Remembrance Sunday: What have we learned?
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 12:9-21 and Matthew 13:24-30

So - we've just experienced our Remembrance Sunday liturgy here during worship. We've prayed prayers, we've 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 Sunday than that? Perhaps. Perhaps there is a lot more to it than that.

[image: st martin of tours]

In fact, there is more to November 11 than you might think too, because November 11 is not only Remembrance day, but it is also St. Martin's day; a day set aside each year to honour St. Marin of Tours. How many people here have even heard of St. Martin? I don't think I have ever heard of St. Martin myself inside a United Church. And that's a pity because St. Martin's story ties in so well with some of the issues that we might struggle with on Remembrance Sunday.

Martin was born in the year 316 AD in what is now Hungary. When he was 10, Martin became interested in the Christian church, and went to church against his parents wishes. When he was 15, Martin joined the military, and was stationed with a heavy calvary unit that operated as a ceremonial unit.

Perhaps the most famous story of St. Martin is from a time that Martin was in the Roman army, and was stationed in Gaul. One day, he was approached the city gates of Amiens, he met a beggar who was cold and had very little clothing. Martin immediately took his sword and cut his military cloak in half, giving half to the beggar. That famous scene is depicted in this image.

And that very night, Martin had a dream where Jesus appeared, wearing the half-cloak that Martin had given to the beggar. And Jesus said that it was Martin who had provided the cloak to Jesus himself. In Matthew, Jesus says that whatever we do for the poorest of the world, we do for Jesus himself. This story points to that situation in real

life.

Later in life, just prior to a battle against the Gauls, Martin decided that the Christian faith prohibited him from fighting and killing. Martin said, “I am a soldier of Christ. I cannot fight”. Martin was charged with cowardice, and he was put into jail for his refusal to fight. But Martin objected to the charge of cowardice and volunteered to go to the front of the troops - unarmed - to prove his bravery. The military leaders agreed. But before the battle started, peace was declared, and Martin left military service.

St. Martin therefore gets the credit for being the first - publicized - Christian conscientious war objector. And he is known for refusing to fight not because he was a coward, but because he was brave enough to stand up for his Christian beliefs, and to stand up to an enemy unarmed.

It seems to simple - sitting in this quiet, cozy sanctuary. God commands us to not kill. And Martin did not kill. In Romans we read, “do not repay anyone evil for evil”, but leave it to God to deal out vengeance. And Matthew's Jesus tells a parable where we are instructed not to attack evil ourselves, but to let God deal with evil in God's own time. And yet - it is human nature to believe that we can and must defeat evil. It is human nature to want to stop evil - particularly as evil is killing and abusing other people. It is human nature to imagine that there can be a final war. To imagine that there can be a war to end all wars. Perhaps that is true in God's time. But it does not appear to be true in our own time.

[image: peace sign]

Remembrance Sunday 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. But no matter how we define peace, it certainly includes the absence of war.

[image: social uplift]

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.

[image: divergent pathways]

But we all know that it's really not quite that simple. One problem is that even though most people say they want peace, there are two ways - two pathways - to try to achieve peace. And these two pathways are not compatible.

[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." 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.

[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.

Remember the suffragette movement. Where women were demanding the right to vote. The movement started with letters to politicians, speeches, education. But as the movement continued to be ignored, the movement became - over time - more violent,

leading to attempts to blow up empty buildings. Among other things. If the government had agreed fix the underlying injustice of not letting women vote - the violent acts would never have happened.

[image: justice deferred is justice denied]

And on the streets of Toronto, where some of us are still protesting for the rights of Palestinian people. And our protests are always completely ignored by government officials. I remember about 6 months into the protests an interesting conversation emerged. Some protesters felt that we had to take more direct action - including acts like breaking into Toronto weapons manufacturers and breaking equipment. And some protesters felt that that was wrong and we had to keep protesting without any acts of violence.

The truth is that if our government had actually engaged and listened, and followed International Law, the protests would have stopped immediately. But ignoring injustice can lead to violence.

[image: presence of justice]

Logically, 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 to in the first place. 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.

This photo is from the First World War. It shows German and British soldiers sharing together on a Christmas Day. They are sharing cigarettes and chocolate. Together. But the essence of Christmas is not chocolate. The essence of Christmas is sharing. Even

with your enemies.

[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. As Desmond Tutu said, “If you want peace, you don’t talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies”.

[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 the paths are not compatible. If you want justice, you cannot value winning over all else. If you want to win, justice takes a back seat.

[image: if you want peace work for justice]

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 though 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 do not 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.” 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.

[slide: field of poppies]

Of course, Remembrance Sunday is not just about philosophies and ideologies. Remembrance Sunday is also 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. But you might be thinking of people who fought in other wars too.

I imagine that many of us here today know individuals who fought in one war or 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 ones who served - and who died - by taking the words of Jesus seriously.

And the challenge to us - in blunt terms - is this. Do we hope, dream, live, and breath into a future where peace is achieved through violence and warfare? Or do we hope, dream, live, and breath into a future where peace is achieved through justice and radical compassion for all people.

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

We will remember them.

Amen.