

**Peace-making as place-making:
building local and organic spaces where people can live in peace**
Lenten Peace Workshop Session 5

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them.”
Matthew 18:20

We are motivated by our beliefs much less than by our loves. It is not strange to find someone who can't stop doing something, despite believing they should stop, because their desires have been trained to pursue that thing and their beliefs are not capable of bringing pursuit to a halt. And our loves are shaped by our liturgies, both the liturgies of the church and the liturgies of our lives. Rhythms, the regularly repeated actions in our lives, form our loves, form our desires and create the space in which we live. Rhythms are forces that move us in particular directions, for good and for bad, and constrain our abilities for change, also for good and for bad. If you want to know what kind of person someone is, look at the things they do with frequency. Looking at these patterns we can get a sense of what someone's life is about, what they value, but looking closer we can also see the kinds of constraints that these patterns place on us. When each moment in the day is spent in service of employment for income there is little time and energy left over for other things. It is no wonder that when people have huge mortgages, car payments, school payments and debt, they find it necessary to work all the time and find it hard to make large scale changes to the patterns of their lives, even if they strongly believe they should. It is hard to find time to seek out alternative sources for clothing that doesn't involve sweatshops, and it is hard to seek out food that doesn't require enormous amounts of energy to transport, when you have no time. Many of the things we do are not intrinsically bad, in fact the goodness of good work and tired bodies is something that is largely lost today, but taking all our activities together we can see that we are locked into rhythms that move our feet in certain directions, and these rhythms are loud, constant and omnipresent.

The witness of the church through time, and in our own time, offers us a picture of how we can resist the rhythms of un-health and anti-kingdom. The witness of the church is found in our liturgies. We follow those witnesses who have come before us by repeating the words we have learned from them. We say, 'Our father who art in heaven'; we say 'the body of Christ broken for you.' And we say these things together. It is no small thing that the scriptures teach us that when we are gathered together God is among us. There is great power in doing things together for the simple reason that by ourselves we are not complete. Completeness is found in the wholeness of the body, of which as individuals we can only ever be one part. So we gather together to be shaped by what we say and sing and hear, and we hope that through our liturgies we form our loves to be the loves of the kingdom - the love of mercy, the love of forgiveness, the love of redemption, the love of charity, the love of the unknown, the love of the world, the love of peace. Community then, is a necessary condition for our witness and for our transformation. The community of the body is the place where we learn the rhythms of liturgy and where we join together to shape each other in the imitation of Jesus.

It is sad, and probably even a sin to be repented, that for many people church has not been a community where they find a place as a necessary part of the body and do not find liturgies that form the loves of the kingdom. Church membership has often become one membership among many and competes for time and energy against rhythms that form loves that are not kingdom loves. We still call ourselves communities, but this is only community in its weakest form - the

association of people at regular intervals for shared activities. But looking at history, from the earliest church right to our present day, we see examples of a richer and deeper community than the community of shared activities. We see the community of baptized people. Baptism is a statement of citizenship and allegiance. When we are baptized we say that our lives and our labour are no longer owed to the powers of the world, but that our lives belong to the kingdom, that God is our authority, and that we are identified with an alternative community. Our membership in the community of witnesses is not one membership among many, but the primary identity of our lives, which will often put us at odds with the systems in which we live.

Communities of baptized people are communities of peacemakers, and these communities build peace in at least four ways: communities oppose the forces of isolation, communities create structures that free resources to be used differently, communities provide safe places of refuge, and communities are visible witnesses to the good life, God's vision of shalom.

One of the most prevalent forces that contributes to the rhythms of anti-peace is the force of isolation. Isolation is often repackaged as independence and privacy, and sold to the public as a desirable good - isolation is the freedom to not be bothered by the messiness of other people. But there is a huge cost to this isolation-as-independence and it is the cost of loneliness and depression. Among those cultures, such as our own, that pursue and embrace our distance from people, drug use rises, divorce abounds, and depression is common. The downside of separation is well known to many, but unfortunately even those that who would choose to resist isolation, those that suffer from its ill effects and long to be more connected, often find they are not able to successfully resist on their own. Despite their best efforts, many people live their lives in relational vacuums, knowing few people and not being very connected to even those they know. It is not hard to connect the dots and see how people living in isolation are those people most at risk to damage others and be damaged by others. Without the opportunity to be shaped and formed in positive ways by loving relationships where vulnerability is possible, and inner life is nourished it is likely that the rhythms of anti-peace will produce damaged people who cannot help but damage others.

The community of Northumbria, a Celtic Christian community in the UK, has a community rule in the style of the monastic communities following St. Benedict. The rule of northumbria is the rule of availability and vulnerability. Availability means being available to our neighbours and to God, and vulnerability means being vulnerable with our neighbours and with God. In their book 'Celtic Daily Prayer' the 'Community's Rule' is described thus:

In the same way as the liturgies emerged from lives actually lived in community, so has the Community Rule. It is a response to that insistent question "How shall we then live?" It is a call to *risky* living: it is not a comfortable or easy solution to life's problems... This involves availability to God and to others - expressed as a commitment to being alone with God in the cell of our heart and to being available for hospitality, intercession and mission. Intentional vulnerability is expressed through being teachable in the discipline of prayer, saturation in the Scriptures and being accountable to one another, often through soul friendships. It also means 'embracing the heretical imperative' (challenging assumed truth), being receptive to constructive criticism, affirming that relationships matter more than reputation, and living openly among people as 'church without walls.'

This is not something to be entered into lightly!

This rule for community living shows us how we might together resist the forces of isolation. It is difficult, and requires giving up the comfort of privacy and distance, but it is likely these comforts that contribute to the problems of isolation in the first place. Again, living with this rule is not

something that can be done by yourself. It requires the mutual support and encouragement of a body.

Jesus said that the kingdom is like a mustard seed. In the kingdom small and insignificant things grow to be large and full of life. The kingdom is also like a sower, Jesus says, who sows seeds not knowing what will take to the rich soil and what will not. In these teachings we learn, what many already know, that we are called to often do small things, unseen, and to do these things without knowing what will become of them. Mennonites have often taken this to heart and have given us many examples of mustard seeds, such as the 'More with Less' cookbook. In a previous era of heightened awareness of the limitations of our natural resources, mennonite leaders asked themselves how they could help give people simple and small examples of rich lives that consume less. And the idea they came up with was a small little cookbook that showed how careful and frugal living could also be rich and delicious. The 'More with Less' cookbook was born, a cookbook that has gone on to widespread use and impact. Thinking carefully about how we can stretch our resources and make best use of what we have is a rhythm of peace. But many of us have a hard time doing this thinking, or we have a hard time finding the time to make better use of our resources.

Living in close community with each other allows us to be more vulnerable with our needs and more available to help those whose needs we come to know. When we are vulnerable with our needs, which may just mean letting someone know that we don't have a lawnmower and can't afford to buy one right now, we give people a gift; we give the gift of allowing them to be generous with us. A good gift requires a good receiver, but usually we would prefer to not let anyone know about our needs, and so do not participate in one necessary half of the equation. Community makes possible the sharing of resources, things and of labour, which in turn both conserves resources, enabling us to consume less, but also frees up the resources of time and labour to invest in the rhythms of peace - more gardening, more generosity, more time with neighbours, friends and family. Communities can build peace by thinking carefully about small practical things that cumulatively make a big impact. Building structures like tool cooperatives, or childcare-sharing networks, or micro-loan businesses, build peace by building spaces of rich living that require less employment for income, and they build peace by creating the opportunity to be generous with our increased access to resources.

Historically churches have been places of refuge. To this day, those fleeing deportation can hide in a church building in Canada and will be free from arrest while they remain inside. Unfortunately, many people have not found our churches to be such places of refuge and instead of being safe and welcoming our communities have been experienced as places of rejection and condemnation. We cannot call ourselves peace churches if we do not make places for people to live free from fear, even if we do contribute money to resolving conflicts in other parts of the world. In many ways, making our communities safe places where people can come and be free from fear is one of the most obvious ways we can be people of peace. In the neighbourhoods where we live there are people who need a safe place of refuge. There are women and children who need places to go, sometimes for a short while, sometimes longer, where they can be safe and they can receive generous hospitality. If we build communities of availability where we make ourselves available to those in need, and we increase our ability to be generous by organizing ourselves to make the most of our resources, we can make places of refuge among us. We can set aside rooms and apartments as places for people in need to stay. And if we are living with each other, being vulnerable with our needs, we can let each other

know that we cannot do this alone, and receive the support of the community as we support those who need us.

We are the city on a hill and our light shines, and our lack of light does not. We witness to Jesus and God's kingdom of peace with our lives, which means that if we do not live as people of peace our witness to the kingdom is that there is none, there is no alternative way of living that is free from violence. In the same way that we have seen from the example of others how life can be lived differently, when we choose to live as communities of peace we give people a picture of alternative life, a picture they currently do not have. Living as vulnerable communities of witness build peace by countering the 'totality narrative' most people live in. The totality narrative common to our world is the narrative that everyone ultimately wants the same thing, we all want the comfortable life of a wealthy western (white) family. Comfort is to be desired above all else. Work only as necessary and only to secure as much comfort and vacation as possible. Consumer goods are the markers of success and the key tokens of the good life. This is not just a story of what is desirable and what we should strive for, but it is a narrative of totality because it says that there is nothing else is desirable and all appearances to the contrary are false. No one really wants anything other than personal comfort, and we are all willing to sacrifice the comfort of others for our own. The good news is that there is another way to live and we can show it to people. We can do the hard work of being messy and uncomfortable, and we can do the hard work of forgiveness and repentance. And we can show others with our lives that the 'totality narrative' assumed by so many is not total. There are other ways to imagine how to live.