

Peacemaking as protest: visible and vocal witness to injustice

Lenten Peace Workshop Session 3

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.”

Matthew 5:14

It is often hard to know what the right thing is to do. The problems of the world are big, and we are small. The problems of the world are messy and complex and often don't have obvious solutions. And as Christians we are faced with an additional challenge. We not only want to do good things, hopefully the right things, we want to know what the Jesus-thing is. Despite the proliferation of the bracelets and vague public sentiment, we still want to know ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ Unfortunately, it has often been the case that Christians automatically assume, without actually considering the things that Jesus said and did, that what appears good is what Jesus would do, and some things that appear good turn out not to be. And so for the most part, we are still finding that we do not know what Jesus would do, or we think we know but we have a hard time *agreeing* with each other. Or perhaps we know broadly what he would do, but lack the details and/or the methods.

Resisting injustice in our society, restoring broken people, removing systems that perpetuate violence and death are all difficult things to do, and they certainly sound like Jesus things, but there is no single unified Christian perspective on how to address these problems. Take protesting as an example. Even though there are many people who believe in Christian protest as a response to injustice and violence, there are just as many people (if not more) who believe Christians should never protest. And of course both positions have the support of scriptures and other things. Even among Anabaptists and Mennonites there is not a unified vision for what peacemaking always means and the methods we should use.

So what should we do? What can we do? These questions often go hand in hand, and usually in this order. We start with normativity, the problem of *ought*. Knowing what we do, having seen and heard what we have seen and heard, we rightly respond to our knowledge with questions of obligation. If we know about wrong things, there are probably things we ought to do. But most of the time we don't stop there, or more likely, before spending significant time considering our obligations, we move right on to finding ways to limit them. Being reasonable people, we are good at finding reasons for acting the way we want to, and so we find reasons for limiting discussions about our obligations by considering all the ways that we can't do anything different from what we are doing. Good reasons. Reasonable reasons. The problems of the world are big, and we are small, and reminding ourselves of this size difference makes it easier to find reasons for not doing anything. Perhaps this sounds harsh, and perhaps it is. People are limited in what they can do. But what are these limits, and are they good ones? Just because we are busy does not mean that we shouldn't rethink our priorities and use our time differently. And certainly there are times when it is appropriate to ask about what we can do, in the sense of what options are available to us. However, and this is an important point, the people that bring about change are usually people who spend much more time focused on what they *should* do and less time on what they *can* do. It is easy to maintain the status quo. There are many forces that influence us to keep things as they are. These forces include good-seeming things we have willingly brought into our lives. When faced with a situation where we recognize that something

needs to be done and we notice ourselves shying away from participating, it is always a good idea to step back and take some time to evaluate why we don't want to get involved. Recognizing that we tend to make choices towards our own comfort, doing things differently means cultivating a set of skills that changes our default response.

So what should we do? If we want to be people who work for peace, people who make peaceful homes and communities, we need to be prepared that peace is going to cost us something. It is probably going to cost us time and also, at a minimum, our comfort. If we are going to resist the forces that maintain the status quo, and be people who do the hard work of contributing to systematic change in our world, we will have to be willing to spend some time being uncomfortable. We don't really like this part of the process, and it may seem unproductive (there are so many people who need restoration – where does it end?), but there is no way to work for peace without perpetuating systems of domination and colonialism if you do not do the hard work of listening to the story of the people who have been damaged and abused. Listening to this story, humbly and with compassion, is how we enter into an honest relationship with the oppressed people of the world. The people that Jesus seems especially inclined towards. And one of the great things that comes from growing into a listening, and probably uncomfortable, relationship with these people is that it is only in this kind of relationship that we can come alongside people, understand the true nature of their experience, and start to see where change might begin. Rushing to find solutions without remaining in relationship will probably just create new patterns of destruction and violence. Peacemaking is never just a question of what we should do, but also of how we do things, and the best way to know how is to not skip out on listening, hearing and relationship building. And these things are not just the first thing to do, they remain an ongoing part of the peacemaking process. We are members of one body, and we cannot be at peace if we do not remain connected to all the other parts.

If we work at humble listening and allow ourselves to hear the truth of stories that make us uncomfortable, we will probably find that we do not need to work at motivating ourselves to act. We will be compelled to act by our love for people that are hurting. Hearing the story of the oppressed compels truth-loving followers of Jesus to speak out. One of the hallmarks of violence and unhealthy modes of conflict resolution is that victims are silenced. Silence, specifically coercive silence, is the great splitter in relationships, the undoer of unity. In many ways peace is just another word for Shalom, the picture of God's created wholeness and balance. Therefore, working for peace is working to restore wholeness and undo separation. When people have been forced into silence they often experience deep inner fragmentation, depression, and isolation. Speaking out, naming the reality of unjust situations, working to give a voice to the voiceless is how restoration begins. This is peacemaking as protest – when we know something is wrong we speak up, we stand out, we witness to the oppression that is coercive silence. We witness to the freedom and life that comes from truth and transparency. If we believe that we are all called to the witness of God's kingdom and the life that comes from him, we must also believe that we are all called to witness – to point out and stand up to – all the times and places that God's kingdom is not present, where people have been cut off from this life.

It is important to remember that using our voices to counter violence and oppression is not a strategy for winning. We speak out because we are compelled to witness to the truth and to witness to Christ's example of non-violent life. There is great power in this, but again we do not do what we do because of this. Using the logic of 'effectiveness' can lead us to abandon non-violent methods when they do not bring the change we want at the speed we want. We listen,

and raise our voice with the voiceless, because Jesus also stands with the voiceless, those caught in adultery and those abused by systems of poverty and subjugation by elites. It is good to remind ourselves of the likelihood of discomfort in this approach because as Jesus example shows, those who benefit from the status quo do not like to be challenged. Thus we prepare ourselves as peacemakers and followers of Jesus by having a vision of what this path might look like. This is the path walked by Martin Luther King Jr.: "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force... We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And, in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process." It may turn out that by using our voices to resist violence and to restore those who suffer that we win our freedom, and the freedom of those we have joined with, but it may also turn out that we pay a steep price for this freedom. But what else can we do? We are the light of the world. If we do not witness to the restoring and redeeming power of God by working for peace, by speaking up in protest, how will anyone see the light and know there is hope?