**Communion as Liberation from Violence – Peace Sunday**

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**Nutana Park Mennonite Church**

**Nov. 13, 2016**

*Scripture:* Exodus 12:21-32 – The Tenth Plague, John 21:1-17 – Jesus multiplies the catch of fish

It’s been quite a week, hasn’t it?

Between the disappointment of the U.S. election results – which appointed someone overtly committed to violent words, attitudes, and actions as leader of that country – and our Canadian celebration of Remembrance Day, it’s been a difficult week to think about peace. And yet here we are, on Peace Sunday, remembering our heritage as one of the historic peace churches, as people of God’s peace and followers of Jesus Christ, who is sometimes called the Prince of Peace.

For me, the Mennonite Central Committee peace pins are one of the most tangible symbols of our identity as a peace church. They name for me the necessity of remembering past wars and violence in an alternative way – a way in which does not glorify the bloodshed of this history, but remembers in the sense of “never again” – in hope for a world in which peace reigns, and war is relegated to the past. In the MCC Peace Sunday materials, there is a poignant quote from U.S. poet Eve Merriam along these lines; she writes, “I dream of giving birth to a child who will ask, ‘Mother, what was war?’”

And yet, that can seem like such a faraway dream, such a vulnerable hope, as represented by the dove on the covers of the bulletins this morning, which bears a target on its bullet-proof-vest-clad chest. There are no guarantees when it comes to peace. And yet we carry on working and hoping for peace in a violent world.

Of course, our celebrations of Communion involve remembrance as well. At the last supper, Jesus says, “Do this in remembrance of me.” But there is another, prior layer of remembrance as well – the remembrance of the Passover, instituted at the time of the ancient Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, where they had been brutally oppressed as slaves. As Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez writes, their slavery in Egypt included many forms of violence: “repression ([Exodus] 1:10-11), alienated work (5:6-14), humiliations (1:13-14), enforced birth control policy (1:15-22).” It truly was a time of “misery” for the Israelite people.[[1]](#footnote-1) And yet, the exodus affirmed their identity as a liberated people and their God as a God who hears and liberates the oppressed, twin truths to be commemorated every year at the Passover or Seder meal.

Now, you might be wondering, what has this story got to do with war? You might have noticed that there’s no battle in the passage we heard this morning from Exodus 12. And that’s precisely my point. In this central biblical story of liberation, of the triumph of the underdogs, the people are simply called to mark the doorways of their houses and to eat a special meal. There’s no bloody revolution, no call to take up arms against the Egyptians, no *human violence* that we know of (whatever we may make of God’s actions against the first-born through a being named “the destroyer” in verse 23). The people’s role in their liberation is to sit down and eat together. That is how they defeat the violence of slavery inflicted upon them. Now that’s revolutionary!

In the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, the people of Israel are reminded again and again to remember the story of the Exodus – when they are given the laws, many of them affirm, “for you were slaves in the land of Egypt” – “the Lord your God brought you out of the land of Egypt” – etc. Some reference to the Exodus appears in everything from the institution of the Sabbath to the first of the Ten Commandments to the laws concerning the treatment of strangers and “foreigners” (Exodus 19, Lev. 23, Deut. 5, 16, 26, etc.). It appears so often that some theologians have argued that it is the Exodus, not creation, that is THE central event that shapes Israelite identity and theology.[[2]](#footnote-2) This has two implications: first, it gives the people a profound sense of hope that God is with them, that God is involved and present in history. God hears the cries of the Israelites as they are suffering oppressive violence in Egypt, and liberates them from that violence. Thus, “Where there is no memory of liberation, there can be no hope.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The second implication of the constant references to the Exodus is the call to not become the oppressors. When they are reminded to be kind to strangers or “foreigners” dwelling among them, there is a clear call to remember what it felt like to experience oppression, and to avoid repeating that cycle once they had obtained their freedom. Remembering their time as slaves was meant to prevent them from in turn becoming the ones who enslave others.

So once a year, at a meal, the people of Israel remember the Exodus, and teach their children to remember – in hope, and in order not to repeat the violence inflicted upon them in the past. In this way, the people remember being brought out of slavery through feasting instead of fighting.

This contrast – this making peace through eating together reminds me of the figure of Abigail, whom we studied a couple of weeks ago in Women’s Bible Study. When her foolish husband had insulted David and his army, and their whole household was at risk of being slaughtered, she quickly prepared a feast and an eloquent speech to talk David out of his plan. And her banquet succeeded – she ended up averting the violence! (Her story can be found in I Sam. 25.)

And we know another biblical figure who was known for feasting – for eating and drinking with so-called “sinners” – instead of for fighting. The narrative read this morning is remarkable in that it is one of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus – and yet involves Jesus hosting a meal!

By the time we get to this story in John 21, Jesus has already appeared to a number of the disciples – to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, to the disciples in the locked room (whom he greets with, “Peace be with you.”), and to Thomas, who said he wouldn’t believe unless he touched Jesus’ wounds (John 20). But despite all of these appearances, some of the disciples have given up on the work Jesus called them to do. In fact, they’ve gone back to business as usual, to their former jobs as fishers, assuming that with Jesus’ death, his ministry has ended, or even failed. What are they supposed to do in the face of the brutal violence of the Roman empire? Even Jesus could not stop the Romans from killing him through the torture of crucifixion.

But Jesus – the risen Jesus – goes and finds them again in their boat on the Sea of Tiberias. And when they’re struggling with their fishing, catching nothing, some man on the shore (whom they don’t recognize is Jesus) tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and the nets are so full that they can’t even lift it into the boat. They recognize Jesus and head back to shore, dragging the net bulging with fish behind them (vv. 3-8).

And the next part is really a very tender moment – Jesus makes them a casual little breakfast on the beach. “When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So they do. And “Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ . . . Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.” (21:9-10, 12-13). So they share this simple meal on the beach with their teacher and friend, who had been executed as a traitor to the Roman empire days before. And after this Communion-like breakfast, Jesus reaffirms his calling to the disciples – not in some strategy to take up arms, not in some plan to avenge Jesus’ death, but in the calling to “Feed my sheep” (21:15, 17). Even after the unthinkable has happened – Jesus has been violently killed – he returns to reiterate his calling for the disciples to nourish one another and other people – to work in healing, life-giving, peaceable ways, which will ultimately defeat the destructiveness of violence and death, liberating us from their false power.

Earlier in the week, the women at the empty tomb had experienced a similar revelation (Luke 24). As Sherri Guenther Trautwein writes in the Peace Sunday materials, “in the midst of confusion and fear, they are called upon to do something simple, something completely within their power. They are called to *remember*. . . . They *remember* Jesus’ words to them and in an instant they understand fully and completely the significance of the empty tomb. They are transformed by a teaching they could not understand until they were on this side of resurrection. Jesus is alive and it is revealed to this group of grieving women that his work of extending God’s peaceful reign in a broken world is not destroyed – far from it! What was dead is now very much alive and they are entrusted with delivering a message of hope that will ignite the work of the early church.” Against all our cynical expectations, “death [is] overcome by life”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This week, as we think of the horrors of war and the abusive and violent President elected to the South, we might say to ourselves: this isn’t much on which to build our hope. Is it enough to keep eating together in the face of unspeakable forms of violence – sexual abuse and homophobia, dehumanizing poverty, racist and xenophopic hatred, devastating war, a wounded, overheating planet? Is sharing what we have and loving God, neighbour, and enemy really enough to liberate us from the shadow of death which hangs over our hurting world? Can these simple acts really accomplish anything in the face of the dominating rule of Pharaohs and Roman Emperors, dictators and presidents? If memory serves, this is precisely what has happened in the past. Our God has liberated an entire nation from slavery, and all they had to do was eat together in resistance to the violence. Jesus was tortured to death and rose again to eat breakfast with his friends on a beach in Galilee. We have been liberated from the illusion that violence will save us. We must remember – and teach our children to remember – that peace, however fragile it may seem, is ultimately more powerful than violence and death. We must remember that we have already been liberated to be people of God’s peace. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

1. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dorothee Soelle, *To Work and to Love*, 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Soelle, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sherri Guenther Trautwein, “Women as Peacebuilders: Biblical Reflections,” from Mennonite Central Committee Peace Sunday Packet, edited by Esther Epp-Tiessen (Winnipeg: Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 2016), 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)