
International Day of Peace
Chapel in the Park United Church
September 22, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 2:1-9 and Romans 12:9-21

Yesterday was the annual United Nations International Day of Peace. Was anyone here excited about that? Did anyone here participate in any of the activities that happened - other than our own luncheon? Were you even aware of any of the local peace events? Is anyone here passionate about peace? Or are you expecting a very boring, bland, politically correct sermon about peace now? You all just came here today for the coffee and goodies after service, right? Besides, we talked about peace last week. Will Rev Paul ever just stop talking about peace? Just a reminder Jesus spoke about peace a fair bit too.

I myself have attended many events designed to celebrate peace. And I will confess that many of them were very peaceful. So peaceful that I actually fell asleep. “Peace” events can sometimes be boring. Perhaps because the speakers do not want to cause any offence, and end up saying nothing at all. I don’t blame you if you expect a boring sermon now.

I’ve often wondered why it is that peace events can sometimes be so boring. And I think that one factor is that we sometimes think of world peace as something “out there”. Something that involves other people. Perhaps peace doesn’t feel relevant here in Canada because things are already fairly peaceful, right? As one example, prior to our last federal election I noticed that CBC had a summary of the positions of the different parties on a variety of issues.

The issues in the summary - in alphabetical order - and this was 2021 - were: COVID recovery, child care, climate change, emergency preparedness, foreign policy, green energy, guns, health care, housing, income supports, indigenous services, jobs, long-term care, mandatory vaccines, pipelines, racial inequality, reconciliation, seniors, and small business.

That was the complete list. Did you notice the word “peace” on that list? No! Our political leaders were not prioritizing peace during the last election cycle. “Peace”, in the

sense of world peace, could perhaps be included under “foreign policy”. But if you read the actual platforms, peace did not show up as a thing. Is that because peace does not really matter to Canadians? Is it because none of our politicians know how to address peace?

I suppose it depends on what we mean by the word “peace”. If by peace we mean the absence of war, then for most of us, peace really is something “out there”. I doubt that anyone hearing my voice here today is actively engaged in global warfare. Seeing peace as the absence of war is one way to distance ourselves from the whole idea of peace. Well, not completely, because our tax dollars are used to subsidize the war industry. Canadians are complicit with war - including the genocide in Gaza - whether we like it or not. But perhaps that’s still a distant idea. World peace probably feels like something that happens “out there”, not here in our own hearts.

I’d like to at least try to bring the topic to home though. Or perhaps I should say, to heart. Because I do not want to ignore the recent anniversary of the event that happened on September 11. I’m thinking of the event that can only be described as a terrorist attack. A country with a democratically-elected president suffered an attack from foreign nationals, resulting in the immediate deaths of 3,000 civilians - with many other deaths to follow. It was a direct attack on the freedoms of the citizens. We all remember that the date was Sept 11, which is why we call the event “9/11”. But remind me - what year was it?

2001? Oh - you are thinking of the “second 9/11”. I was thinking of the “first 9/11, sometimes called “the other 9/11”. The first 9/11 happened on Sept 11, 1973, in Chile. That was the 9/11 where the US was the aggressor, not the victim.

In the 3 years leading up to the attacks, “The Allende government nationalized Chile's foreign-owned copper industry, which was responsible for 75% of Chile’s exports. Rather than compensate the former owners, Allende sought payment for the unfairly extracted resource. And Allende did not stop with copper.

In its first year, the government nationalized 91 industries, redistributed 5.5 [million] acres of land, granted wage rises to the working class, and built quality homes for the poor. Allende hoped to build a sovereign, developed, democratic, and humane

nation - and one whose foreign policy was built on principles of friendship.”¹

This situation was unacceptable to the US. “Fearing that Allende would set a good example for other nations to follow, U.S. President Richard Nixon ordered the Central Intelligence Agency to 'make the economy scream’”² And so the US supported and staged the removal of the democratically-elected government. In place, they installed “Gen. Augusto Pinochet, whose brutal military junta imposed neoliberalism through deadly force, torture, and the "disappearance" of thousands of leftists. Despite its awareness of Pinochet's human rights abuses, including his execution of political opponents, the U.S. continued to support the pro-market dictator during his bloody, 17-year-long reign.”

Allende realized that his country was confined by the greed of international corporations. Allende had a vision of justice, equality, and peace. The US and other foreign powers used military and economic force to put an end to that. We attacked them because of their freedoms.

Which makes it a bit hard to understand the second 9/11. The US always portrays itself as an innocent victim of 9/11. But the US was the perpetrator of the first 9/11. Moreover, the US has 800 military bases in more than 70 countries on foreign soil. In contrast, Britain, France, and Russia - combined have only 30 foreign military bases. The US has interfered with many countries around the world - even overturning the democratic will of the people.

Some people have understood that the US model is all about control and protecting their own interests. In 2002 Jean Chrétien [to his credit] said that 9/11 was “a time to reflect on the consequences of the western world’s excessive greed and power”. Other politicians, like Stephen Harper, simply blamed 9/11 on Muslims.

But perhaps the bigger tragedy of 9/11 is that the US (and Canadian) response to 9/11 was the “war on terror”. The “war on terror” has been very expensive. Latest estimates put the cost at \$21 trillion in cash and about 1 million dead civilians. So perhaps the biggest tragedy was the loss of what positive work could have been done with \$21 trillion and a million human beings.

¹ <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2021/09/11/other-911-progressives-remember-allendes-chile>

² Ibid.

If we had heeded the words of Jesus, we might have put our money into trying to make the world a more just place. Instead, we took that money and we armed ourselves. Jesus said, “love your enemies”. But the “war on terror” says, bomb your enemies. The “war on terror” is not a recipe for peace.

The “war on terror” has in fact been a prime force responsible for creating terrorists. Robert Pape, a professor at the University of Chicago has done extensive research that demonstrates the suicide terrorism is not driven by extremist ideologies. It is driven by military occupations. US military actions increase global terrorism³. And some people just love it that way because they make ridiculous amounts of money supporting the war machine.

But I also want to take this conversation in a different direction. Jesus talked a fair bit about peace. Jesus often said, “peace be with you”. Early Christian writings encourage us to “do what leads to peace”. But what sort of peace were Jesus and these early writings talking about? I think in every case when Jesus discusses peace, he is talking about inner peace. Spiritual peace. Not military or global peace. Remember, even though Palestine was occupied by the Romans during Jesus’s time, Jesus never spoke against the occupation. Or if he did, it was not recorded. Jesus did not criticize the Roman Empire at all. Jesus’s harshest criticisms were reserved for uncaring religious leaders. Jesus preached inner peace.

Inner peace sounds nice. But we live in a world that sometimes makes that difficult. It can be hard because we have so many divisions in our society. What barriers do you see in our own society - and our own hearts - that prevent us from treating all people fairly? In what ways is peace missing, or incomplete because the status quo favours artificial barriers that create separation. Bring this home. Reflect on your own heart, this community of faith, and our wider community. What barriers do you see? If you don’t see any barriers, let me ask you this. In what year did Canada become a democratic country?

When Canada was created in 1867, only white adult males could vote. At that time, that was considered very democratic. The ruling class was trying to create a system

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_the_war_on_terror#Aiding_terrorism

where only elite white males could vote. So allowing all white male citizens to vote was actually progressive at that time. Moreover, in 1867 it was widely accepted (even by most women) that men were intellectually superior to women. So the whole idea of women voting was not seriously considered by the vast majority of people at that time. By 1900, women who owned property had secured some voting rights, but only on local and municipal levels. The first province that allowed women to vote provincially was Manitoba, in 1916. The last province that allowed women to vote was Quebec, in 1940.

While white women made slow headway securing voting rights, non-white people did not fare so well. People of Asian descent and Indigenous people were explicitly banned from voting in Canada until 1948. The Canadian Government did not extend voting rights to the Indigenous community as a whole until 1960. The Inuit people received voting rights in 1950. But ballot boxes were not consistently brought to the Inuit communities where the people actually lived until 1962.

So I believe that Canada became a democratic country in 1962. Not in 1867.

I share this story because it demonstrates that even here in Canada, we have a long history of racism, sexism, and using barriers to prevent the full participation of all citizens. And every time that Canadians create barriers, we choose division over peace, because peace comes from justice. And artificial barriers destroy justice and therefore destroy peace.

So - how do we reduce the barriers that prevent peace? I want to share a brief story with you. I was in a book study in Toronto once where I met a person who worked at an agency that helps people find employment. The agency was setup in order to preferentially help people of colour, refugees, people who wear clothing with religious significance, people with accents, and people who are somewhat older - in other words - people who struggle in Canada to secure employment, even when they are fully qualified. This person also shared the fact that in order to keep their government funding, her agency was required to fulfil 2 conditions:

- One condition is that they needed to register 400 new job seekers every month.
- The other condition is that they needed to secure jobs for 69% of the people who they register. And this has led to an interesting dynamic in the office.

There are 3 workers at this agency. People seeking employment come in and wait in line, so the people are seen in the order that they arrive. So far so good. But these 3 workers know at a glance which people will be hard to place, and those job seekers reduce the % success rate of the agency. So when the workers are ready for their next customer, sometimes they stall for time if they see that the next person in line will be hard to place. They tidy up some files or whatever, hoping that one of the other 2 workers will take the next customer. These workers know from harsh experience which people are very unlikely to get jobs. And they sometimes find themselves avoiding those people - the very people that the agency was setup to help in the first place.

The truth is that racism and other barriers to peace cannot be eliminated quickly by just setting up programs and agencies. I don't care what promises we hear from our leaders prior to our next election. Racism is deeply embedded in Canadian society, and it can be eliminated, but only at the speed that society evolves. And as we know, society does not always trend towards reducing racism - right now there is actually a rise in racism in our society. And we should not simply blame these 3 workers for trying to avoid people who were hard to place. The real problem is that we - the rest of society - are biased when we hire new people. And we - the rest of society - are biased when we are in a shop or a restaurant and we do not want certainly people to serve us. That is what creates the need for that type of recruitment agency to exist in the first place.

Jesus said, "peace be upon you". But Jesus never suggested that we do not have to work for that peace ourselves. What barriers to peace do you see in your own life, the life of this congregation, or our wider society? And what do you want to do about it? I hope we all have meaningful conversations about that this week and ongoing. The barriers we live with are barriers to peace, but not just "out there". The barriers are also barriers to our own inner peace.

Do you want to live in peace? Do you really want to live in peace? Start by being honest about the artificial barriers in your own life, in this congregation, and in our wider community. And remember, we are always allowed to change our minds.

Peace be with you.

Amen.