

The Peacemakers

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Psalms 34:14, Matthew 5:1-12

This question was once asked, "If you could choose what you want most in life, what would you ask for?" The most common answer was "Peace." People want peace in their marriages, families, workplaces, country and world." The verse we read from Psalms today, says, "Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it." We all want peace, whether it be in terms of family relationships, friendships, or on a larger scale such as with the wars in Ukraine, and in Gaza. We seek peace. We look for it, and hope we can find it. But, in this verse I also sense a challenge. We might look for peace, but do we also pursue it? Do we put energy into making peace? Conflict is a natural part of life. The challenge is how to deal with it in healthy ways, when it happens. Personally, I find it a challenge to step into situations of tension or conflict in order to help improve the situation. It feels much safer to stay on the outside looking in, so to speak. But, God calls us to step into the mess, just like Jesus stepped into our world working to help make peace between people and God. His faithfulness to speaking truth, and challenging the religious leaders at the time led him to being executed on a cross. God blessed his actions, raising him to life. Jesus is now Lord of all. The forgiveness and peace we receive through him gives us wisdom and energy to work for peace in our relationships.

The Mennonite church emphasises Jesus as the centre of our faith, community the centre of our life, and reconciliation as the centre of our work. In other words, we are called to work at making peace. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is active all over the world in areas of peace and development. They help those suffering in poverty, and supporting refugees. They create centres for women who have been the victims of violence. They advocate for peace and justice at the United Nations in New York City. Traditionally, the Mennonite church has emphasised the value of working for peace in various ways. My challenge is to not just sit back and let others do the work, but instead step into situations where I might be able to make a difference. How do you pursue peace?

Today, we read the "Beatitudes", a list of nine "Blessed are..." statements with which Jesus began his "Sermon on the Mount." His speaking from a mountain likely has significance since important events for the Israelites often happened on mountains. For example, on Mount Sinai, Moses received the 10 Commandments from God and passed them on to the people. With Jesus speaking from a mountain, it makes this message more significant than your average sermon.

Some people see these Beatitudes as commands to be followed, kind of like the 10 Commandments, but they are really promises rather than commands. They are the blessings that God provides to the vulnerable... It may seem like these nine are for nine different kinds of people, but they actually reflect one group of people, those to whom Jesus was speaking. These were the poor, the outcasts, those who hungered and thirsted for righteousness rather than the oppression they were receiving. And the promises relate to all the good gifts of God's reign, life in God's Kingdom.

Half of these Beatitudes are found in the book of Luke as well. Luke focuses more on the status of the people in society, while Matthew gives these sayings a more spiritual emphasis. For example, while Luke says, "Blessed are you poor," Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." While Luke says, "Blessed are you who are hungry," Matthew says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..." Luke was focusing on people who were actually financially poor and hungry. Matthew's emphasis was wider. Some of the listeners may have been OK financially, but spiritually, they knew they were poor. Jesus is saying that those who realize their poverty, their need for help, their need for God, those who are hungry for righteousness, will be filled. They will experience God's reign and presence. In Matthew's list, others who are blessed are: those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, and the pure in heart, those who are persecuted, those who have evil spoken against them, and those who are peacemakers.

Today, I'm not going to go into too many details about each of the Beatitudes. Instead, I'd like to

focus on the theme of peacemaking as emphasized and supported in the verses read today. God's Kingdom, the place where God actively reigns is a place where people realize their poverty and brokenness, their need for God. It's a place where the pure in heart live with integrity, a place where the meek trust God to lead rather than pushing their own way. It's also a place of mourning, where we realise the effects of sin on all people, where we may be persecuted. Yet, it is also a place where the broken and vulnerable belong, a place where God reigns, a place where we receive comfort, mercy, and love. It's a place of peace. And, to be a part of this realm means not just to receive peace from God, but to share it as well – to be peacemakers, to seek peace and pursue it.

I'd now like to share about a recent experience I've had attending NARPI. NARPI is a yearly program for those with an interest in peacebuilding. NARPI stands for "Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute." For about 10 days, students, teachers, and other workers come together to learn about how to make peace in various ways. Each year the program is held in a different country. Last year, they had it at Jeju Island in South Korea, and next year, they hope to have it in Taiwan. This year, it was held in Japan with around 75 people attending. We could choose between a number of different courses which we took at Miyazaki International University. There were courses on gender and sexuality, trauma healing, and restorative justice. I took a course on Creating Peacebuilding Programs since I've been asked to lead some workshops and possibly help teach courses on conflict transformation at International Christian University here in Tokyo.

The NARPI course was great, but the best part about the whole experience was meeting people from across Japan, from China, Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and even from Ukraine. Everyone had a passion to work for peace in some area. So, it was quite an inspiration to hear their stories and see their excitement. It was interesting for me because, normally I meet people in Christian settings, but this program was open to anyone, so there were many non-Christians. It felt like God was present as I was led into a number of deep conversations when others asked me questions about the Bible and my Christian faith. Whether they were believers or not, I sensed God at work in them as they described various areas where they hoped to work for peace. For example, a man from Mongolia hopes to create a program to help lawyers gain conflict transformation skills, or a tour guide from Hiroshima wants to build in a more personal element to help people think about how they can work for peace in their lives, rather than just focusing ending war and nuclear weapon development.

There were a number of people who were already working for peace in different ways. A woman from the Philippines shared with me how someone had set fire to her family home and field, destroying everything. Eventually, they found out who had done it. Instead of fighting in court for punishment she and her family decided to forgive the person who was responsible. What a story! Her family worked with various community and armed groups who were in conflict. When they heard about her family forgiving their enemy, one of the powerful groups was so impressed that they showed new respect for the family, and decided to make sure no one else would harm them. In today's reading from Matthew, later in the same chapter, Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. I could see how a deep faith in Jesus Christ gave the woman and her family the power to even show love to their enemy.

Surrounded by so many people who were seeking peace and pursuing it, I wondered, in what areas are we pursuing peace? When we moved to Japan, I didn't notice it right away but recently, I realized that in pretty much every church that I've been a part of, there has been conflict. There have been tensions between pastors and church members, tensions between church members, and tensions within the families of church members. As Mennonite churches we talk a lot about peace, and yet we so often struggle with our own conflicts. Maybe one reason is that we have yet to grow in some of the areas Jesus lists in the Beatitudes. Do we admit our brokenness and poverty, that we need the grace of God? Are we meek, and merciful? Are we hungry and thirsting for righteousness? Or, are we slipping into the temptation to see ourselves as already righteous enough, thinking more about other people who need to grow and improve? Love and forgiveness play a major role in peacemaking. If we've been

hurt in a relationship, it may mean seeking to listen and understand the other person, rather than right away trying to prove that we were right.

“Blessed are the pure in heart...”. This means living honestly and with integrity. It reminds me of Mr. Masami Ogata. During the first part of NARPI we spent a few days in Minamata, learning about the challenges that came with the Chisso company regularly dumping harmful chemicals into the ocean, poisoning the fish. They actually had known about the problem but did hardly anything about it for almost 10 years. As a result, thousands of people have been afflicted with Minamata Disease, a terrible affliction related to mercury poisoning. The disease affects the brain, causing problems with muscle coordination, weakness, tunnel vision, damage to hearing and speech, and sometimes insanity, and paralysis, followed by death.

Let me tell you about Mr. Ogata. His family’s main business was fishing. He was about two years old when his grandfather died of the disease. Then, Mr. Ogata and about 20 other family members ended up with the affliction. He struggled with tunnel vision, and numbness and pain in his fingers. He had trouble sleeping because of the pain and underwent surgery on his fingers eight times. With more and more people getting the disease, fear spread throughout the community and beyond. At the beginning, people didn’t know what the disease was and feared it was contagious. Many people lost their livelihood and also experienced discrimination. Some people wouldn’t come near them.

Eventually everyone realized the disease came after eating affected fish. Mr. Ogata loved eating fish, but because of the discrimination against Minamata Disease survivors, he hid his symptoms, and told everyone that he’d never eaten fish. For 38 years, he pretended he was OK, and finally the government ruled that he didn’t have Minamata Disease. After years of denial, he now didn’t know whether to feel happy about this or not. He definitely had some of the symptoms. Later, he figured that the government had lacked seriousness towards dealing with the disease. But, he also acknowledged that because of his own running away from it and pretending he didn’t have it, the government likely had trouble believing that he actually had it. He then decided that he needed to stop running away and acknowledge that he had the disease. Ten times, he applied for certification, and ten times he was rejected. Finally, in 2007 he got the certification that he did indeed have the disease. He imagines that it was likely tough for the administration to forgive him for his years of lying about his symptoms. He now realizes the importance of living honestly.

In the beginning, he was hiding and not being honest, but later on, I believe Mr. Ogata showed some of the qualities that Jesus talks about. He was making peace through his forgiveness of the government who should have taken the Minamata Disease more seriously. Forgiving the Chisso corporation was also a huge step. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus talks about prayer. He says we are to pray, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...”. Forgiveness is often a key element in making peace.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Seek peace and pursue it. We know about peace being important, but it’s not always easy to get practical with peacemaking. The best way is to start with our relationship with Jesus. We can make peace, using the energy given us by God because God has already made peace with us through Jesus. We can show others mercy and forgiveness because we’ve already been forgiven by God through our Lord, Jesus Christ. By the grace of God, we can have a pure heart, living with honesty and integrity, as we learn to live with trust rather than push our own way when faced with those with whom we are in conflict. I’d like to close with verses 17 and 18 from the book of James chapter 3, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” May we taste and share the fruit of God’s peace in our lives. Amen.