
Pathways to Peace
Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 12:9-21

So - we've celebrated Remembrance Day here during worship. We prayed prayers, we heard the Last Post and the Reveille, we had our moment of silence. We reflected on our personal past and we reflected on our collective past. Is there more to it than that?

Perhaps. Perhaps there is a lot more to it than that.

Remembrance Day is not simply a time to think about war, it's also a time to think about peace. The word "peace" comes from the Latin word "pax", which means freedom from civil disorder. It is very similar to the Arabic word "salaam", which has a somewhat broader meaning: safety, welfare, prosperity, security, fortune, and friendliness. Peace, pax, and salaam all sound like worthwhile traits for our society, or indeed for any society. And no matter how you define peace, it certainly includes the absence of war.

So peace is a natural thing to desire. Besides, the obvious alternative to peace - war - is very expensive. War is expensive in terms of human life and human resources. War is expensive in terms of financial resources, fuel, materials, and goods. Not only are resources which are used for war diverted from more constructive tasks - such as education and health care - but war often destroys our infrastructure too. Not many people would argue that we don't want peace. So really, I should simply endorse peace, give a couple of illustrations, and stop talking.

But we all know that it's really not quite that simple. The thing is that even though most of the people living on our planet say that they want peace, there are essentially two ways - two paths - to try to achieve that peace, and those two ways are not compatible. And people end up being less peaceful in part because we are divided on how to achieve peace. It's a funny thing.

One of the paths to peace that humans keep trying is - in fact - war. Or to be more gracious, the path is the path of victory. There are numerous historical accounts of people fighting wars in the belief that some great final war will end all wars and therefore bring peace. We are even able to make war sound holy. In Leviticus chapter 26 for example, the author writes that God says, "I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you

afraid. I will remove wild beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you.”¹ In other words, the author believes that God supports the idea that military victory will bring peace.

We have many historical cases where people imagined that wars would actually end of themselves, and peace would therefore come. However, this has rarely happened in human history, and when it has happened, the time of peace has been relatively short-lived.

The other path to peace that humans keep trying is - justice. The idea is that war and violence are symptoms of an underlying root cause. And that root cause is injustice. Logically, then, if injustice is the root problem, then justice is a path that will lead to peace by eliminating the need for violent actions and violent responses in the first place. And if injustice is the real problem, adding even more injustice through violence will only make things worse. Two wrongs do not make a right!

Our reading from Romans depicts this sort of approach. If your enemy is hungry – feed them. If your enemy is thirsty – give them something to drink. Overcome evil – not with more evil – but with good. More than that – the approach to peace found in Romans is not just about giving things to our enemies – it's also about *feeling with* our enemies: Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Be with each other. Share our feelings with each other.

We have historical examples of people who followed the path of peace through justice rather than violence. The stories of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. come to mind.

So - of the two paths to peace - what are we supposed to do? Is one of the paths right and is the other one wrong? What we can all agree on is that both paths are popular, and that they are incompatible. Even at the level of the schoolyard, we see both played out. When faced with a conflict between students at recess, some teachers – for example – treat the conflict by making it an opportunity to discuss and promote justice and respect, while other teachers confront the conflict between students by threatening to veto the situation with their own institutional power. Are both approaches really so embedded in our human nature?

1 1 Leviticus 26:6-8 (NIV)

The 2008 movie *Passchendaele* gives us a glimpse into the interplay between these approaches. The movie is primarily about the actions and thoughts of a Canadian Sergeant in the First World War. Sergeant Michael Dunne clearly has a love/hate relationship with war and with killing other people, which comes out in different ways at different time throughout the movie. At one point, sitting in a rain- and mud-filled hole in the ground, he tries to support a new, young, scared soldier. Dunne says to the boy, “Forests burn ‘cause they have to, and oceans, they go up and down ‘cause they have to - I don’t think we’re that different. If you want to get through this then you gotta start seeing if for what it is: it’s something we do all the time ‘cause we’re good at it. And we’re good at it ‘cause we’re used to it. And we’re used to it ‘cause we do it all the time.”

The struggle between those two paths - peace through war and peace through justice - is depicted within the Bible itself. The examples highlighted earlier clearly show that some biblical authors support the idea of peace through war, while other biblical authors support the idea of peace through justice.

That sounds like a criticism of the Bible, but most biblical scholars don’t see it that way at all. John Dominic Crossan, a scholar and former Roman Catholic priest, puts it this way, “If the Bible were only about peace through victory, we would not need it. If [the Bible] were only about peace through justice, we would not believe it. The Christian Bible forces us to witness the struggle of these two transcendental visions *within its own pages* and to ask ourselves as Christians how we decide between them.”² So on this topic, the Bible simply confirms what we already know - that some of us, including people of faith, support peace through war and others of us, including people of faith, support war through justice. Perhaps that’s simply a consequence of our human nature - mixtures of good and evil that we are.

But of course, Remembrance day isn’t just about philosophies and ideologies. Remembrance day is about remembering people - actual individuals that we know who - for *many* different reasons - decided to enlist and engage in the activity of war. Today, we think primarily of those who volunteered to join the military during World War One and World War Two, although you might think of other wars too.

I imagine that most of us here today know individuals who fought in one war or another.

2 John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*, pg. 94.

People we cared about. Perhaps friends. Perhaps family. Perhaps our own spouses, or our own parents, or our own children.

And as we now are being asked to remember them - how will we remember them this year? Will we decide that a few prayers and a few minutes of silence is enough? Will it be enough to go home and look through a photo album. Will it be enough to spend time alone with our memories and perhaps with a tear or two?

Or will we decide to honour the memories of our loved one who served - and who died - by taking seriously Crossan's question.

And his question - in blunt terms - is this: Do we hope, dream, live, and breath into a future where peace is achieved through violence and war, or do we hope, dream, live, and breath into a future where peace is achieved through justice for all.

We have the right to decide for ourselves. We have the right to dream of a new world. We have the right to imagine and live into the kingdom of God right here. We have the right to remember.

We will remember them.

Amen.