

Family Likeness

Series: Seek Peace and Pursue It

Matthew 5:9, 38-48

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⁹“*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

³⁸“*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

⁴³“*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

When my oldest granddaughter was four-years-old, she made a bold pronouncement: “I’m a strong, independent woman.” That drew some chuckles, recognizing where that came from: she picked it up from her feminist mother.

Often, in observing the conduct of children, we’re inclined to say: *Doesn’t she just remind you of her mother/father.* Or, *You can tell where he comes from.* Or, *You don’t have to guess who his parents are.* There is a recognizable family likeness.

You can also tell who God’s offspring are: they’re the peacemakers; it’s their family “likeness.” Two times in Matthew 5 Jesus suggests that God’s children are peacemakers: *Blessed are the peacemakers*, Jesus said, *for they will be called children of God.* (5:9) And *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your heavenly Father.* (5:44-45)

When we think of God, various images come to mind: God as creator, or God as judge, or God as Redeemer, but try out this image of God for size: God as a peacemaker. That is who God is; that is what God does. God makes peace.

Paul in Romans 5 says that we were God’s enemies; we were in rebellion against God. In spite of the fact we were at war with God through our rebellion, God made peace with his us through Jesus’ death on the cross.

In 2 Corinthians 5 we read that God in Christ has reconciled himself to this rebellious world, to us, in other words. God is a peacemaker, a reconciler, and he likewise calls us to a ministry of peacemaking and reconciliation. The amazing thing is that those of us who claim to be God’s children demonstrate our kinship with God most clearly when we live and act as peacemakers in the world. *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

When Christians are working toward peace, making peace, it might be said of them: “Don’t they just remind you of their heavenly Father, the one who wants to make peace with us and to be reconciled with us?”

So the theme of peace from a biblical perspective raises the question of who God is, what kind of divinity is God. It also raises the question about what kind of people we are as God's called-out ones.

Before I say more about what peacemaking is, I want to say what peacemaking is not.

Peacemaking does not simply mean being peace-keepers. You've heard of Pax Romanum, the peace of Rome during the Roman Empire. It was peace at the end of a sword, peace established through occupying forces (which the Jews knew about in Palestine). It was peace experienced as occupation and oppression. That's peace? No, that's peace-keeping with the use of power, peace at any cost to the victims.

The motto of the U.S. Strategic Air Command (which oversees the nuclear weapons system in this country) is, *Peace is our profession*. That's not what Jesus had in mind; that is keeping the peace with overwhelming force, not peacemaking.

Peacemaking does not simply mean avoiding war or conflict. This is a Mennonite tendency, to think that so long as we don't go to war or get involved in other kinds of conflicts, whether violent and lethal or not, we are being peacemakers. Nonresistance was the term we used to use for this, which is a negative term: not resisting evildoers through some kind of forceful or lethal means. But peacemaking is an active, positive term. It keeps in front of us the reality that peace (shalom) has to do with both personal and corporate well-being which includes justice, prosperity, happiness, serenity, as well as peaceful relations between people.

Peacemaking does not simply mean having inner peace. Some Christians like to spiritualize all the biblical teachings on peace: it is peace between ourselves and God which results in an inner peace, they claim. But Jesus isn't talking about inner peace necessarily. In fact, being committed to Jesus' way of peace may not even lead to peaceful relationships with others. Indeed, Jesus acknowledges that it can lead to persecution. The reality is, if we're disciples of Christ, this is likely going to cause us turmoil, both inward and outward turmoil, not necessarily tranquility.

Peacemaking involves pursuing acts of peace, doing things which make for peace, not simply avoiding war or conflict or merely "keeping the peace." Jim Forest, a Catholic peacemaker, said: "Among the things that Christ did *not* say in the Sermon on the Mount is, 'Blessed are those who prefer peace, wish for peace, await peace, love peace, or praise peace.' His blessing is on the *makers* of peace."

Peacemaking involves working toward justice where necessary. There can be no true peace (shalom) where there are gross inequalities, where some people have power and privilege while others live in poverty, degradation, and despair. Do you know the three wealthiest Americans own as much wealth as the bottom half of all Americans? Is that right? Is that just?

Of course, taking on the powers that maintain such inequalities is never popular; so peacemaking can be a risky business; on the surface, it may not appear very peaceful at all. But then think of Jesus: controversy and conflict seemed to follow him throughout his life, and it led to his death. "Many regard the Prince of Peace as a disturber of the peace" (Forest).

Peacemaking means we must deal with the demons inside ourselves which lead to conflict and disharmony with others. We must make peace with ourselves. Although as I said before, the peace Jesus talks about isn't merely inner tranquility, inner and outer peace do go together, after all. All too often, people who create conflicts and wars are in part, at least, projecting their own unresolved agenda onto others. I'm reminded of what Walter Wink, a biblical scholar and promoter of peace, said: some of the angriest people he ever met were in the

anti-war movement. Being peacemakers entails being at peace with God; and being at peace with ourselves.

Peacemaking entails patience. Mennonite church historian Alan Kreider discovered that patience was a key concern of the early church up until the time of Constantine. Patience was a key ingredient in their commitment to Jesus' way of peace. This patience was grounded in the belief that God is patient with us, and we should therefore be patient with others. We should not try to control outcomes or the behavior of others through force. We should live in an unhurried manner, living at the pace given by God.

Peacemaking involves forgiveness: not keeping score, wiping the slate clean. True forgiveness means letting go of slights, no longer wishing to get back at the person who harmed us in some way.

Some years ago at College Mennonite Church we were encouraged to pray the Lord's Prayer five times a day during Lent. I always pray it once a day, and during that Lenten season I never got it up to more than three times a day. But after awhile a conviction emerged: I cannot continue to pray over and over "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" if I'm going to hang on to some grievances against others. I slowly started letting those grievances go. It was a spiritual liberation.

Peacemaking challenges us to be creative. I cannot give you a proof-text on this point, but it seems to me the early church practiced creativity in settling disputes. Consider the example in Acts 15 when there was a dispute over how much of the Jewish law should be imposed on Gentile believers. The Spirit led them to a healthy compromise. Too often conflicts emerge over impatience and a lack of creative exploration of non-violent means of settling conflicts.

Peacemaking means that we sometimes must bear the cross of Christ. Peacemaking cost Jesus his life. He came to make peace between God and us, and to work toward peace among God's warring children. And what happened? Jesus got caught in the crossfire, so to speak. And he promised us that if we take up our cross and follow him, the road isn't necessarily going to be an easy one. We may experience suffering and persecution on account of him.

Peacemaking must begin with us; and a good place to begin is by loving our enemies. To be sure, we do have enemies; we should be honest about that. But I'm reminded of what Flannery O'Connor said: "It is hard to make your adversaries real people unless you recognize yourself in them—in which case, if you don't watch out, they cease to be adversaries" (*The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*).

God loves his enemies and attempts to make peace with them; as his children, so must we. That is why Jesus told us to pray for our enemies. It helps us to see our enemies the way God sees them—in need of his love and redemption. Even if the other person isn't willing to do what it takes to make for peace, we can do our part. You know the saying: it takes two people to develop a friendship; it only takes one to stop an argument or a fight.

What if questions: People committed to the peacemaking way of Christ often get asked all kinds of hard questions, some real, some hypothetical. *Didn't Hitler have to be stopped? Or, What would you do if some crazed gunman were about to attack your wife or one of your kids?*

On my way to Tehran, Iran in 2008 I was seated beside the Iranian ambassador to Mexico. We had some good, friendly and animated conversation about our differences, both religious and national. I was able to challenge him about some of the antics of President Ahmadinejad. He was particularly incensed at the Mennonite concept of peace. There are times when you have no choice but to use force to counter force. Not doing so is irresponsible.

Let me tell you two stories about making peace practical.

Many of you here knew Atlee Beechy, I'm sure, who was a professor at Goshen College and was very actively engaged in peacemaking work with Mennonite Central Committee. He was my spouse Suzanne's uncle, so I knew him as Uncle Atlee. He was one of the best peacemakers I've ever known.

Atlee grew up in very rural Holmes Country, Ohio. He started his career teaching in an inner-city school in Columbus. One day during recess he discovered an animated crowd on the playground. Two boys were fighting in the middle, and one had a knife he was about to use. Atlee instinctively went up behind him, took his arm and grabbed it, twisting it behind the boy's head, and then retrieved the knife.

Decades later Atlee still had misgivings about what he had done: was this the way a peacemaker should have handled this situation? I wouldn't second-guess him: I would stop violence to another person if I could do it without inflicting harm on that person, even if it meant I would be harmed in the process.

During the French and Indian War, a Hochstetler family, a Mennonite family in eastern Pennsylvania, was attacked by some hostile native Americans. Consequently,

a son and daughter were tomahawked and scalped, and the mother was stabbed through the heart with a butcher knife and scalped.... The father and another of his sons—who their captors decided not to kill because they were intrigued by his blue eyes—were taken captive and led into the frontier. They were released years later as part of a prisoner exchange in the French and Indian War....

The sons had guns and ammunition in the home and were ready to defend the family, but the father, firmly believing in the doctrine of non-resistance did not give his consent. In vain they begged him. He told them it was not right to take someone's life, even to save one's own.¹

The most recent account of this incident that I read came from David Swartz, a Mennonite historian of American religion who got his doctorate at Notre Dame. He wrote about it in a blog he called "The danger of a single Mennonite story." This story is often told as an exemplary story about Christian faithfulness to the point of martyrdom and death. Swartz said

there was another story that my history teachers had not told me. My ancestors may not have brandished guns and forcibly taken land from indigenous peoples. But they were nonetheless complicit in what we might call the European invasion of North America. Indeed, their farms would not have been possible without the backing of the British Empire. Their farms would not have been possible without wars and dozens of broken promises and treaties between the U.S. government and various indigenous people groups. Their farms would not have been possible without help from the land offices of Pennsylvania and Maryland that gave them land designated as "vacant." This second story, which is more attentive to the historical context of my ancestors, exposes their

¹ David Swartz, "The danger of a single Mennonite story," The Anxious Bench blog/Patheos (February 10, 2021)

inaction in the face of terrible injustice. In this case, unlike the first story, inaction doesn't seem quite so peaceful.²

My response to “What would you do?” questions is to say that in a panic none of us knows ahead of time how we would respond. The non-pacifist might, in fear, try to escape rather than helping his loved one; and I, committed to the peace of Christ, might in a state of panic, do something violent.

There's a reason why we have fire drills: to help us be able to respond somewhat reflexively in an actual fire. I was once in a fire situation in which I panicked. When I ran into the hallway in the apartment building where we were living and saw nothing but smoke, momentarily I couldn't remember how to get out of there, even though I had gone in and out of that building scores of times.

You know how flight attendants go through the procedures for responding to an emergency on a plane? It is a good thing to think ahead of time how one would respond in the event of an emergency landing. I always look at where the exits are on a plane as soon as I get seated, especially noting where the closest exit is. Hopefully it's information I don't need to use, yet necessary life-or-death information in a crisis.

I think we should do something like this as a peace church: think through different scenarios of how we would respond to the threat of violence—a peace church sort of a “fire drill.”

What responses would be in keeping with our commitment to Christ's way of peace? What reactions would reflect our likeness as God's children of peace?

Can we claim our family likeness as children of God's peace? Do our actions and our demeanor reflect that we are God's children of peace?

² Swartz, “The danger of a single Mennonite story”