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# Jesus and the peaceable kingdom

## Reading

Mark 8:27-38; Philippians 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 2:1-10

## Teaching

Who do we say that Jesus is? What do we believe about Jesus Christ?

**(1) We believe Jesus is God's Son, who brings salvation through his love.** In Jesus' time, many people hoped God would intervene in their world and send a great leader to set things right. As Jesus did his mighty deeds and taught with authority, many hoped this was the One.

Peter confesses in Mark 8 that Jesus is this hoped-for one, the messiah. And, as we read, we know that Peter is correct. Peter does see accurately. Jesus *is* the messiah.

But Peter is also *wrong*. Immediately after Peter's confession—"You are the Messiah"—Jesus begins to talk about what his messiahship means. Jesus starts to teach that as messiah he will undergo great suffering, and be rejected

by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed. Jesus, the messiah, will *not* be setting things right with brute force and will *not* be establishing a new empire in the manner of King David.

Jesus, the messiah, will bring God's new age into being and herald the outpouring of God's salvation by *suffering and dying*. That the messiah's victory involves his own suffering confounds the people's expectations. It

confounds Peter's expectations. Jesus, the messiah, does not stand for power-over others. Jesus, the messiah, does not stand for easy victory and glory before human beings. Jesus, the messiah, has to do with consistent, persevering love and compassion and openness—even in the face of violence from those who resent that kind of love.

**(2) We believe Jesus is the model human being, who asks us to follow his way of living.** Practical life is central to theology. How we live *and* what we believe go together hand-in-glove. What do we believe about Jesus Christ? We believe that our confession of Christ as savior *and* our following Christ in discipleship *together* make up our Christology. What matters about Jesus Christ includes his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus matters because he won us salvation by dying for our sins *and* because he showed us how to live.

**(3) We believe that Jesus is God-with-us, who shows us that the power of love is the most important kind of power.** In Jesus, we see God. In Jesus' birth, we see God entering the world on behalf of hurting humanity. In Jesus' life, we see God's chosen one revealing human life as it is meant to be lived. In Jesus' death, we see Jesus' faithfulness standing the ultimate test, the "rulers of this age" crucifying him (1 Cor. 2:8). In Jesus' resurrection, we see God's vindication of Jesus' life. We learn just how faithful God is to his promise of eternal life for those who trust in his mercy. Jesus shows us that the power of love is the most important kind of power.

What matters about Jesus Christ includes his life, death, and resurrection. He is our savior who died for our sins and he is our model who shows us how to live.

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# The peace vision of the Old Testament

## Reading

*Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 1:1-15:21, 20:1-21; Jeremiah 8:18-9:2; Jonah 1:1-4:11; Psalm 46:1-11*

## Teaching

What is the main point of the Old Testament story?

The Old Testament deals with the intersection of faith with everyday life—wars and rumors of wars, people in communities and families trying to live together, parents and children, friends and neighbors and enemies, joy and sorrow, fear and courage, love and hate.

The Old Testament writers understand their experiences in terms of faith. We too strive to understand our lives in the light of our faith. We share with the biblical writers the same earth, the same ongoing story. They have much to teach us.

The Old Testament story is sad—the rise and fall of the ancient Israelite state, the building of a little empire and its destruction, the construction of the great temple and seeing it reduced to rubble. The actual political history is one of failure, broken dreams, pain, and even despair. However, in the midst of that brokenness come words of hope, words of assurance, awareness of God’s mercy and love. God was not contained in the temple. God was not inextricably identified with the king and with the nation state. When the temple fell, when kingship fell, when the nation-state fell, God remained. And God remained merciful and

**The deepest, underlying point to the whole story told in the Old Testament is God’s mercy and love.**

loving. God promised a future, structured a new way, centered on little expressions of faithfulness and trust, rather than on nation-states and power politics.

The deepest, underlying point to the whole story is God’s mercy and love. God’s creation of *all* things is an act of love. God’s calling of Abraham to be the father of a people serving as a light to the nations is an act of love. God freeing the enslaved Hebrews from Egypt to new life is an act of mercy. God’s giving of the law to structure the Hebrews’ life is an act of love. God staying present amidst corrupt kingship and empire as a way of life, often through the prophets, is an act of mercy. God being with the people in grief and promise and as a healing presence amidst exile is an act of mercy. God’s prodding through the post-exilic story of Jonah to remain open to all peoples and not to be self-centered and proud is an act of mercy. God’s call through Daniel during the Maccabean revolt patiently to await God’s kingdom, neither accommodating with corrupt empires nor impatiently trying violently to overthrow them, is an act of mercy.

The story concludes, in Daniel in the Old Testament, with a call for people of faith to find peace through patience. Live faithfully, live mercifully, accept that you don’t control history. Be patient, trusting that your finding little ways to be at peace, your refusal to bow to false gods of warfare and exploitation of others—this is part of God’s continuing works of creative mercy. Aligning ourselves with that *is* the peaceable way.

## Prophetic Faith

### Reading

Amos 1:1–9:15; Matthew 5:20, 38; Romans 3:21-26

### Teaching

What did Amos teach people about how to live?

Amos exemplified how Old Testament prophets challenged how the people of their day lived. Amos wrote of his country-people: “They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that God’s holy name is profaned” (2:6-7).

In the face of this injustice, Amos offers a corrective. “Seek the Lord and *live*... you that turn justice to [bitter poison]” (5:6). Turn away from the acts of injustice which happen way too often. “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have [been claiming].

Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to [you]” (5:14-15).

The solution to Israel’s crisis is made clear: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). God’s justice. Let it shape your lives. Let God’s justice determine how you people relate to one another.

It is crucial for us to look at the biblical teaching on God’s justice within the context of the *biblical* worldview,

and not necessarily the worldview of our modern world. Jesus told his followers in the Sermon on the Mount that unless their justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will never enter God’s kingdom (Matt. 5:20). He then speaks of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (5:38), which is certainly a big part of the *world’s* understanding of justice. But not so with you. Godly justice has to do with *loving* enemies, *refusing* to fight back, *rejecting* the desire to punish and coerce.

Paul writes in Romans about the fullest expression of God’s justice. The *justice* of God is revealed in the salvation-giving death and resurrection of Jesus. God’s justice has been revealed *separate* from the legal realm, *apart* from the law (Rom. 3:21-26). God’s justice, expressed toward sinners, has ultimately to do with providing a way of *salvation*.

Likewise, when Amos calls for justice to roll down like waters, he is calling for Israel’s society to enhance life, especially to enhance life for those who are depersonalized and exploited. To do justice is to support life. Amos adds, by way of emphasis, let “righteousness [roll down] like an ever-flowing stream.” For a desert people, an “ever-flowing stream” is an amazing resource, a stream which contains water *all* the time, which doesn’t dry up. God’s justice, God’s righteousness, is an even more amazing resource. Even in the face of faithlessness by the people, God doesn’t quit. God’s love perseveres, it doesn’t dry up. And God keeps working to make things right. God keeps working to heal brokenness.

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# Enemy love

## Reading

*Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 10:25-37; Romans 12:14-21*

## Teaching

What does “love your enemy” mean?

Jesus taught that loving one’s enemy means actively seeking to do good to the kind of person one would tend to feel enmity towards. The clearest teaching here is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). That this is not a peripheral story is made clear by this parable being part of a conversation about the fundamental religious question (“what must I do to gain eternal life?”). Within that conversation, the parable answers the question “who is my neighbor?” (as in, the way to gain eternal life is to love God and neighbor).

**A person who is clear about what love of enemy means probably has gained such clarity due to a fundamental faith commitment, not primarily due to rational argumentation.**

Jesus basically equates “neighbor” and “enemy” (the beaten Jew’s “neighbor” is the Samaritan, his nation’s worst enemy). So, “love your enemy” must mean show compassion and kindness

toward *all* people, most especially those who in some sense are one’s enemy.

This may be difficult to do, and because of this difficulty, one easily resorts to “what if?” kinds of questions. But the basic meaning seems pretty clear.

In his actions, Jesus followed this same kind of path. We may think most centrally of his respectful and kind involvement with lots of the people who we may assume

could have been his enemies—law breakers, unclean people, Roman soldiers, Jewish religious leaders, those who put him on the cross.

It is clear from the responses Jesus himself received in his own lifetime, and from the responses pacifists have received ever since, that this whole issue of loving enemies is actually very much a question that can only ultimately be answered on the level of people’s faith.

Jesus could explain quite clearly what he meant by loving enemies, and embody it in his life, but still that would not be clear nor persuasive to people who do not share his faith. That is, people who do not see God in the same way Jesus saw God, people who do not understand the nature of reality in the same way Jesus understood the nature of reality would not agree with him on loving enemies.

A person who is clear about what love of enemy means probably has gained such clarity due to a fundamental worldview conviction (faith commitment), not primarily due to rational argumentation. A person who is not clear will likely not gain clarity without such a commitment.

Certainly, the phrase “love of enemy” can easily be used as a platitude. As well, our Christian faith community has probably at times used this “love of enemy” lingo while at the same time knowing little about genuine love and kindness toward certain people within this same community. That is why we need continually to reflect on the question of how we understand and apply the call to love enemies.

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# Hope for the Lamb's triumph

## Reading

Revelation 5:1-14, 13:1-18, 21:1-22:6

## Teaching

How does John's social criticism challenge congregations today?

The book of Revelation, when read carefully, directs us toward a nonviolent path. To begin with, the book identifies itself as a "revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1). Jesus, in his life and teaching, serves as the key that should orient our interpretation. Revelation means to stimulate our following the way of Jesus.

Revelation speaks on a symbolic, imaginative level.

The author, John, faced a double crisis. On the one hand, he feared long-term consequences for churches that found themselves too much at home in Roman society. On the other hand, others faced severe persecution.

John offers a sharp critique of Babylon. Though John's Babylon obviously represents Rome, it also represents most nation states when they demand total allegiance. Chapter eighteen contains the heart of John's critique. The main points of contention include: (a) the idolatrous worship of the empire; (b) Babylon's violence, especially toward people of faith; (c) Babylon's placing such high value on brute power; and (d) Babylon's materialism and unjust economics.

**According to Revelation, the way of true power in the world is the way of the Lamb.**

However, John's concern went beyond critiquing Babylon as an end in itself. He critiqued the corrupt wider culture in order to argue for faithfulness *within* the Christian culture. John uses his social criticism in order to challenge the churches. In which society are they finding their home—that of the community of faith or of the world around them? Too many Christians, such as those in the church at Laodicea (chapter 3), were too comfortable with the values of their culture.

He offers his readers a choice: Babylon or the New Jerusalem. The portrayal of the fate of Babylon intends to highlight the choices Christians make. Will we let Jesus and his way determine our values? Or will we let the spirit of Babylon provide our framework for living?

Those who choose the way of Jesus will likely find themselves in conflict with "Babylon" (chapter 13). Part of the argument of Revelation is that such conflict cannot separate them from God. They simply need to keep trusting in the power of God's love to empower them to be victorious in resisting Babylon and its Beast. In the end, it is the God of Jesus, not some apocalyptic scheme, that is sovereign in Revelation. The point of Revelation is to shake us up to encounter God.

The God of Revelation, when the book is read as a whole, is the God of Jesus. The victory over evil is won by Jesus' suffering love on the cross (chapter 5). The book ends with the enemies of God (the rebellious nations and the kings of the earth) finding healing in the New Jerusalem (see chapters 21-22). According to Revelation, the way of true power in the world is the way of the Lamb. The source for Truth, the criteria for values and priorities, the way to deal with brokenness and evil—these all lie with God and the Lamb. They do not lie with the schemes and plots of Babylon.

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# Pacifism is a faith conviction

## Commentary

### Teaching

Is pacifism an “absolute” for Christians?

A challenge often presented to Christian pacifists is the assertion that simply having strong feelings about our position is not a persuasive reason for others to accept them. While we may have clarity based on our own feelings, like all feelings they are nonetheless personal and subjective—people with other points of view have equally strong feelings.

In response to such a challenge, I would begin by saying that we are not talking so much about “faith based *feelings*” as about what I would call personal faith *convictions*. When I talk about pacifism I am not talking about my feelings,

I am talking about the convictions that shape my entire being.

These convictions are very much based on reason, on experience, on

biblical study, on observation, on my understanding of reality outside myself. They have to do with my awareness of the objective God (that exists outside of my subjectivity and projection) and God’s will, not my own feelings.

I believe there is a significant difference between saying that a conviction is “personal” and saying that it is “subjective.” To me, “personal” connotes that I am involved in the knowledge, that my perceptions and commitments and values shape what I know. By definition, I think all faith-knowledge and all moral-knowledge are personal.

**Genuine pacifism can never be coercive when it advocates for truth.**

That faith-knowledge is personal does make conversation difficult. Certainly we cannot simply impose our faith-knowledge on others and unerringly prove its absolute truthfulness. However, I do not believe that that difficulty means that all personal knowledge is purely subjective. That is, personal knowledge is not simply relativistic, nor do we each simply define truth only for our own individual selves.

I believe we can talk about genuine truth and a hierarchy of values that exist outside of our subjectivity. However, because faith-oriented and moral truths are personal, we can not say they are strictly objective.

In thinking about an issue such as pacifism and love of enemies, we can and, in fact, must, think not only in terms of our personal experiences and opinions, but we also must struggle with “public” information. For example, the teachings of the Bible may be diverse and complicated, but they are not inscrutable or hopelessly self-contradictory. Likewise, neither the teachings and experiences of our faith tradition nor the findings of science (broadly defined) are inscrutable nor hopelessly self-contradictory. Biblical teaching, tradition and science all offer us crucial data for ascertaining the truthfulness of pacifism.

Our big challenge is to find ways to transcend the either/or of either authoritarianism (where we impose our views on others) or relativism (which denies any objectivity). We need to struggle to find ways to accept the reality of truth without closing the conversation or making the discernment process less open.

I believe that a commitment to pacifism can help one in this struggle, since genuine pacifism can never be coercive when it advocates for truth.

## Nine Modest Proposals for Mennonites on the road toward peace

*Let's stop talking about the "peace position." Peace is not a position. Peace is a way. Peace is a journey we are called to walk. And I'd rather be on a journey, inviting others to walk with me, than to be at one particular position, and having 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.*

### Nine modest proposals for the journey . . .

- 1. Let's immerse ourselves in the whole story of scripture.** The Bible has no chapter and verse to tell us how to respond to international terrorism. But we will find reliable guidance as we become familiar with the God of the Bible. We Mennonites have our favorite peace texts we turn to. But our convictions on peace are based on the whole of scripture.
- 2. Let's cling to belief in a God whose heart is for all his children.** God loves 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 himself and to each other. Every person on the face of this earth is God's creation. And God desires reconciliation with all of us.
- 3. Let's agree not to take God's job away from God.** 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 human life is worth saving, and which is expendable. To "rid the world of evil" is God's agenda, not ours. "Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).
- 4. Let's not waver from a commitment to make Jesus Lord of our lives, and follow his example in life.** "What would Jesus do?" is not a bad place to start. Simplistic? Maybe, and it doesn't answer every question. But can we picture Jesus and his disciples running a

bomb squadron to crush the evil systems they had to deal with? They did confront the powers, but with radically different methods. We have to take Jesus' life seriously, if we want to make him not only personal Savior, but Lord.

- 5. Let's agree to always walk toward, not away from, those with whom we disagree.** All of our opinions have points that can be challenged. We literally need each other in the church. We need diversity of perspectives to find the truth. Everyone suffers from a certain measure of naivete. If we just stick with those who see things our way, we will never discover our blind spots.
- 6. Let's always spend more time listening than formulating responses.** We have to be quiet long enough to hear what the Spirit is saying. If we are constantly driving our own stake in the ground, in order to defend our position, how will the Spirit nudge us a little farther along the road? How will the Spirit break through to give us new insight?
- 7. Let's commit ourselves to work for peace with justice.** The biblical picture is one of "justice and peace kissing each other" (Ps. 85:10). There is no peace without justice. Let's not short-circuit justice in the present crisis. It is right that those responsible for these massive acts of inhumanity are called to account. But there is more than one way for that to happen.
- 8. Let's always listen to the wisdom of the church.** There are good reasons why certain convictions have remained with us for many generations. We can disagree, but we must bend over backwards to listen. Some Mennonites can quote talk show hosts and radio preachers backwards and forwards, but have no idea what our Confession of Faith has to say. Mennonites don't get everything right. You might study our tradition thoroughly, and still find things to take issue with. But do listen to the wisdom of our community of faith.
- 9. Let's never stop proclaiming hope.** That's something important we have to offer the world in times like these. Our theology of resurrection is a theology of hope. God can bring life out of death. God can bring peace out of chaos. And God has the last word.

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# Ancient Israel's power politics

## Reading

1 Samuel 8:1-22; 2 Samuel 11:1-27; 1 Kings 21:1-29; Jeremiah 7:1-34; Isaiah 40:1-44:28

## Teaching

What can we learn from Israel's political experiences?

The story of the liberation of the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt is cited more than any other in the Old Testament as embodying the saving work of God. The God of the Exodus, unlike most other gods, does not exist merely to reinforce the king's power. This God hears the cries of those the powerful treated as non-persons.

The Hebrews did not gain their liberation from slavery and toward freedom through human military might. God miraculously brings about liberation. The center of power in this new society thus lay not with the generals and the warriors, but with the people's God. The people

with the most status are the weaponless prophets, those who best discern the will of the liberating God.

While the Hebrews journeyed toward the promised land, God gave them the law to provide structure for the delivered slaves so they could sustain the effects of that deliverance. The law served the purpose of structuring life toward justice—in contrast with Egypt's injustice.

Following Israel's establishment of their nation in Palestine, the political structure remained decentralized for several generations. However, eventually, crises—internal and external—brought forth a strong desire for a

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more centralized system, anchored around a king. Ultimately, in what follows, even the greatest of the kings, David, acts with profound violence. He takes his captain Uriah's wife, the beautiful Bathsheba, and sees to it that Uriah meets his death in battle.

What follows are several centuries of a sad litany of one corrupt king following another (with few exceptions). David's act of *taking* becomes the norm.

With the prophet Jeremiah, we come to the fulfillment of centuries of warnings. In the generations of power-hungry kings, prophets raised challenges. Turn from God's ways of justice and peace, gather horses and chariots, trust in the sword and you will die by the sword. Israel's great temple meets with destruction in 586 B.C.E. The office of king, the monarchy, stands no more. These central objects of confidence, these signs of God's presence and Israel's identity, lie in ruins.

Out of these ruins, though, a message of hope emerged, articulated most profoundly in Isaiah 40–55. God loves God's people still. The original hope of the Exodus—a community centered around God's love and mercy—received new voice. However, from the time of Jeremiah and Isaiah 40–55 on, this community found its identity not through its linkage with any particular nation state, but as a counter-culture, a creative minority in many different nation states.

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# Paul: The transformation of a violent man

## Reading

Acts 7:54–8:1, 9:1-19; Romans 5:1-11, 13:8-10; Galatians 1:11-24

## Teaching

What does it mean to serve God?

The first Christians followed Jesus’ ways of openness and abundant mercy. As Jesus had, they faced conflict with the religious leaders. This conflict reached its height when one of the early church’s most dynamic leaders, Stephen, was executed by stoning.

The book of Acts tells us that when “they dragged [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58).

This Saul himself soon regularly breathed “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Saul’s hostility toward the Christians was *because* of his commitment to protecting God’s honor. Later, he wrote how he “was violently persecuting the church of God” because of the zeal he had for his religion (Gal.1:13-14).

Then something amazing happened. Saul headed for the city of Damascus, looking for Christians, intending to bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried for blasphemy, perhaps hoping they would all meet the same fate as Stephen. On the road, Saul was blinded by a flashing

light and then came face to face with Jesus. “He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’ ” (Acts 9:3-9).

Saul was undone, rendered speechless and blind for several days. He recovered, but was never the same again. On the Damascus road and after, Saul had his life turned completely around, symbolized by his new identity, Paul the apostle. His old world came apart.

However, because Paul did sincerely want to do God’s will, he was able to receive God’s direct revelation to him. He came to follow his new understanding of God’s will with full commitment. The Jesus he had hated, he came to believe, was in fact the fullest revelation of his God. Jesus was not a blasphemer, but instead was the model for genuine faithfulness to the God of Israel.

This revolution in Paul’s worldview led to his transformation away from a zealous and violent persecutor of people he considered to be heretics. He became a man of peace. He remained intensely committed to serve God, but realized that the service God desires is to unconditionally love others, not to seek to do them harm when they offend his belief system.

Paul came to preach the following message: The gospel of God is the good news that, more than anything else, God loves us and wants us to be whole. In *response* to God’s love, we are challenged to love others. This is the most important law or commandment. Paul wrote: “The one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘you shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word. ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (Rom. 13:8-9).

**Paul remained intensely committed to serve God, but realized that the service God desires is to unconditionally love others, not to seek to do them harm when they offend his belief system.**