

Sermon- Living Christ's Peace in a Violent World

Scripture: Rom 12:14-21, Deut 24:10-22

Sunday, March 1, 2020

Last Sunday, I dealt with Article 21 on Stewardship. Article 21 focuses stewardship of our material resources and I talked about the three kinds of tithes, the sacred tithe, the festival tithe and the tithe for the poor. Article 21 also dealt our stewardship of the time we have from God and I addressed the weekly, 7 year and 49 year sabbath cycles. I had said the way we steward our resources inside the church has a direct impact on the way we steward the Gospel for those outside the church.

Today we are going to deal with the Article 22 that addresses the things that Mennonites are most well known for, peace, justice and non-resistance and I am going to hit upon all three today.

Article 22 begins with these words, "We believe that peace is the will of God". Then article 22 paints a picture of the peace history of the world like this. "Although God created a peaceable world, humanity chose the way of unrighteousness and violence.1 The spirit of revenge increased, and violence multiplied, yet the original vision of peace and justice did not die.2 Prophets and other messengers of God continued to point the people of Israel toward trust in God rather than in weapons and military force".

It goes on to say, "The peace God intends for humanity and creation was revealed most fully in Jesus Christ. A joyous song of peace announced Jesus' birth.4 Jesus taught love of enemies, forgave wrongdoers, and called for right relationships.5 When threatened, he chose not to resist, but gave his life freely.6 By his death and resurrection, he has removed the dominion of death and given us peace with God.7 Thus he has reconciled us to God and has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation.8

As followers of Jesus, we participate in his ministry of peace and justice".

First I want to address is this idea of *making peace*.

The Old Testament word for peace (shalom) includes healing, reconciliation, and well-being. You see, shalom is more than the absence of war. It starts with making peace with oneself. This includes your looks, your talents, your circumstances and even your past. When people are not at peace within themselves, they tend to take it out on others. They want to make fun of others or put others down to feel better about themselves. In that process relationships are broken, and trust is lost. When relationships are broken a certain wellbeing is lost as well. But the Bible is very clear that at the root of all broken relationships is the broken relationship between human beings and God. There is a picture of that in Genesis. It is the picture of the cherubim, those terrifying beings with the body of a lion, wings of eagles and face of human with a flaming sword in their hands blocking the entrance into the garden of Eden. Their job was to cut off humanity's access to the tree of life and to God himself.

But God wanted to repair this broken relationship, so he sent Jesus Christ to cross the threshold guarded by the cherubim that humanity could not cross. Then Jesus Christ paid the penalty for human sin and opened a door for our reconciliation with God. Many human beings availed themselves of this reconciliation. Presumably many of you who are sitting here count yourselves as one of those people who have been reconciled to God. Now to us, we have the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us. But there are many subparts to this ministry of reconciliation. And at any given time, each of us may have the opportunity to engage in some subpart of this ministry of reconciled with God.

One of these sub parts that Article 22 is addressing is the subpart within the ministry of reconciliation that deals with pure peacemaking. Jesus Himself addressed it when he said, ***blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called the Sons of God***. What does that look like for you and me? Some of you may be wondering about the value of doing just peacemaking. There are Christian Peace-Making teams in the Mennonite Church

working in the Israeli-Palestine area trying to make peace, they are in Iraq and Kurdistan trying to bring peace, they are in many other hot spots around the world. Honestly, I have struggled with the value of peace making among people who are not Christ followers in the first place because I did not think that the peace you can have without Christ can really last. But as I have been wrestling with this issue even in this past week, the thing that has struck me is this. If you see a person hungry, would you offer him bread or would you offer him Christ? If it were Jesus Christ, he would offer him bread first and say, now that you are satisfied, I do have something even more satisfying if you are interested, right? You see Jesus take this approach with the woman at the well, the feeding of the 12,000 and every time Jesus did a miracle! So let's apply this approach to the situation of violence. If you see two people fighting on the streets, would you just let them fight it out or would you try and stop the fight or at least call for help to stop the fight before you can preach to them? Of course you would do something to stop the fight first right? Just as it is hard for someone to think about spiritual things if they are hungry for food, so also it is hard for people to think of peace with God if they are presently dealing with violence. I have come to think that the conflicts at every level in our life are opportunities God is placing in front of us to be peacemakers and in that process opening a platform for us to talk about the deeper peace that you know about. Any farmer knows that before seeds can be planted the soil has to be prepared by removing the rocks and weeds. Removing violence is like removing the rocks to prepare the soil. Article 22 states *"Our peace witness also **includes peacemaking and working for justice. Peace witness is needed even when the nations in which we live are not at war. Ministries of mediation, conciliation, and nonviolent resolution of everyday conflict can express our commitment to Christ's way of peace**"*. Jesus put it this way. He said, ***"blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the Sons of God"***.

Now there is another concern in Article 22 and that is the issue of **seeking justice**. In the commentary section of Article 22 it notes “According to Greek and Roman ideas of justice, people should get what they deserve. According to the Bible, justice involves healing and restoring relationships. That is a reason for the special concern for the poor and the oppressed evident in the Bible”.

You see, we all have that instinct in us that people should get what they deserve. But we usually don't have that same concern when the spotlight is on ourselves. When it comes to ourselves we usually want a few notches better than we deserve 😊 But let's turn the spotlight back on others for a minute. You see while the instinct that people should get what they deserve is not inherently wrong, because it is related to fairness, we usually don't factor in the reality that we never have the full picture in a given situation and in most cases we are not aware that we don't have the full picture. Any given person's condition is the result of many things like the social and economic opportunities, family issues, generational influences and even mental health issues. One of the things I learnt from talking to John is that many who come to a food pantry, are people who will just not be able to fit in any work environment. It is not because they are lazy and just want a free ride in life. So see when God distributed gifts to people, He just did not give everybody the same level of gifting. To some he gave more and to some he gave less. And the expectation was that those he gave more would reach out and help those he gave less. Because every ability that a human being has does not originate in themselves but is a gift from God, given by God for God's purpose. So those who have share with those who need. That is the Biblical view of economic justice.

And God also cares more about how those who have less are treated. That is why He has laid it out how to treat the poor in such incredible detail in the Bible. Let me give you a taste of this from Deut 24. It says, ***When you lend something to the poor, don't enter his house to get it. Wait outside while he brings it to you.*** Why? So that even as a

lender, you do not intimidate the borrower with the power you have over them, but respect their space. Deut 24 says, ***If your neighbor is poor and he lends you his cloak for security, don't keep his cloak overnight. Give it back in the night and take it in the morning.*** Why? Because you do not leave the borrower without the basics he or she needs to sustain their life, even if it means temporarily letting go of your security for this loan. God recognizes that there will always be rich and poor but there is a bare minimum that even the poor should have and that includes a warm cloak to sleep with at night. Now Duet 24 states that if ***you do return the cloak back at night, God will consider it a righteous act and bless you for it.*** On the other hand verse 14-15 says this, ***“Never take advantage of poor and destitute laborers, whether they are fellow Israelites or foreigners living in your towns. ¹⁵ You must pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it.*** Now get this. Deut 24 goes on to say ***If you don't, they might cry out to the Lord against you, and it would be counted against you as sin”.*** So what verse 15 is saying is this, you better not take advantage of the poor and destitute. If they have trouble because of you and cry out to God, that will be held against you by God Himself! It is like God is keeping a very close watch on those who are poor and disadvantaged in some way. God is also keeping close tabs on those who are helping the poor and those who are not. It is wonderful that we have families in our church that work very closely with the homeless.

Let me add this about the issue of economic justice at the national level. Election season is on us again and in this session the merits of capitalism and socialism are going to be debated on the TV screens and on Facebook pages. I want to make some observations of both those systems as it relates to economic justice. In capitalism you put your hopes and trust and power in the hands of those with big money. The question I have is this, if in the United States, it was always recognized that power cannot be concentrated in one human institution and was therefore divided into three co-equal branches that could check each others power, then how do we forget that people in private industry are

equally fallen and their power needs to be checked as well by government oversight and regulation? In this country it is easy to be blinded by the allure of capitalism. On the other hand, in socialism you do tax the wealthy a lot more, with the promise of a lot more services provided for all. But can we trust the government to make the best use of those funds and prioritize those areas that align with the values of the kingdom of God? That would be a big leap to make. So when you are thinking of whom to vote, don't fall for either a capitalist or socialist extreme but look for the **trustworthiness** and **priorities** of an individual candidate. And vote for the one who cares the most for economic justice because that is so important to God. God calls us to seek justice at every level because how we treat the poor matters deeply to God. God has called us to be a people who are always seeking justice for the weak.

I addressed two ideas laid out in Article 22. The idea of peace making that is the main message of the Bible in a way and the idea of justice for all. But I want to ask you one more question. Are peace and justice actually really independent of each other? Think about this. When there is violence at any level be it war or a conflict between two people, who is going to be at a disadvantage? The one who is weaker right? If there is war it is the poorest who suffer the most. If there is an economic recession, it is the poor that suffer the most, if there is a disease outbreak, it is the one's with the weakest immune systems that will suffer the most, when there is a weather disaster, it is the poor who will suffer the most. When one person or a group of people suffer more than others, that is the definition of injustice. In other words, violence creates injustice. Peace on the other hand creates justice. But it works the other way to. When justice is done, it creates peace. So peace creates justice and justice creates peace. Article 22 declares many times that peace and justice are inseparable. When we work towards one we get both. When we lose one we lose both.

I want to finish out on this note though. Peace is so important to God but we have to remember that violence has an incredible power. The power to spread to anyone it touches. That is why in the New Testament we are warned to “not resist evil”. I want to touch upon what it means. To not resist evil means to not engage violence with violence.

Let me quote article 22 again. It says “As followers of Jesus, we participate in his ministry of peace and justice. He has called us to find our blessing in making peace and seeking justice. We do so in a spirit of gentleness, willing to be persecuted for righteousness’ sake.⁹ As disciples of Christ, we do not prepare for war, or participate in war or military service. The same Spirit that empowered Jesus also empowers us to love enemies, to forgive rather than to seek revenge, to practice right relationships, to rely on the community of faith to settle disputes, and to resist evil without violence.¹⁰

Led by the Spirit, and beginning in the church, we witness to all people that **violence is not the will of God**. We witness against all forms of violence, including war among nations, hostility among races and classes, abuse of children and women, violence between men and women, abortion, and capital punishment”. End of quote.

The Bible is very clear that you cannot solve the problem of violence with violence. Sorry, the answer to a bad guy with a gun is not a good guy with a gun! The answer to the bad guy with a gun is finding something that will actually help the bad guy with a gun. That is what Matt 5:44 means when it says, ⁴⁴ ***But I say, love your enemies!^[a] Pray for those who persecute you!***

This is very hard to do and takes asking God to give you peace, presence of mind, love and Holy Spirit power. In your flesh, it is impossible to pray for the benefit of someone who is attacking you. But in God’s power all things are possible.

I hope is that we will be people who can be Christ's ambassadors in situations where violence and injustice is rampant. I pray that we will be able to return evil with good. I hope that each of us will be used by God to bring a little peace to our corner of the world and justice along with it. Let us pray.