

Isaiah 1:10-18
Isaiah 2:2-4

I wanted to start my sermon this morning by explaining the trajectory of the next few weeks. As you, I hope have noticed, we are focusing on peace this morning—peace in our hearts, peace in our communities, but particularly peace in our world, and the Mennonite commitment to non-violence.

Next week we will turn to a different traditional Mennonite concern—that of justice, economic, social, and political.

Finally, two weeks from today we will have a service of dedication for the mission agencies of this congregation, publicly recognizing and blessing the work that we do as a congregation, in our attempts to be a missional people, acting in the world.

But today, I want to talk about peace.

When I was in high school my church did a whole quarter of a Sunday School class on conscientious objection and pacifism. We talked about why Mennonites refused to go to war, what it meant to be a conscientious objector, and played fun mental games like “what would you do if you were faced with someone trying to set off a nuclear bomb and you were the only one who could stop them, but to stop them you had to kill them?”

Those of us who were interested at the end of the class wrote faith statements expressing our belief that God calls us not to resist evil with evil, but to overcome evil with good, and explaining that if called into military service, we would opt for any type of conscientious objector service that was allowed. We spent a whole Sunday School hour on the process of writing these essays, so I'm a little chagrined that I have no idea what mine said. Sometime after that, I went to the post office and registered for the draft (six months late, if I remember correctly) with a draft card with “Conscientious Objector” scrawled all over it. I figured the United States was at peace, and was unlikely to get itself into a war that required the draft in the time frame I was worried about (till 2007) and I didn't want to cut off any options for federal financial aid. 9/11 hadn't happened yet and Iraq wasn't even on the horizon so I felt pretty safe.

Since then, I've publicly stated that I'm a pacifist in a number of different ways, from peace marches to television interviews, but in terms of actually having to make life decisions because I'm a pacifist, I've done pretty much zero.

Unlike people in the generations before me, I haven't had to put my conscientious objector status to the test. Despite the fact that the war in Iraq has cost the lives of thousands of Americans, left hundreds of thousands of Iraqis dead, has created a refugee crisis that has lead

nearly 10% of Iraqis to flee their homes, and has cost hundreds of billions of dollars, the war in Iraq has had almost no effect on my day to day life. I do not know anyone personally who has died in country, and very few who have family overseas.

Rather than inviting me to be a participant in the war effort, my country has asked me to continue paying my taxes and spending money as if there was no global crisis going on, and I have contentedly obliged. Sure, I've done some protesting, written my congress people in two of the three different districts I've lived in since the beginning of the war but basically, I've felt reasonably comfortable with the opportunity to express righteous indignation at the government and grumble about how our political system fails to follow the way of Christ.

This is a far cry from what it has meant to be pacifist during previous wars. Last week we talked about the persecution and execution of pacifists during the religious wars in Europe 500 years ago. Being a pacifist in that context was risking your life. Through most of Mennonite history from that point forward, pacifism has been a challenging choice. Being pacifist has often meant losing social status, jobs, and wealth, sometimes even leaving a country that no longer allowed people to escape military service. One of the primary reasons that many Mennonites immigrated to North America was to escape the requirement to serve in the military.

In the United States, Mennonites have had some different kinds of difficulties with their pacifist position. During World War One, some Mennonites were beaten or tarred and feathered because they would not support the war effort, and because they were largely of German descent. The persecution was less severe during World War Two, the Mennonites had learned to assimilate a bit more, but during this time many Mennonite churches learned to fly the flag in the sanctuary to speak to their patriotism, even though they would not fight in an attempt to avoid trouble with their neighbors.

During WWI, WWII, the Korean War, and Vietnam, there were drafts which meant that many men from the historic peace churches, Mennonite, Brethren, and Quaker, while not expected to fight in the war, did have to serve their country, building dams, working in Mental hospitals, and serving in overseas mission. To get out of serving in the army, you had to publicly defend your pacifism, and serve as volunteer labor for years of your life.

In contrast, the war we are fighting today is so unpopular that my opposition to it puts me in the majority of Americans, and my unwillingness to fight in it puts me in good company with the other 40 million or so other men and women between the ages of 20 and 30 who have chosen not to join the armed forces.

So as we celebrate God's work of peace in the world this Sunday, I wanted to take this time to ask what it means to be pacifist if no one asks you to kill.

The world does not look like the peaceable kingdom painted in Isaiah so there is clearly work yet to be done, but how do we best live out Christ's calling to love our enemies in this environment? Are we really pacifist if we rest comfortably behind the walls of the American

military industrial complex content to live our lives in peace when so many other parts of the world are broken? Have we really upheld the gospel when we refrain from violence ourselves but at least 20% of our tax dollars are going to warfare? Are we a people of peace when our practical theology seems to accept our growing complicity with oppression and violence designed to preserve the economic system that benefits us so greatly?

I want to think about these questions with you, because I think claiming what it mean to be a people of peace in the modern context is central to our task as gospel people.

There are a couple of ways to think about this question. On the one hand, I think there is room to celebrate living in a society that does not expect us to use violence. There is plenty of peace work to do without worrying about conscientious objection.

For example, teaching peace has its own validity.

I am delighted that I have been raised in a tradition that gives me perspective on the actions of my nation. I believe it is good to be able to recognize and name the hypocrisy of a country that has enough nuclear weapons to obliterate the world several times over complaining about other nations building a small stockpile, the hypocrisy of a country that complains about other nations intervening in the affairs of their neighbors when we are willing to impose our power around the globe. I am glad that I have been taught to look at the revolutionary war, the civil war, and the wars that led to the western expansion of the United States and recognize that they too were acts of destruction, where one nation imposed its will on a different group of people, and that there might have been a better way, and part of my mission as a pastor is to communicate that truth-that violence does not bring glory-in new ways and to new audiences.

It is good to learn to keep the needs of the world in our attention and our prayers, to remember the violence in Darfur, Iraq, Burma, and the like, to remember that no participants in a war have God on their side, and that all participants in warfare are surrounded by divine live. This morning we are going to have the opportunity to bring our concerns for peace before God and the gathered body in a ritual of prayer, and I believe that these ritual rememberings, the peace candle that we light every Sunday, the prayers we lift in gathered worship, are essential parts of God's calling to be a people of peace today.

Further, there is plenty of peace work to do in our own communities. The simple vision yet unreachable vision of a community at peace calls us forward, so that we struggle to find an end to domestic violence and child abuse, to discover techniques to reduce bullying and social isolation that hurt so many, to bringing about conflict mediation in a nation obsessed with litigation, in all our walks of life, there is plenty for us to advocate for and to devote our lives too without ever moving beyond the neighborhoods in which we live, without even beyond the borders of our own families.

But I think if we limit our peace position to these very good goals, its possible that we lose some of the value that God hopes that we will discover as a people of peace. Because I suspect that

part of the value of the peace position is that it sets us apart and is a clear sign that we are devoting our lives to God. Refusing to kill unmistakably communicates a rejection of the world's utilitarian framework. Self interest cannot be the deciding factor if you are not willing to use force to redesign the world in your image, and the sacrifices that historically people of peace have made to preserve their commitment to nonviolence has reminded the world again and again, that they have chosen a different path.

So without the obvious tool of conscientious objection from military service, I wonder how we might go about making a similar statement-providing clear evidence both for ourselves and the watching world that we have envisioned a new way of interacting with the world, and a new way of creating the future.

I won't try to provide a final answer to this question, I mainly open it up for your contemplation as you make your life choices. Nevertheless, here are a couple of thoughts I've had this week.

- 1) One option that many have chosen is Political advocacy. One of the ways that we can make a public commitment when the world doesn't ask for one is to advocate for peace politically. The MCC Washington office, and Mennonite Church USA have adopted this practice, and I think it is in large part because in advocating for political change we make ourselves harder to ignore, in the same way that Christ coming to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover was a political statement that the Roman authorities could not ignore. It sets us against the world in a way that makes it much harder to be silent, and fit in.
- 2) A second option is international peacemaking. Christian peacemaker teams are an attempt by Christians to put their money where their mouth is. These people go to war torn regions and serving as observers of conflict, fair brokers who are attempting to treat both sides of conflict as far apart as the US military and Iraqi insurgents with peace and justice. They see it as part of their calling as people of peace to go to those places where the children of God are killing one another and witness to a different way. This is a risky business, as the deaths of several Christian Peacemaker Team members attest, but for those who feel deeply called to a more public witness, there are few actions that are more powerful.
- 3) A third option I've been playing with for a few years is an increased commitment to V.S. One of the interesting historical notes I'd like to mention is that many Voluntary Service Units, were originally started to provide locations for alternative service during WWII and the Korean war. They continue to serve the same purpose of signifying publicly a commitment to a different way of life. We don't have a draft to push young men and women into alternative service today, but I wonder how the church might change if we encouraged all people to take a year or two of their lives and serve the world as a sign of their commitment to living out an alternative lifestyle. Not just our high schoolers, not just A, S, J, A, but all people who come become members of this faith. When we take

concrete steps that indicate our commitment to peace, I think that changes both ourselves and our world for the better.

So those are just a couple of quick thoughts on how we might be people of peace in a time period where we are not asked to go to war. And I fear that this sermon may become obsolete if the gathering tensions with Iran spread the middle eastern conflict further and stretch an already extended military further than it can bear. Nevertheless, I am sure that you may have some suggestions of your own on this question, if it even resonates with you at all. And as we continue to consider the need for peace in our world, I hope that you continue to evaluate what you feel called to do, and how you feel led to express God's peace to the world.

May the peace of Christ be with you.

Amen