

ENGAGING PEACE

I was driving along a grid road Thursday,..... before we had a frost, enjoying the emerging fall colours..... and all the yellow Canola flowers. They were not a typical mid-September site, yellow we expect from Aspens, this time of year, but not from Canola.

It's been a strange growing season, even so, the Canola is simply doing what it knows to do; it is growing and trying to make seeds. It is trying to survive, and it is not smart enough to understand the craziness of the situation. It doesn't know better.
All creatures struggle to live / to carry on.

Living things strive to live for self and the species, and it is the lucky and the strongest that succeed. That mode for existence is called the **law of the jungle**. Fortunately, we humans have the intelligence and capability to rise about that ruthless and brutal code. The capability comes from an inner moral compass and God who through scriptural lessons and the examples of Christ inspires us to appreciate and reach for life at a higher level..... than animalistic brute force.

Unlike the animal world, we have the mental ability to understand that playing "king of the mountain" will render most of us at the bottom and clawing to survive. As social beings we delight in cooperation, mutual trust and community balance. We feel good about achievements that elevate all of us, and not just the few. Public parks and universal healthcare are but two examples. When a society is out of balance there is discontent, resentment..... and more prisons because of the unrest. A healthy society shares and invests in the whole, and we know that. That is our inner moral compass.

Following the horrors of WWII, the world came together and declared that we humans will no longer succumb to the law of the jungle / survival of the richest and militarily strongest.

Sadly, our humanistic moral compass is not always able to sustain us. When the powerful manoeuvre to claim or retain the throne, then all others are tempted to scramble to resist or get in line. And, then the light that separates us from animals grows dim.

We need God.

God inspires and enables us to reach beyond the confines of animalistic living. God is our strength instead of mortal might, and God's grace can lift us up to see beyond the temptation to surrender to the law of the jungle / beyond fight or flight. This is possible when we consider and choose the way of God.

Moreover, not only can we soar above the shadows of brute force and fear, we are also called to radiate the divine light to others.

Of course, it makes sense to share God's way / God's salvation; it is the nature of God to consider the whole / to invite all in.

After 9/11, I was not surprised by the American response, but nevertheless, I was sadly disappointed..... and dismayed.

I was dismayed by the overwhelming support for revenge – to choose brute force as the response. The public conversation did not include contemplating the reasons for the terrorists attacks or how best to avoid future hostilities.

Whenever I mentioned a non-violent alternative to 9/11, I was dismissed as naive or unpatriotic. I often heard, “What else can we do? We can’t do nothing. We can’t hide.” Fight or flight were the only two known options for nearly everyone. I came to realize that the public conversation was missing the beauty and virtue of Christ—the wonderful example that God has given us.

Moreover, I was also sadly frustrated by how timid the peace church was, including we Mennonites. Had we lost our passion for peace? Had we bought into popular culture’s definition for peace.... which is only the absence of war? Or worse, had we lost God’s love for the whole of creation / for all people, and only wanted to coddle our own safety by being quiet and unseen?

To be sure, a few Mennonites spoke out, but only a few.

Peace is not hiding in seclusion or behind a military fortress.
Peace is not destroying or intimidating one’s enemy into submission.

True Peace includes a thriving, sharing, trusting humanity, creatively engaged in justice, love and grace and living in creation without fear.... because of God’s love.
But, real peace was not being proclaimed.
The way of God / the message of Christ was not being heard.

Instead, most of society only knew the rant of brute force, and that rant intensified after 9/11.

Those in power drew more power by embedding fear in people.
Unrelenting fear immobilizes people, clouds sound reasoning and makes people dull.... And, thus easy to control and manipulate.
From Washington, was broadcast, such things as Saddam is a threat, we could be attacked at any moment, the terrorists are getting stronger so we must strike them now,... Weapons of Mass Destruction will get you..... terror threat level is orange..... and on it went.

And, the people cried out, protect us, destroy Iraq, kill the terrorists.... make us safe..... take away the fear – take away the fear.. but the fear was part of the ploy.... in the game of the law of the jungle.

The powerful responded: give me your young to fight and die, give me your money to buy more weapons... and ..cut taxes for the rich, too.

The call for justice, for grace and community building was an easy to ignore whimper.

The *religious* political leaders, apparently, failed to read Isaiah 31 where it states “woe to those who trust in military might”.... or all the many passages about doing justice and trusting God for survival. And, I’m not sure how they interrupted Jesus’ mandate to love our enemies and to live the Golden Rule.

As our nation becomes more powerful and, no doubt, influenced by the US, we too are embracing the law of the jungle.

Similar to the fear implanting, redundant warning of Saddam has WMD, we too hear and now accept that we must live in fear – that we must protect our arctic frontier and that we must be militarily strong to repeal a terrorist threat.

Rarely do people ask, “Who will we attack in the defence of the arctic – the United States, the Russians.... or perhaps Norway?”

Ah,..... reason / common sense must be put aside if we are in the mode of living the law of the jungle.

Instead of pooling our resources to help build a better and just society, we are ready to spend billions and billions and billions of dollars on new war ships and F35 attack fighters. And, the F35 is a air to ground attack plane; it is not an interceptor, nor is it a search and rescue plane. It is an offensive weapon designed to kill targets on the ground,.... and who are those targets..... and why?

More fear is implanted with the talk that we must get tough on crime, even though crime has been decreasing over the past 20 years.

We must get tough..... because we are afraid.

And, when we choose to rely being powerful in order to survive, then we are failing to trust and invest in each other / in the well-being of the whole,..... so we better start building more prisons..... because that is the result of living in an unjust and imbalanced society.

Too much politics? I’ve mentioned these things to show what is going on.

Politicians have intentionally and methodically chosen to engage in the public conversation, and their message is of fear and the law of the jungle.

The powerful are engaging in the public conversation, and we must also engage in the public conversation, too.

We are keenly aware of the consequences when the German churches chose to be silent and allow Hitler to monopolize the public conversation.

Sound reasoning must be proclaimed, and God’s way/ the way of Christ must be shared, too.

And, that is why we are doing Peace in the Public Square.

Peace in the Public Square is introducing Christ’s message of creative, pro-active justice and trusting love into the public conversation.

It is a prompt to tap into one's moral compass.... and to sense the inner touch of God's Spirit.

One line we used is, "The way things are is not the way things have to be." That message scratches at the level where souls are searching. It pricks at a deeper sense of truth- that life is more than fighting or hiding.

People need to know/ want to know that we are not limited to the law of the jungle's options of fight or flight.

Everyone's hope and salvation / our lives depend on the third way.

We do not have to live in fear.

Trusting in brute force is living in fear – fear of being attacked, fear of being defeated, fear of not being strong enough, fear of running out of things and fear of being weak.

For example, the classical argument against pacifism is "What are you suppose to do if someone breaks into your house?"

That question is fraught with fear, and the illusion that brute force will keep a person safe.

The truth is sometimes ugly happens; we can't control life. Violent break-ins are extremely rare, but are possible. Moreover, a violent response to a break-in usually makes the situation worse.

Therefore trusting in brute force is a myth, and it will not eliminate fear.

Striving to be more powerful than the enemy is living with the fear that one is not strong enough,..... and it is living with the fear that there are bad guy, enemies out to get you.

The law of the jungle/ the way of brute force does not end fear, nor does it eliminate enemies. Instead, it usually produces more enemies and more fear.

God's way as we see in Christ is the only way to be rid of enemies and to live without fear,.... and that is to love our enemies, to do justice and to trust God instead of violence.

Jesus taught in our Luke text that we should confront an oppressor / resist submitting/ stand up for justice,.... and that transforming the evil actions and systems includes living the Golden Rule/ doing justice.

But, remember we can Not control others, bad actions or life itself.

Thinking we are so powerful is a lie, and trusting in brute force is worshipping another god.

Yet understand, when faced with violence, Christ way / God's way..... will NOT guarantee a perfect solution, but it WILL increase the chances of a desirable outcome, because it will NOT feed more hate, fear and violence into a desperate situation, and it will nurture wholeness / peace in ourselves and in the world, instead of fight or flight.

Fear and the lust for being more powerful is so deeply entrenched in our society that most people struggle to even contemplate a different way / God's way.

Even so, many are still willing to engage with questions when the way of peace is introduced.... which means there is still hope.

Some of the common questions are listed on the Question and Answer sheet that was placed in your church box. Use the sheet as a reminder and as a resource in engaging the public in conversation. I won't take the time, now, to review those questions.

In addition, we need to engage in the public conversation with our own questions. Such as why are only the troops honoured at football games and such? Why not support and honour teachers, farmers, social workers, doctors and nurses artists and peacemakers, to mention just a few who I think are keeping our country safe and helping to make the world a better place. Why all the focus on the military-brute force?

Can we not think and be more creative than that?

Can we not honour all those who give their lives, their whole lives, in serving our country and humanity through various creative and non-destructive means?

Honour all people who live to serve others, and as we do, let us share that fight and flight are not the only options.

Ask questions in the public conversation.

And be sure to ask, when does the Golden Rule not apply, and ask when is it okay to kill enemies, and with that ask..... are we so wise to dilute or ignore the teachings of Christ?

Questions are part of the conversation.

It was asked, "How is our church's Peace Stance determined?"

I trust the answer to that question is Jesus—he's life and message.

We respond to following Christ as individuals and as a church unit.

As a church, we are proclaiming through the newspaper, signs and ads on city buses that we believe in Christ way of peace.

It is a risk to go against the flow,..... but that is part of being a follower of Christ.

Hopefully, those messages will bring encouragement to other like-minded people and spark interest in the public conversation.

To be sure, the ads are merely bringing up the topic, it is up to us as individuals to carry the light / to illuminate God's way.

Mentioning the ads to others in order to engage the peace message is one example. Our peace actions, such as living the Golden Rule through MCC and to each person we encounter is also necessary in engaging peace.

There are other forces and powers engaging in the public conversation, and that is all the more reason for us to engage with Christ's message.

Yet,..... we are far from perfect, and we still possess our fears,... and we often trip in our journey of trying to following Christ.

So, how dare we be so bold as to declare peace as the way,.... when, in all honesty,.... we juggle our grasp of being in peace.

If you hear nothing else, then listen to this: We are not God, nor is this our message. We are simply trying to be faithful to God's way, as understood through Christ. The way of peace is a constant choice, just as is following Christ.

The journey is long, yet full of grace.

Dare we settle for less, dare we dilute the Gospel and set our own path?

In the words of Paul, we "Press On".... in faith, trusting God, only God.

Our hope, our salvation rests with God and not with the illusion of brute force or redemptive violence.

From Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore WE WILL NOT FEAR.....

The Psalmist continues: God is at work to end war, to break the weapons of war,... to end the violence.....

Verse 10: "Be still and know that I am God!"

Let us pause, let the whole world pause for a moment..... and understand that we do not control events and we NOT king of the mountain... because we are NOT God.

And, even though we are weak, we need not be a victim, either.

Engaging peace begins with accepting our own weaknesses and inviting God to free us from fear.