

## **Peace Without & Within (shorter version)**

John 14:23-31; Philippians 4:4-9

John Howard Yoder wrote, The role of the church is to cultivate people who “can risk being peaceful in a violent world, risk being kind in a competitive world, risk being faithful in an age of cynicism, risk being gentle among those who admire the tough, risk love when it may not be returned, because we have the confidence that in Christ we have been reborn into a new reality.”

A few years ago I had a new experience. I was part of a ceremony dedicating a peace pole. This took place in a family’s front yard. On the pole in four languages was the prayer, “May peace prevail on earth.” We had a picnic and ceremony. The family that was putting up the pole, are Brethren and have a tradition of putting up a peace pole every place they move to.

They don’t attend the closest Mennonite Church, but I was the closest Anabaptist pastor to them, plus we came to know each other a little bit. So I was asked to come and offer a formal prayer. Three couples from my church were there, plus some other families from various religious perspectives, including Jewish and pre Christian. We had a good time getting to know each other, picnicking together after dedicating and praying around the peace pole.

It’s an interesting way to create the opportunity to witness with one’s neighbors. Maybe we should put one up at the corner of our church. We all can pray, regardless of religion, political views or perspective, “May peace prevail on earth.” This world sure needs peace.

Peace is a broad concept. Usually we think of less violence, the absence of war, and less crime. If we think about peace we may tie it with feeling safe, financial security, people being kind to each other and everyone has less stress. Peace of mind is some thing that we all want. We all want to be able to rest, to not have to worry, to feel free to enjoy life, family, work friends, church, hobbies, entertainment, and so on. We all want ourselves and others to be able

to not be burdened down with worries that rob us of vigor, life, and purpose.

If we think deeply about peace, we realize that it has to do with both our internal well being and with social, economic and political well being for everyone – not just ourselves. If we dive even deeper into what makes for peace – we get to individual spirituality as well as fairness and justice for all. Biblically I think we can say that peace involves individual hearts, responsible relationships, a just society and world, and a healthy bond with our Creator.

As followers of Jesus who live in the world, we know we need to relate to the evil that is in the world. From the start there have been Anabaptists who were sure that following in Jesus' footsteps provided clear guidance: Disciples suffer with Christ, they do not inflict suffering on others through violence. That’s the tradition we are in. It’s more than North Star Mennonites being graceful, kind and helpful.

It’s being like Jesus Christ in going the second mile with people, turning the cheek, being willing to suffer instead of doing violence – verbal, emotional, psychological, and physical to others. This belief covers all aspects of our lives – toward ourselves, with neighbors, in the workplace, at church, in public, in the home, and in our relationship with government. We follow Jesus foremost above all other groups, idols or ideologies that want our loyalty.

Jesus in his last days with his disciples, knowing they would be confused, fearful and sad when he was killed and resurrected had this to say to them. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. “ (John 14:27)

The Living Bible says it this way. “I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart! And the peace I give isn’t fragile like the peace the world gives. So don’t be troubled or afraid.” What a wonderful promise and encouragement to people whose world was

going to really be turned upside down with the cross and empty tomb!

So as followers of Jesus Christ, we accept the gift of peace. Our Philippians passage outlines the recipe for peace. "Rejoice always in Jesus." That's where real peace starts. Worship.

**Next**, "Let your gentleness be known to every one. The Lord is near." Makes sense doesn't it? Gentleness and Jesus and peace go together.

**Verse 6** mentions not worrying and instead be thankfully asking God for our needs. "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." I take this to also mean that having regular prayer times is an important part of finding peace. It's part of building a healthy bond with Jesus.

To have the peace that Jesus offers we need to, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (I Peter 5:7) And we can trust in Jesus' words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. (J 14:1)

**Verse 7** is like a summary – when we worship Jesus, are gentle, and not anxious, then, "The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." That's quite a promise. God's peace guards, protects, heals, comforts our minds and hearts – our mental capacities and our emotions. That's right where we need the most help – in our thinking and our feelings which often prevent us from having peace.

God invites us to allow him to control our thinking so we can have peace. Romans 8:6 says, "The mind of sinful persons is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace." When we allow God to fill our hearts with what is good and holy, we have peace.

**Philippians 4:8** tells us, "Whatever is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, worthy of praise. Let your mind dwell on these things." It's important to note that peace and death are named as opposites when we put the

Romans and Philippians verses together. Not having Christ and peace in our lives is death.

Having Jesus in our lives brings peace as we worship, are gentle, not worry, and pray, then God's peace protects our hearts and minds – beyond what we can fully understand. Next, we "Keep on putting into practice the things that we have learned and received and heard and seen in Jesus, and the God of peace will be with you." That is very clear instruction and an awesome promise about receiving peace.

Peace comes out of a bond with Jesus. It's a gift believers receive. We grow in peace as we follow the Bible's teachings. Then peace acts like a guard – keeping our minds & hearts from harm in ways we don't understand as we think about honorable things. As we do what we have learned, the God of peace sticks with us.

That's a nice summary of what many Christians believe about peace. It's mostly focused on our personal behavior. But Anabaptist Mennonites, have a further understanding of what the Bible and Jesus mean by peace. This is where history, theology and doctrine becomes interesting and complicated.

Over time the Anabaptists came to agreement that in questions of discipleship, the words and the example of Jesus were final, and could not be set aside until Jesus himself set them aside.

Once this decision was accepted, it was clear to the early Anabaptists that disciples of Jesus Christ must put away the sword, unconditionally, for three reasons:

1. The example of Christ himself, who prayed "not my will, but yours be done," and who allowed himself to be crucified. Disciples of Jesus, if faced with a similar choice of resisting Caesar, will not do so but accept death instead.
2. Jesus' clear command forbidding violence and hatred of enemies; Jesus commanded love.

3. Participating in violence contradicted the principles of spiritual integrity, that believers who live by the Spirit of Christ will show the love of God in their daily lives. Christians wield spiritual weapons, not weapons of war.

By 1540 the Anabaptists had achieved wide consensus that reborn, rebaptized followers of Jesus will refuse to participate in violence. But some questions have persisted to this day with each generation: How should pacifist Christians relate to the world of evil and violence?

An early Anabaptist leader, Menno Simons wrote, "They who are baptized inwardly with Spirit & fire, & externally with water, according to the Word of the Lord, have no weapons except patience, hope, silence, & God's Word."

Another early Anabaptist leader, Peter Riedeman taught, "Governmental authority has its place outside Christ, but not in Christ."

So over time, the majority of Anabaptists came to be guided by the words of Jesus: "Resist not evil." They understood these words to mean: Separate from the world, and don't become involved in its governance.

These "nonresistant" Anabaptists were not anarchists; they were separatists. They believed that God had ordained governments to keep order in the world and they believed Christians would live according to the "perfection of Christ." Governments were necessary and were to be obeyed, insofar as they did not command things contrary to God's word.

A small minority of Anabaptists thought that the separation of the church from the world should not be so absolute. One early leader, Pilgram Marpeck was committed to nonviolence, but he thought of the church more as an outpost of God's love whose mission was to radiate that love out into the world. It was a subtle but important shift in emphasis that Mennonites debated for centuries and it's often part of our theological dialogue today. At

different times in history and in various situations, the issue of picking up arms to defend oneself and how we relate to government has been a tension point.

In the end, the difficult issue of violence was settled according to the principle of discipleship. Reborn disciples will follow Jesus. They will speak the truth and live the truth. They have renounced claims to earthly possessions. They will not return evil for evil, but will respond to evil with good.

So a pacifist sees the world in a certain way, understands it in a certain way. The commitment to nonviolence is a life-shaping, mind-shaping kind of conviction - a conviction that shapes all other convictions.

It's a commitment to not being willing to rely on power over others. This is a major move away from the thinking of western philosophy that is essentially at its core coercive if it can't be persuasive. We come up with logical reasons for a position, and we find ways to "force" others to adapt to our view.

A big problem with the way people in the West have approached knowledge is that it is based upon a desire to be "on top," to be in power. If we ourselves do not happen to be in power we still tend to imagine being in power. How would I think if I were the one in charge? However, being in such a position, or wanting to be in such a position leads us to being violent. John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian wrote, "being on top of the heap consistently keeps one from seeing things as they are. Even wanting to be there has that effect."

This is in total contrast to Jesus' vulnerably going to the cross. It's choosing to voluntarily go the second mile even though one mile is all that was legally required when a Roman soldier told a local citizen to carry his baggage. It's inviting people to listen to your witness but if they don't want to, shake the dust off your feet and move on to the next town. In vulnerability,

Jesus modeled a willingness to respect others' freedom either to accept or reject his message.

When we study religion of any kind, much of the history is one of having power over. Often religion is tied to a governmental system that is coercive. This is a major issue today when we think of Muslim terrorists and our response. But all they are doing is what Christians did when we forced children from their homes to residential schools, colonized countries to rape them of their wealth, supported the Crusades, or – pick your historical event. And its easy to ignore that how we do business with other countries, affects their levels of societal peace.

So nonviolence, pacifism and peace isn't just about military issues. It touches on all of life – including in our own homes and businesses. It's about how we treat each other in every part of life. Sexism, equal pay, what is a moral level of profit? It involves how we treat the earth we have been given to care for. Peace isn't simply a personal calm life. Biblically it involves every part of our life including our economic, social, and governmental systems.

It's not an accident that Jesus' first sermon was these words that support the Old Testament law of Jubilee that was a way of providing peace as we are talking about it – personal, spiritual, economic, ecological and societal. He said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

We dare not just spiritualize these words. We need to make them real as the early Anabaptists and disciples did. As we work at understanding what Biblical peace fully means, and incorporate it into our lives personally as well as work for justice in non violent and non coercive ways, like Jesus did, then we will find peace and lead the world toward peace.