

Luke 6:27-31

²⁷ ‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Luke 18:9-14

⁹ Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” ¹³ But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

Jesus told them a parable – a Mennonite and a Fundamentalist Christian went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed, “God, thank-you that I am not like other people: like Evangelicals and those non-social justice Catholics; those who think this is a Christian Nation and must be defended; even those earnest but misguided Methodists, Lutherans and Presbyterians who believe that was is sometimes a necessary evil. God, I thank you that you have made me smart enough to know that there is no gospel without peace. Amen.”

But the Fundamentalist stood far off, saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner!”

I hope that this is not too harsh a beginning to my sermon, but I know that this is a reality for me – it is easy for me, in a settling like this, to be self-justified in my own view of peace – to be harsh and judgmental to those who have been formed in a different path and understanding of who God is.

As we continue this series of Peace, I recognize that a big part of why I am a pastor is because it was the highest value of my family – of my parents and grandparents – to serve the church, a peace church. And I know that there are many wearing a military uniform who have chosen to do so for the exact same reason that I am a pastor, it was the highest value of their parents and grandparents – to serve their country (which so many link to serving God – whether in this country or others).

My point is to try and remind us that, within our passion for peace, let us continue to seek understanding. Within our hope that our world will be transformed through love, let us always remember – especially when speaking and acting for peace – to speak and act in love.

Even for us, as we seek through this worship series, to build upon and further our commitment to peace – it is important to remember that even among pacifists there is a continuum of views.

David Augsburg¹, a well-known Mennonite professor and author, tells a story of riding a subway train in Eastern Europe one winter evening. He exited the train and a man followed him. The man continued to follow as David walked to the apartment where he was staying – each turn, the man was still there. As David's heart raced, he maintained his regular pace of walking – David came to the door with keys in hand, he unlocked the door – turned around quickly and shoved the man as hard as he could into a snow bank – then got inside and locked the door.

That was an act of physical force for one's own protection. Some might say this is not the act of a pure pacifist, even though it was not using violence.

J. Lawrence Burkholder, was a teacher of Christian ethics at Harvard Divinity School and later the president of Goshen College (a Mennonite institution) – was not an absolute pacifist. J.

Lawrence referred to himself as a 'Rule Pacifist', meaning this was his rule of life, but like all rules, there are times when it might need to be broken. He was not sure that our Anabaptist/

¹ Augsburg has been a professor in the School of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary since 1990, he is Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling. I heard David tell this story at the Reedley Peace Center in Reedley, California – I might not have all the details of the story right here, but this was the main point of his story.

Mennonite ways of teaching pacifism really prepared us for some of the ambiguous situations of life. He spoke to a class I took on ‘War, Peace, and Nonresistance’ about why, in his mind, there are times we might have to use violence. He shared with our class a situation which impacted his thinking. He was doing alternative service during World War II, flying humanitarian missions with the United Nations. He was part of a crew evacuating people from a particular region before the invading German army came over the mountains. They had been told this would be their final trip, the last chance they had to evacuate people in time. The plane was overloaded, there were too many people for them to be able to take off. If they didn’t get people off the plane, they would all die. The pilot thrust a gun in his hands and said, you have to get people off this plane or we will all die here. And so this is what he had to do, a young Mennonite man who had signed-up to help with humanitarian work, forcing people off a rescue plane with a gun. It was that or all die. Clearly this shaped his view of what it meant to be a person of peace – what it meant to be a follower of Christ seeking peace in a world of violence.²

One of the things that has most challenged my view of absolute pacifism was hearing Weldon Nisly, former pastor at Seattle Mennonite, talk about his experience with Christian Peacemaker Teams in Iraq at the beginning of the emergence of ISIS in Northern Iraq. Weldon and his CPT group met with Yzidi people, a Kurdish ethnic minority group who faced incredible brutality by ISIS members – their CPT group was interviewing survivors to document human rights abuses and trying to gather information on family members (especially young women and girls) that were being held prisoner. Weldon reported that he asked some of the Yzidi people at the end of

² This was told in a class I took in the early 2000s, so again, the details of this story may be a bit off from what was shared, but the larger thrust of the story was this.

his time with them, what would you like me to tell my government in the United States when I return.

“Bomb them.” they said, “you must bomb them.”

As one who believes that this is never the answer, it was challenging to hear this response from those most directly impacted by such violence. This is not the story of a person or group, after experiencing violence, offering a word of forgiveness that makes for a good sermon illustration. It is a reminder that my peace position has been formed in one who has grown-up in relative safety –where my countries wars have been fought elsewhere, but not here – it is the recognition that my peace position has been formed largely in a life of peace.

Because I grew up as a pacifist, in some ways I struggle to really understand how a follower of Christ can truly be okay with the use of violence – I understand it on a head-level, but in the core of my being, I can't really comprehend it as a true option. I know that the vast majority of Modern-Day Christians have never seriously considered peace as a legitimate option for public life. For the vast majority of Christians, that is not within the possibility of their worldview. Walter Brueggemann says that people can really only accept something within 5% of their known worldview. For most Christians, that Jesus literally meant to ‘love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us,’ is not within 5% of their know worldview.

While this is true for most Christians of our time (and most of history), this was not always the case – for the first 300 years of its existence, the Christian Church was a peace church. The first Christians, after Jesus lived, taught, died and rose, they were pacifists. And

unlike me, their peace position was not formed in a life of comfort and safety – they were a persecuted people who often experienced much violence.

Court documents from the first two centuries of the Christian Era show Christians trying to leave the Roman legion – after they have been converted to Christianity, as followers of Jesus they cannot kill – so they tried to get out of the legion. Such a stance usually cost the ex-soldier their life (like Saint Marcellus, whose bones/relics are at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana).

One of the early leaders of the Church, Ignatius of Antioch, wrote to his fellow Christians who were being arrested and killed by the Roman government, “Do not avenge yourselves on those who injure you...”

Between 150-250 Christian Era there has not been one Christian writing found that speaks positively about warfare or Capital Punishment. And in one Roman authors writing, Celus (in 178 CE) argues that Christians are bad for the Empire because of their nonresistance, “if all were Christians in the empire, the empire would fall.”

But, as the Christian church grew and expanded after 250, it was still pacifist, but not all Christians were pacifists. Eventually, the major shift of history came once the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 313 CE – when Church and State are merged – of course this changed everything in terms of allegiance, sacrifice and what one is willing to die for. Without going into all the dates and emperors, in the end, in a span of 120 years the Roman Empire goes from having NO Christians in the army to having ONLY Christians in army

From this time forward, the church never really seriously considered whether or not Christians should use violence. The church and its theologians largely worked, after the Western World became Christian, to – at its best, try to limit the damage done by war and violence, and at its worst, give justification for wars of expansion, conversion and wealth. This is where we have to pause and acknowledge the brilliance of Jesus to never set-up an earthly political kingdom (in terms of geographic and nationalistic boundaries) – not because he failed to do so or by accident, but as an intentional choice – never creating something that humans would think they must defend with a sword.

After Constantine, the main position of the Christians church is that of ‘Just War’, that there are times when the greater good will require the use of violence. This is never really questioned by the majority or powerful Christians of the last 1700 years. There is a time when it is decided that priests and monks should stay out of the fighting, but that for the regular Christian, we must fight. Those that question the use of violence have been small minority groups (like the Anabaptist Movement, Society of Friends/Quakers, etc.)

It is interesting to note that there were two revivalist movements that begun as peace movements, but did not maintain those positions:

-Seventh Day Adventists began both as pacifists and vegetarians. It has been easier for them, in the American context, to remain more vegetarian than pacifist.

-Assemblies of God (Pentecostal Movement).

I think within these we see the recognition of peace within the gospel AND the difficulty of trying to maintain such a view if you want to be taken seriously in an American context.

Overall, the main point that the Christian Church has arrived at, especially in this country, was probably best articulated by Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote and taught that **Jesus is not the model for social ethics**. That while we claim Jesus Christ as our leader and our salvation, he is not the example we follow for living our social lives.

Niebuhr argued that *social change is needed, but it will not happen through love*. People are too selfish and injustice does not want to be challenged – it will have to be met at times with resistance (physical and violent). Jesus can be our personal model for how we relate to our families and as church members, but Jesus is no good for our public lives.

Social change is needed, but it will not happen through love. That is hard for me to simply repeat to you, even just as quoting someone else because this is so antithetical to how I feel. And so, I think, when it comes down to it, this is the ultimate question we are left with:

We all believe that social change is needed. No person, Christian or otherwise, looks around our globe and says, “this is good enough – this is probably what God had in mind.” We all believe that social change is needed. I think the key question is, whether or not we believe that this change will happen through love.

There is no force in the world better to alter anything from its course than love. – Fr. Greg Boyle.

I think ultimately why I remain a Christian pacifist is because I do believe that darkness cannot drive out darkness – that only light can do that; that only love can do that.

I believe that there is no force in the world better to alter anything from its course than love. This is my hope. My core belief.

It has been said by a few Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians that, *enemy love is the fullest sense of who Jesus is calling us to be*. That truly seeing the humanity of our enemy, that working for their reconciliation and their salvation – that this is what Christ calls us to.

And so, why Anabaptist-Mennonites (Quakers and others) continue to say that Jesus is the only model of our social ethics – is because without true reconciliation, there can never be peace.

Because peace brought by the end of a sword – peace brought with guns and weapons and the threat of nuclear annihilation – this will never be a lasting peace. The only lasting peace is in seeking transformation. The only lasting peace comes through the work of love – through the work of mutual transformation that seeks to liberate oppressed and oppressor.

And so, while as a Christian pacifist, I would argue that our goal is not to be effective, but to be faithful to our understanding of Jesus Christ. I would also argue that peace is effective – that in fact, it is the only thing that can be effective in the long-run. *There is no force in the world better to alter anything from its course than love.*

Some Christians – most even – would say this is not practical. Most would say, this is not the way of the world. And with that, we can agree, it is not the way of the world. But it is the way of Jesus Christ.

May we be a people of such a peace. Amen.