
Pathway(s) to Peace
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
November 8, 2020
by Rev. Dr. 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 Remembrance Day than that? Perhaps. Perhaps there is a lot more to it than that.

[image: peace, pax, salaam]

Remembrance Day is not simply a time to think about war, it's also a time to think about peace. We sometimes think of peace as just the absence of war. But the word peace has broader meanings. For example, the word "peace" comes from the Latin word "pax", which includes freedom from civil disorder. The Arabic word for peace, "salaam", includes safety, welfare, prosperity, security, fortune, and friendliness. Peace, pax, and salaam all sound like worthwhile traits for our society, or indeed for any society. But no matter how we define peace, it certainly includes the absence of war.

[image: mlkj social uplift]

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. War consumes resources that could be used to enhance society. Like education, healthcare or infrastructure. If the war is on your own soil it destroys infrastructure. Therefore, not many people would argue that we do not 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. One problem is that even though most people say they want peace,

[image: divergent pathways]

there are two ways - two pathways - to try to achieve peace. And these two pathways are not compatible. And people end up being less peaceful in part because we are divided on how to achieve peace. It's a bit ironic.

[image: peace through strength]

One of the pathways to peace that humans keep trying is - in fact - war. Or to be more gracious, the pathway is peace through victory. There is a long-standing belief that one final “war to end all wars” will bring peace. Many people over 1000's of years have fought in a war they hoped would be the last war ever.

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.

This passage also demonstrates why the idea of a war to end all wars doesn't actually make sense. Because it's only the final war in our minds - if we win. If we lose, we will regain our strength and fight back later. Having a loser guarantees there will be future wars.

Many people believe that wars will simply end, and peace will therefore automatically come. However, this has rarely happened in human history, and when it has happened, the time of peace has been relatively short-lived. Perhaps the only war to end all wars would be a war that we intentionally lose. And we decide we will not try to get even later. But that's an untested theory.

[image: peace through justice]

The other pathway to peace that humans keep trying is - justice. The idea is simple. War and violence are symptoms of an underlying root cause. And that root cause is injustice. We see this lived out on our streets today. The current violence in Caledonia is a symptom of injustices against indigenous Canadians that have been going on for many years. The current violence around Black Lives Matter is a symptom of many years of injustice against black Americans. Injustice leads to violence.

[image: mljk 2 presence of justice]

¹ 1 Leviticus 26:6-8 (NIV)

Logically, then, if injustice is the root problem, then justice is a pathway that will lead to peace. If violent responses are caused by injustice, then having justice would mean there is nothing to respond violently to. And if injustice is the real problem, adding even more injustice through violence and war only makes things worse. Two wrongs do not make a right!

[image: Christmas truce]

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 is 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. Eliminate your enemies by turning them into friends.

[image: talk to your enemies]

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

[image: peace bombing]

So - of the two pathways 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 not compatible. If you want justice, you cannot value winning over all else. If you want to win, justice takes a back seat.

Even at the level of the schoolyard, we see both of these pathways played out. Imagine a conflict between two students at recess. Some teachers treat the conflict by making it an opportunity to discuss and promote justice and respect. Other teachers veto the situation with their own institutional power, teaching that might makes right. Are both pathways to peace really so embedded in our human nature?

[image: if you want peace work for justice]

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. This comes out in different ways at different times 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 pathways - peace through war and peace through justice - is depicted within the Bible itself. Our earlier examples show that some biblical authors support the idea of peace through war. Other biblical authors support the idea of peace through justice.

[image: no justice no peace]

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, put 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 some of us, including people of faith, support peace through justice. Perhaps that’s simply a consequence of our human nature - mixtures of good and evil that we all are.

[image: poppies]

But of course, Remembrance day isn’t just about philosophies and ideologies. Remembrance day is about remembering people. Remembering 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. And you might be thinking of other wars too.

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

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

another. 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.