

TUMC SERMON (PEACE SUNDAY) – November 9, 2014

Matthew 5:1-15, Romans 12:9-21 and Isaiah 2:2-5

Peace: one stitch at a time

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(Begin with a piece of crochet, and gradually unravel it as the story of war is told. Start re-stitching in part B)

God saw all that was made and it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

Then came war... *(unravel a part)*

This week, Canada is remembering the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. It was supposed to be “the war to end all wars.” As you can see by how it was named (“the first”) that plan didn’t go so well. We’ve already had a second world war and sadly, wars on an increasingly global scale are far from ended.

Shaping the story:

What happens on such anniversaries is that we begin to hear stories of triumph and glory and sacrifice for country, and in Canada – a country where we once, rightly or wrongly, thought of ourselves as peacemakers – that way of talking about war seems to have ramped up lately.

Everyone shapes the story of war.

As a mother and a youth pastor, and to a certain extent, as a citizen, I can understand why narratives that glorify war might be useful. If I had sent off my two sons or my young friends to war (Isaac, Jonah, Quintin, Jerrom, Derek, Jacobo – all would have been old enough) and they had been ground up and killed and maimed and “shell shocked” by the gruesome trench fighting of the first world war – or any war – I would be trying to make sense of it somehow too, I would also hope it had served a larger purpose or any purpose at all, really.

We try to make sense of that war so that we do not have to come face to face with the senselessness and insanity of the whole thing: Losing a generation of young men, 16 million deaths, 21 million visibly wounded, countless psychological damage, three million widows, six million orphans and a disillusioned world... far from being good.

(unravel)

Those in power shape the story of war by telling us it's the only choice, by minimizing the risks and the pains of war and maximizing the presumed value of fighting for our own freedom (even while taking away the very lives and freedom of other people). They tell us it's "necessary" that there are no alternatives, that it's us or them.

Under that argument this week Canada, in our name, has officially begun to drop bombs on an ideology, with an all too familiar refrain of "our strategy is that this will all be over soon and that it will not escalate." God help us!

(unravel)

Industry shapes the story of war with its fascination with supposedly more and more precise weaponry. Yes, they say, it was terrible warfare, the problem was the technology; let's create better grenades, better bombers, better guns, radars, and remote control drones that will somehow eliminate the reality of actual people being killed by each other. The technology is so enticing and by distancing the killer from the killed, the story of war is shaped into nothing more than a photogenic technological strategy. Oh yes, and into a profitable venture for so many.

Soldiers who lived through the First World War have told their own unraveling horror stories.

(unravel)

This week I revisited a book that I had read in high school, *All is Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque – OK, I watched the movie version of it, made in 1929, a mere 10 years after the end of the so-called Great War.

It chronicles the experience of a young soldier, Paul, who eagerly signs up to fight egged on by a patriotic war-promoting teacher. After he enlists, Paul quickly learns that reality and idealism are very far apart. In a poignant scene, he comes back to his old classroom, where the teacher is urging yet another group of even younger boys to fight for their country.

Earlier Paul had spent a whole night in a trench beside an "enemy" that he had tried to stab, but whom he only mortally wounded. That night taught Paul about the humanity of the other. Now the teacher wants Paul to inspire the students, but instead he says: "I'll tell you how it is, we live in the trenches, we fight, we try not to be killed, sometimes we are, that's all."

The dismayed and unrelenting teacher tells him "No, that's not what one dwells on." And the students all call Paul a coward.

As part of a peace church, we remember stories of other people who were considered cowards in their time, the pacifist conscientious objectors – people who refused to fight in wars and refused to buy into the story of war in principle – as a matter of being faithful followers of Jesus.

We are here today, honoring our annual liturgy called Peace Sunday. We are here to name war, any war at all, as being against God’s goodness. We are here to tell the story in a different way.

I know that this is “preaching to the choir” in some way. But choirs need to meet and get some regular practice with each other, so that on performance day they are ready to sing. ☺

We had a preaching team meeting this week, and if you were to review, like we did, the sermons we’ve heard in the past months and our theme of love your neighbour you would find a clear thread of peace teachings. (They’ve been excellent and profound and I’d encourage you to listen to them again.)

(start re-crocheting)

One such story we remember today is that of E. J. Swalm a young (Brethren in Christ) farmer from Collingwood, ON who applied for and was denied conscientious objector status in 1917. Since he was drafted he reported to the military but refused to do any duties. He was stripped and forced to wear a uniform, and he still refused, so they threw him in jail abused him physically and verbally and put him into forced labour. People from the church eventually intervened and he was released. EJ went on to be an outspoken advocate for nonresistance and non participation in war.

So you see, it took courage for EJ, but it also took the diligence of faithful people, who advocated with government for even such a thing as conscientious objection, and they backed up with faithful lives as peacemakers and with a history of being “peace churches.” That’s who we are.

As a peace church we focus on a different way of seeing things, we imagine scenarios without the need for violence. For example we celebrate happenings that are unimaginable for the warmongers, like today’s 25th anniversary of the crumbling of the Berlin wall. God help us, may the wall in Israel-Palestine suffer a similar fate! (AMEN)

We celebrate and support the existence of Christian Peacemaker Teams who responded to a call to be “ready to start to die by the thousands in dramatic vigorous new exploits for peace and justice.”¹ May God protect and guide them.

¹ <http://www.cpt.org/about/history>

As a peace church we name the story of Mennonite Central Committee (and Kairos, World Vision, Effect:Hope and similar faith-based organizations you work for) that give us systems through which to make visible our love of neighbour. May God help this kind of care system to become as globalized as wars.

Each move we make towards peacemaking, helps to stitch together an alternative to war. As a peace church who does not want to lose hope, we are called to “dream of the world as it could be and not just be content with how it is.”²

It is a vision so beautifully captured in the poetic image of swords being turned into plows, weapons into farm implements. Warfare giving way to the cycles of life. The Prophet Isaiah, spells out “the conviction that God’s intention for the whole of creation is a world order free of the weapons of war, free of war itself, and free of the planning and preparation for war.”³

Isaiah mentions a mountain. Mountains in the Bible are symbols of places where God meets people and speaks to them. The prophet envisions a gathering place where all the nations will come to learn a different way of walking, i.e. of living in the world.

This vision begins with turning towards God to learn how to live differently. It’s clear that there is a learning curve involved in turning spears into pruning hooks.

I remember a story that Shane Claiborne told the youth last year at Peace it Together (an annual event at CMU). His church in Philadelphia (a community rife with gun violence) was picketing gun stores, and then started converting guns into garden implements. At one such conversion event, he told us, a mother whose son had been killed by a gun, took the hammer and pounded the ex-gun soon to be garden tool, while saying “This – is – for – my – son!”

I don’t know about you, but I’ve struggled about how to react to the news these past weeks. Despair was and is very close at hand. But I’ve become convinced that once the lamenting is done, we must, like that mother, harness whatever anger and frustration and grief we might be experiencing about the state of the world, and continue to pound away at transformation, one step, one stitch at a time, in all realms.

Romans 12, just before the passage we read, we hear the words:

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 this world, but be transformed by the

² (Shane Claiborne https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWH4R0_-4hg)

³ Believers Church Commentary on Isaiah, Friesen

renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1,2)

To those of us grown up in the church, it might seem obvious, but it is not.

A culture of fear is alive and well all around us (fear of ISIS, fear of radicalization, fear of Ebola, fear of personal violence lurking under the surface). Fear can make us close in on ourselves, but we are called to hope for and live for something different.

Take a look at Romans 12:9-21. Today I would like to encourage you, if you see yourself reflected in even one of these instructions in Romans, you are working for peace, your life is making a difference.

Are you being hospitable? Do you love another with mutual affection? Do you, in so much as possible, live peaceably with one another? Then you are working for peace.

You may have noticed the piece of crochet that Anita has been working on, they are just a few small stitches, but put together they create a lovely pattern. Even when parts of the work might seem to unravel, it's possible to pick up and start again. Such is the work of peacemaking.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Finally, we have reference to another Mountain in our scriptures today – Jesus' Sermon of the Mount. It is sometimes seen as Jesus' own hopeful vision for the world, his promises for an ideal future to come. I propose that it is a blueprint for the church.

I'll conclude with some words from a sermon I was given back in 2010, my sermon of the mount manifesto:

We are children of God's Peace

...

We believe these beatitudes are not just a pretty metaphor

We don't just pine away for peace,
we believe that with God's direction and protection
we can actually work for peace — like the button says
We take this job description seriously: this blessing and being blessed

We are the ones who value the poor in spirit, the humble, the meek
We are the ones who will comfort the mourning,
and find comfort with each other and with God
We are the ones who seek nourishment and fulfillment by seeking justice,
who break this bread and drink this cup with others and on behalf of others
We crave and serve up mercy, because God is love and has loved us first

We do not see the world with malice but with purity
We choose to be peacemakers, in the big things and in the little,
we choose not to be bullies – not to put others down so that we can look good,
we choose to be friends – even to the ones who are ... different,
we choose not to use nor defend violence against others in any way
– even if we think they deserve it ,
even in our cars and on our social media comments
even if we have to choose to do this everyday
over and over again
we choose to see in the face of the other
the face of another human being like us

We are game for the hard work of disagreement
of not walking away on first instinct
of looking for reconciliation,
of regarding others through the eyes of God's love
When facing indignation,
we have imagination for transformation

We know this is misunderstood and terribly misinterpreted
by those who believe that we are naïve,
that war is necessary, ordinary
that questioning is unpatriotic, idiotic
Yet
we persist in living out the kingdom of God

Sisters, brothers, friends
We are people of God's Peace.