
Peace Sunday
Wesley Mimico United Church
September 29, 2013
by Paul Shepherd

Based on Deuteronomy 7:1-11 and Isaiah 2:2-4

Well – it's here. Just like I promised last week, this week we are celebrating both the United Nations International Day of Peace – which was September 21, and also the World Week of Peace in Palestine Israel – which was this past week.

And just like I promised last week – it's now time for us to take up our homework. You didn't really think I'd forget, did you? For those of us who were not here last week, we had homework for this week. And the homework was simple enough. We were invited to pay attention during our daily lives – to random conversations, to the news, to our own hearts – to listen for messages of peace. This homework is really an experiment to see if we hear or think more about peace just because the United Nations and other groups choose to put labels on the calendar.

[So – from last week – what did you hear or experience about peace]

[And – from last week – what did you hear or experience about war]

I have to confess that I heard a lot more about war than I heard about peace this week. And to be honest, all that I even heard about peace was the possibility of not starting another war – yet. I can't honestly say that I heard much about actual peace at all.

Is this a sign that the world is not interested in peace? Is this a sign that the world no longer follows Christian, or even other religious values? Or is it actually a reflection of the fact that historically, many faith groups including Christians have supported and endorsed war over peace and still do today? Christian attitudes to war and peace are complex. Complex enough that Roland Bainton actually wrote a book entitled, “Christians Attitudes Toward War & Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation” in 1960. If the issue of war and peace was simple, I doubt that Bainton would have bothered to write about it.

There are 3 basic responses to war: pacifism, the idea of a “just war”, and a holy war, or crusade. According to Bainton, pacifism is the idea that war is never a good idea, and that

resistance to force should never use force. The idea of a “just war” is that war is unfortunate and regrettable, but that sometime situations make war “the lesser of two evils”, and that therefore, sometimes engaging in war is necessary. Plato understood that a just war is “based on the objective of securing peace [therefore] the amount of violence should be restricted to the minimum necessary to obtain satisfaction.”¹ The idea of a holy war or crusade is that God not only supports war, but actually calls for war. “The crusade was fought not so much with God's help as on God's behalf, not for a human goal which God might bless but for a divine cause which God might command.”²

By these definitions, the text we read this morning from Deuteronomy describes a crusade. God tells his “team” to not only occupy the land, but to utterly destroy the current inhabitants. Does this mean that God endorses war? Bainton would disagree, saying, “The Deuteronomists ... constructed the account of the conquest and in the books of Numbers, Joshua, and Judges represented their ideal as having been actualized in the taking of the land. An exceeding important point in their rationale was that Israel had invaded at the behest of Yahweh and advanced under the protection of his outstretched arm.”³ In other words, perhaps instead of imagining that God called for war. Perhaps the people engaged in war and then chose to describe the situation – later – as if God had called for war.

The Bible does include stories of crusades – holy wars – where stories are told of how God called for treatment of human beings worse than the treatment those humans would have received from human hands. Does that sound familiar? The stories of the “Christian” crusades are very similar too of course.

Now I'm sure you expect me to follow that up with biblical stories of peace. But I'm not sure that I really know any. Our reading from Isaiah this morning does include the well-known call to turn swords into plow-shares, which sounds hopeful. But once again, this call to disarm was to come after God's “team” had won. That call in Isaiah is still a call to pick up weapons. The text say to put down your weapons ... later ... after we've won. And as we know, that “later” is still yet to come.

1 *Christian Attitudes Toward War & Peace*, page 38.

2 *Ibid.*, 44-45.

3 *Ibid.*, 47.

Perhaps you believe that Jesus preached peace. Well, he did. But I believe that Jesus mainly spoke about inner spiritual peace. In John 14:27 Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” Jesus is not speaking about international peace – but personal peace.

Perhaps when Jesus spoke about turning the other cheek he was talking about peace, but again, I believe he was speaking on a personal level.

There is a Calvin and Hobbs joke, where Calvin and Hobbs are playing a “war” game, and Hobbs asks why they never play “peace”. And Calvin says it's because they don't have any role models. Perhaps that's true – even in the Bible.

The text from Deuteronomy is disturbing on another level. That text – and ones like it – are often used to justify the creation of the state of Israel on lands that were already populated – the text is often used to justify the Israeli occupation of Palestine. So the text ties in well with the fact that this is the “World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel”.

Take a look at our bulletin cover. The image shows how the land has been “shared” by Palestine and by Israel since 1946.⁴

Within the lands that Israel is stealing from Palestine are the “occupied territories”, lands which are rightfully owned by Palestine, but which Israeli squatters move into. They move into these lands protected by a powerful military machine which is supported by many first-world countries, including Canada.

This image appeared on public transit vehicles in Vancouver earlier this year, and created considerable reactions. I read a number of posts that protested against these advertisements. And what do you think people protested? Did people protest that the maps were wrong? Did people protest that the facts were wrong? No. People only protested that the image reflected badly on Israelis and by extension, on Jewish people. Nobody objected to the facts. But some people did complain that the facts were being revealed.

The facts are disturbing. The situation in Palestine Israel is nothing like an equal battle. Israel enjoys 3 billion dollars of military aid from the US every single year – including nuclear weapons and chemical weapons, and Palestine has ... rocks and homemade weapons. In the

⁴ e.g. see here: <http://o.canada.com/2013/08/28/disappearing-palestine-vancouver-translink/>

military operation called “Cast Lead” in 2008, for example, there were 13 Israeli fatalities and 1300 Palestinian fatalities. The situation is completely imbalanced in favour of Israel.

Israel gets away with this for a number of reasons: The support of Western governments, including Canada, the support of Christians who read the story in Deuteronomy in a literal way, all aided by our rampant hatred of Muslims, drummed up continuously by our media. And many people still carry a collective guilt around the treatment of Jewish people during the Second World War, and refuse to seriously critique Israel's actions.

And into all this mess – last year the United Church of Canada released a document and a mandate to try to help. Extensive consultations including site visits, along with much listening, produced a 26 page report which was approved by General Council last year. But in very brief, the report:

- affirms the rights of both Palestinians and Israelis.
- “calls for an end to the occupation, saying that it is the primary contributor to the injustice that underlies the violence of the region”.
- Calls us to reject the doctrine of “Christian Zionism” which reads passages like Deuteronomy in a way that violates love, justice and reconciliation in order to legitimate Israel's theft of Palestinian lands.
- Calls for people everywhere to boycott goods that are produced in the occupied territories but are labelled “made in Israel”.

Rev. David Giuliano, a former United Church Moderator, and an active participant in this work said, “The future of Israel and of Palestine are intimately intertwined ... Until Palestinian people experience justice, peace, and freedom of movement, Israel will be unable to fully claim its place among democratic nations.”

It may be a small step, but it is a step. Peace does not seem to come to those who merely wait. Peace comes as we bring peace ourselves to the table. Our own table.

If you didn't hear much about peace last week, start talking about it this week!

Amen.