

Bearing One Another's Burdens

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1st Corinthians 12:12-27

Well, today we join churches across the world celebrating Peace Sunday. (Officially, it was last Sunday). But, because of this, I decided to take a break from the book of Revelation and talk about Peace. We'll come back to Revelation later.

Peace begins with our relationship with God, made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This peace then influences our personal relationships as well as our relationships with the far away stranger. Each year, Anabaptist-related churches all over the world focus on a peace theme on this Sunday. Our church is part of this Anabaptist/Mennonite family. Three of the main things Mennonites emphasise are Jesus Christ (as revealed in God's Word, the Bible), the faith community, and peace or reconciliation. The focus for Peace Sunday this year is, "When one member suffers, all members suffer: Peace as accompaniment and solidarity." "If we are interested in embodying God's peace and justice in this world, what happens to one affects and should also matter to others." The challenge is that we are all influenced by a spirit of individualism that sometimes causes us to focus more on ourselves than on those around us in our community, and beyond. In our relationships, we may not always see how we are connected. Beyond our personal relationships, God calls us to notice, and to care for those in need. As we remember that God cares for the poor, the refugee, and those who suffer, may we be inspired to give attention to areas where we can make a difference rather than look the other way. At times, this may mean just recognising the pain of others and lamenting.

1st Corinthians chapter 12, verse 12 says, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” And, in verse 26 we read, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” Like a human body, the body of Christ, the church, has many members. We are interconnected. Our behaviour towards others not only affects them, it also has an effect on our own souls, whether we realise it or not.

Most of us may know someone with whom we have trouble relating. It may feel like things would be better if we just cut that person off, but in doing so, we may also be hurting ourselves. God places different people in our lives, people who sometimes really irritate us. It’s easy, then, to wonder, how can I get this person to change? But, we may never be able to change the other person. God may be allowing these encounters to show us just how much we don’t know, how powerless we are, how much we are in need of the grace of Jesus Christ. Or, there may be something we, ourselves, need to change, in order to improve the situation.

Speaking about irritating people, I remember a time where I held on to anger. It was really a stupid reason. Some of you may remember this story. In my college days, I was so excited at a plan to share an apartment with my two best friends. We decided we’d choose each other so we could all be assigned the same apartment. Later, when the school assigned apartments though, I was shocked to see that a fourth person had been added to our group. Tom was someone I’d met earlier. We’d gotten along OK, but I’d

found his manner a bit irritating. Now, he was going to be in our apartment! He must have requested to be included with me and the two other friends. It felt like my perfect plan had been ruined by this guy! In general, we all got along OK, but I held on to my anger and irritation all year! I actually never spoke to Tom unless I absolutely needed to! Years later, as I looked back, I realised that God was showing me my stubbornness and my self-centredness through Tom. He had really done nothing wrong! Several years later, I'm glad that God gave me an opportunity to improve our relationship. Tom needed a place to stay during a visit to the area where I was living, and so I invited him to stay at my place. We then began to relate more as friends than as enemies. In looking back, my holding on to anger not only hurt Tom, it was hurting me as well. If I had let go of my anger, and instead shown more care for Tom, that year in the apartment may have gone way better...

As believers, we are part of the same body. When one member suffers, all members suffer. With Tom, I was reminded how we can cause suffering. Even when the source of suffering is from somewhere else, we are called to walk with those who are hurting. Who are the hurting in our world? Some struggle with loneliness, health issues, or unemployment, problems made worse by the pandemic. Recently many have been suffering because of forest fires. Others struggle with oppression in various forms. Indigenous people continue to suffer the effects of residential schools, and injustice continues. News of police brutality, and "Black lives Matter" protests alert us to the fact that systemic racism against people of colour seems to be increasing. The challenge

is that it's hard for us to see the areas where we participate in systems that keep some people down while lifting others up. We may think that the problems are all "out there" somewhere, not realising that we are connected.

I remember travelling in India after one of the Mennonite World Conferences in Calcutta. Out in the country, I visited a Mennonite church where there were many people struggling to have enough food to survive. It is the first time that I sensed the reality of poverty for many people. The poor people weren't just in some disconnected place far away from me. They were part of my spiritual family, brothers and sisters in Christ. They were from the same world-wide Mennonite church to which I belong!

With people dying all over the world because of the pandemic, we are reminded of how we are interconnected. Here in Canada, even if we bring our COVID infection rates down to zero, if there are still thousands of people being infected south of the border, we can't totally relax. What happens in one country can affect us all. We can't ignore the pain of those around us without hurting ourselves. In Galatians 6:2, Paul says, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Paul also says, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than [one]self. Let each of you look out not only for [your] own interests, but also for the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4) This all comes from a vision of interconnectedness, through Jesus Christ. We live in a society that emphasises individualism. It's easy to think that we are free and separate from others. Children are encouraged to become independent. This isn't wrong, but the

reality is that to be human means to be connected with other humans. We may think we can be free from other people, but it's an illusion. It's not the way of Christ.

It's tempting to focus only on ourselves, making sure we are doing OK, while we ignore those around us. It's like the priest and the Levite in the story of the good Samaritan. According to the law they had no obligation to help the man beaten beside the road, yet the message of Jesus is that we are to care, like the Samaritan who went out of his way to help the man, take him to an Inn, and pay for his care.

In Canada we emphasise the individual, but in Japan they have a different way to view humanity. For Japanese, the emphasis is on the group over the individual. It is important to learn what others in the group would like, rather than asserting one's own preference. The good of the group is seen as more important than the good of any individual. When I'm driving, my wife Rie sometimes gets irritated when I don't slow down to let another vehicle onto the road, or when I go through a yellow light when another vehicle coming from the opposite direction is trying to turn left. I know it would be best if I were kinder to other drivers. The Japanese way is to consider the situation of people around you. I've been used to just making sure I'm following the rules. If I'm doing the right thing, I may not care what others around me are doing. But, I think the Japanese way of caring for those around you, is also more Christian.

As I looked through the Peace Sunday materials prepared by Mennonite World Conference, I was surprised to see a testimony by Mitsuru Ishido. He's actually a friend of mine that I got to know during my last visit to Japan! Mitsuru is the General Council

representative for the Tokyo Area Fellowship of Mennonite Churches. He wrote a song to encourage Keiko Nasu, one of the church members “who was sewing masks to donate to refugees, foreign students and a church member with lung problems.” The song he wrote is based on the pentatonic scale of Okinawa and he plays it on a sanshin (or shamisen), a three-stringed traditional instrument used in Okinawa. Mitsuru collects shamisens and he actually gave me one the last time we’d met. I haven’t gotten around to learning how to play it yet, but you’ll have a chance to hear Mitsuru play his song, in a bit.

In his testimony, Mitsuru talks about how Okinawa has a history of peace and war. He says this: Okinawa was once called Ryukyu, and from that time it had the tradition of being an island of peace; an island without weapons. For 300 years, Ryukyu kept its independence through its diplomacy of music and dance instead of the sword. The heart of Jesus as the “prince of peace” and the “heart of peace” of Ryukyu islands have this common witness, so I tried to use the traditional scale of Ryukyu. I played the song on the Okinawan shamisen, a traditional instrument that uses three strings and snake skin-drum. In modern times, the Ryukyu Kingdom was annexed to Japan. Before the second World War, construction of military equipment was carried out. Today, the role of a strategic base called the “Keystone of Pacific” is being enforced, contrary to the traditions of the island peace. During World War II, the most intense ground battle in Japan took place in Okinawa. In order to protect the main headquarters of mainland

Tokyo, many civilians and soldiers were killed during time-consuming operations. They hid themselves in limestone caves called Gama, but at the end civilians were forced to choose death rather than being caught by the enemy and potentially leak information. This led to the order of “mass self-determination” (mandatory suicide by majority). The tragedy of a man in a family killing his mother or daughter by hand and finally attempting to commit suicide has left many wounds. After the war, residents were detained in concentration camps. Hunger became prominent as the U.S. military base took homes and fields away. However, amid the crippled life in the concentration camps, Okinawans drew on their peace tradition through music. They survived by creating a musical instrument made from cans that were picked up from the garbage. These are called Trash Can Sanshin. Okinawa’s music and peace loving mindset has never died. Although trampled many times, the attitude of living on the foundation of peace and music has kept Okinawan music alive to the present day.

I have a recording of Mitsuru playing his shamisen and singing the song that he wrote called, “Peace in my heart.” The first line, “yesu no kokoro uchini” means (The heart of Jesus is reflected in my heart). Take a listen...< recording >

Mitsuru is working to care for others, spreading peace through his music and support. With his shamisen he makes a connection with the peaceful traditions of Okinawa and the peace that passes all understanding found in Jesus Christ. Well, how about us?

What can we do? We are here to serve each other and walk with those who suffer as Christ walks with us. God cares for those who suffer.

Let's pray. Loving God, thank-you that you care for us more deeply than we care for ourselves. Help us to not forget that we are one body, through your Son Jesus. Grant us the strength and courage to bear one another's burdens. Open our eyes that we might notice those around us who are hurting. In our personal relationships may your spirit of peace be our guide, rather than a self-centred spirit. In the wider areas of suffering in our world, open our eyes to where we can make a difference in changing systems that keep people suffering. And, where we feel helpless to do anything about the suffering in our world, may we bring all this to you in prayer, knowing that you care about what happens, knowing that you are at work in our world, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.