arrested... How does God's generous neighbourhood maintain equality among such flux? Through the continual proactive practice of humility, the downwards motion, seeking the good of others. If I get this job... if I make this marriage... how will I become more humble in the company of my fellow believers?

For practicing this humility, Christ was highly exalted by God. Therefore, Paul says, we copy this downward motion in our smaller setting. We enter this difficult, frightening, vulnerable perpetual revisioning. We work out our salvation - the method by which we are saved from a world of predatory control and violence - with fear and trembling. It is illogical and faithful, and therefore, a frightening prospect. But we do it for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.

Before I close I want to remind us about love of self. Love your neighbour as yourself. These two are yoked together. They depend on each other. One cannot exist healthily without the other. Love of self without love of neighbour develops selfishness, greed, isolation. Love of neighbour without love of self develops insecurity, abuse and burnout. I was reminded this week of Luther's description of a human as 'a layer of snow atop a pile of manure'. Loving ourselves - learning to see the fertile possibilities of that manure - is an integral part of being in God's neighbourhood.

When we follow Christ's example of love of neighbour it takes us into a vulnerable place. Doing it alone would be deadly. Doing it with perfect people would be without value. When we try to love one another, we find that we are all in need of neighbourly peace, justice and support. From the foundations of our faith, our commandment towards neighbourly justice in the presence of God, we are able to find peace. First the peace of everyone's needs being acknowledged, met, and surpassed. Then the active peace of a living community able to address injustice, support the oppressed, and be the light of Jesus in a world of confusion, isolation and need.

Are we this sort of neighbour? Are we becoming this sort of neighbour? Do we know the cost and are we working out how to help each other bear that cost?

One thing I know. We will continue to ask these questions, attempt these challenges, seeking God's will for us, together.

Amen