

9 Mile Markers on the Journey of Peace

Based on Phil Kniss' 9 Modest Proposals for Peace, Harrisonburg, Virginia

John 14:1-14 by Patty Friesen, OMC, May 7/23

In today's gospel reading, the bewildered disciples ask, "How can we know the way?" Good question - how can we know the way? How can we know the way to God and how can we know the way of peace as we crawl out of a pandemic, as Russia continues to bomb Ukraine and as drought brings fear in time of seeding and wildfires? It feels timely to begin a sermon series on peace through the spring.

I am a Mennonite pastor, a representative of the historic peace church tradition, and now that Canada is vicariously engaged in one of the most popular wars since we took on Hitler's Germany, I feel challenged in my pacifism once again. I was in the United States for the Gulf War against Iraq in the 90s and protested in downtown marches with other Mennonites in Portland, Oregon and protested again with church members in Minneapolis over the US bombing Afghanistan after 9-11. Those felt like blatant acts of US aggression that needed protest. Now, in the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, I'm not sure how to implement a biblical pacifist response. We all agree that the attacks against Ukraine are unspeakably evil. But what constitutes an appropriate Christian response to that evil? And do I even have any street credibility to speak about Christian non-violent resistance in Ukraine? Maybe not but I feel like I do have a right as a Canadian citizen to respond to our government's recent spending spree—\$19 billion on fighter jets and \$406-million on a missile defense system for Ukraine.

Slide 1 - Caleb Ratzlaff - I take my inspiration from other Anabaptist voices like Caleb Ratzlaff from St. Catherine's, Ontario who was elected to the St. Catherine's city council, at which time he left his position as pastor of Westview Christian Fellowship.

"I got a better understanding reading scriptures, asking the question, 'Who has power, wealth and authority, and who doesn't?'" he says. And that, he says, "is a political question." He feels there is a close connection between religion and how people organize their lives, which he calls politics. Tension between his Christian beliefs and the work of the city council came up at council recently. When council made a motion to support continued federal funding of military aid for Ukraine, he shared his grandmother's immigration story of how she came to Canada a century ago, fleeing persecution in present-day Ukraine. His grandmother's pacifism, despite persecution, inspired him to abstain from voting on the motion.

How do our understandings of Jesus and peace from our tradition influence our thoughts and actions with regard to the war in Ukraine today? Let me offer 9-mile markers based on a sermon Pastor Phil Kniss of Parkview Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Virginia preached after 9-11, that will help us move a little farther down the road on our peace journey. To begin, I propose we stop talking about a Mennonite "peace position." Peace is not a static position of theology that never changes. Peace is a way. It is a journey Jesus has called us on. I'd rather be on a journey, inviting others to journey with me, than to be at a particular position and have to defend it. Taking a journey is something you do on the move. Taking a position and defending it is something you do standing still. Give me the journey, any day.

(1) *Let's immerse ourselves in the whole story of Scripture.* We are a people of the bible. We need it to guide us through these confusing times- which is why the Anabaptist Bible Commentary Study has been so important as we wrestle with difficult texts as a worldwide Anabaptist community and as a gathering here at church on Thursday nights with Luke. Folks can still come for the last session this Thursday. The Bible doesn't have a chapter and verse that tells us how to respond to international terrorism but we can study the whole picture to get a general idea of what would Jesus do in our present situation.

(2) *Let's cling to belief in a God whose heart is for all people.* You can't get more basic than that. God has a deep and abiding affection for all human beings, and wants all people to be reconciled—to God and to each other. That is the most basic truth about God we can hold to. Every person on the face of this earth is God's creation. And God desires reconciliation with all of us. The temptation in war is to demonize Russian people when their leaders do not represent what citizens may feel about the invasion.

(3) *Let's agree not to take God's job away from God.* We humans are very good at usurping God's authority. God is the only Creator and Sustainer of life. God is the only righteous judge of good and evil. Yet we presume to be able to determine which forms of human life are worth saving, and which are expendable. We have been informed by leaders that the nation's mission is to "rid the world of evil." The Scriptures are pretty plain. That's God's agenda, and God is going to do it, in God's time and in God's way. "Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord." Sure, we should do all we

can to make this world a better place, more just, more peaceful—but rid the world of evil? That battle belongs to God.

(4) *Let's not waver from a commitment to follow Jesus' example in life.*

WWJD motto from several decades ago is not a bad place to start. “What would Jesus do?” That question, by itself, may not answer all the complex issues we face in the modern world. But I still say it's a good place to start. Can we picture Jesus and his disciples running a bomb drone to confront Roman soldiers? They did confront the evil powers in their context, but they used radically different methods. Jesus taught in Matthew 5, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be God's children; who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” We have to come to terms with passages like this. We have to come to terms with the methods Jesus used to confront his own enemies, and the powers of evil that were crushing his people under occupation.

(5) *Let's agree to always walk toward, not away from, those with whom we disagree.* All of us have opinions on these and many other issues. And all our opinions have points that can be challenged. Brene Brown in *Dare to Lead* invites us to share more feelings than opinions. If we can get to our feelings and vulnerability behind our opinions, we build more understanding and trust with those with whom we disagree. We try to model this kind of sharing of experience and feelings at our committee meetings, in worship and on council. It's more vulnerable of course but more effective in turning down the heat. Slide 2 – Ben and Luke

6) related to #5 - Let's always spend more time listening than formulating responses. We must be quiet long enough to hear what the Spirit is saying. If we are always feverishly making our case, how will the Spirit break through to give us new insight? If we are constantly driving our own stake into the ground to maintain and defend our position, how will the Spirit nudge us a little farther along the road? It's like Luke listening to Ben here last Sunday.

(7) Let's commit ourselves to work for peace with justice. That's the biblical picture. The psalmist sang about justice and peace kissing each other. There cannot be lasting peace without justice. Let's not short-circuit justice in the present crisis in Ukraine. It is right that those responsible for these massive acts of inhumanity on both sides be called to account for their deeds and that justice be done in an international court. It will take a long time like our own Truth and Reconciliation process in Canada but it can begin now with help from Mennonite experience and history.

(8) Let's always listen to the wisdom of the church. Let's be familiar with the confession of faith of our own tradition—whether we are from a historic peace church or another Christian tradition. There are good reasons why some convictions have remained with us for generations. We can disagree with some of these convictions, but we must take them seriously and bend over backwards to listen. We Mennonites don't get everything right. We may thoroughly study our tradition, whatever it is, and still find things with which to take issue. That's okay. That's good, even to question and test. But let's listen to the wisdom of our faith community and generations of experience on the journey. To that end...

Slide 2 - fighter jet - I was inspired by the following responses from Mennonite leaders to Canada's investment in F-35's for Ukraine in the January 26 issue of the Canadian Mennonite magazine.

"We continue to encourage the Canadian government to invest more money in supporting peace building and address the root causes of conflict, rather than increase military spending. Through our work, we see the vital and life giving examples of conflict prevention, community mediation . . . spaces of alternative justice that all contribute to a more peaceful world." —Anna Vogt, co-director, MCC Canada's Peace and Justice Office (Canadian Mennonite, Jan. 26/23)

From Jesse Nickel, professor at Columbia Bible College where Luke and Becca graduated. "What is the government hoping that these fighter jets will accomplish? What does financial support of Ukraine's struggle against Russian invasion hope to change? And how might we, as Christians, accomplish similar goals, but in ways that embody the teaching of Jesus?" No wonder Luke and Becca are so smart after studying with him!

9) I'm stopping with nine mile-markers for peace, because I don't want anyone to confuse these with the Ten Commandments! The ninth mile marker is ***Let's never stop proclaiming hope.*** That's something important we have to offer the world in times like these. Our theology of resurrection and a peaceable kingdom is a theology of hope. God can bring life out of death. God can bring peace out of chaos. If people listen to God, God can bring an end to the war in Ukraine. God has the last word. Let us pray...Resurrected Christ, you have offered a Way for us – out of our human messes and into the fullness of life that you promise – in our souls and in our homes and in our

churches and even with our country and Russia. Please help our world leaders to hear your still small voice and find ways to humility and compromise so that both Ukrainian and Russian lives may be saved. Amen.