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Blessed Are the Peacemakers

LISA CLARK KEITH

In this increasingly hostile world, I find myself thinking deeply about what it means to be a peacemaker and, more specifically, a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

I am no theologian, and a far-from-perfect congregant, yet, I cherish deeply my relationship with Jesus Christ. His redemptive love and saving grace are things that I hold tightly to my heart. I could not go on living as I do without knowing for certain that He loves me unequivocally, and that my purpose in life is to exemplify the love He has shown me, to others.

There are two things that happened in my life that pointed me toward the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church rather than any of the many other denominations in Fresno. First, in 1999, I attended a five-day training in “Basic Conflict Management and Mediation” led by Dalton Reimer and Ron Claassen. Second, several years later, I read the book *What Would You Do?* by John Howard Yoder. Yoder’s book had a profound effect on me then, and as I reread it today, it still brings me to tears.

Conflict: Danger and Opportunity

In the recent past there has been discussion at my place of work – Fresno Pacific University (FPU) -- about whether to arm Campus Safety Officers with handguns. Just the term “officers” makes me uncomfortable, the authority inherent in that title makes me uneasy. I would much prefer to refer to the men and women in our Campus Safety unit as “first responders” or “ambassadors” - something that alludes to their most important roles at the university; that of providing aid and assistance.

Those in favor of arming the officers noted the rise in shooting incidents nationwide and cited our social responsibility to care for and protect innocent people on our campus.

Those opposed were much quieter, though just as concerned.

However, I spoke out vehemently against the idea of arming Campus Safety personnel. My sentiment echoed the words of Yoder, “...killing of the attacker would seal for him that negative destiny. I would take away from him any possibility of repentance and faith.” I felt that the taking of human life interferes

with the ability of God to work in and through those individuals, no matter how dangerous or disenfranchised they may be.

I thought about writing an article, strongly committed to the idea that as a university affiliated with a historical peace church, we have a moral and ethical responsibility to live out those sentiments that we hold dear in our confession of faith and that thousands have died for. But what about our social responsibility?

Empty Handed

I am reminded of the Harrison Ford Movie, *Witness*. It is about a young Amish boy who is a material witness to a homicide that occurs during a trip into the big city with his mother. When the “bad men” come to find and kill the policeman hiding among the Amish in their community, the boy rings the tower bell as a signal to the community members on the surrounding farms to come quickly. There is a poignant moment when all the farmers throw down their rakes, hoes and plowshares, and run – empty handed – directly to where the trouble is.

They came empty handed, without a weapon. No weapon for defense or for aggression. They came running into the midst of danger, together. Whatever they may need to face, they would do it together.

Sheep, Sheepdogs, and Wolves

A dear Christian friend from my high school days who is now a retired police lieutenant referred me to an chapter in a book, *Warriors*, by a former U.S. Army ranger who now works as a homeland security expert. The chapter, “On Sheep, Wolves, and Sheepdogs” is written by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman. The piece suggests that most people fall into one of three categories. According to Grossman, I personally am a sheep, since I have no capacity for violence. The wolf is an aggressive sociopath. The sheepdog holds deep love for fellow and sister citizens, but also has the capacity for violence in the pursuit of justice, and therefore serves as the protector of the flock. Grossman implies that the sheep is blissfully unaware of the wolf’s presence and proximity to the flock.

The missing piece from Grossman’s metaphor is that although I do not espouse the use of violence, it does not mean I *am* not capable of it. Perhaps that is what scares me the most; that I am capable of violence. Only with the Holy

Spirit's guidance, am I able to refrain from the use of force during times when I feel that I need to defend myself or others from attacks of different kinds.

I can only hope, in such agonizing situations, that I might sacrifice myself to save others, knowing with certainty, that my death, while possibly viewed as tragic, would allow me to see Jesus face to face.

What If My Child Were the Shooter?

As I pondered these conversations and continued to read, I wondered how I would respond if my own child was the shooter in a particular incident. Wouldn't I want someone – anyone – to stop them by any means necessary to save the lives of others? This was a turning point for me. I had come to terms with the necessity of giving my own life for someone else, but now I had to consider the possibility that I might lose my progeny by keeping them from doing the unthinkable.

I had now placed the responsibility of that possibility squarely upon my shoulders as a parent, and had taken it upon myself to be the sole determiner of the outcome of that imagined day, leaving others and God out of the equation.

Social Responsibility

Correspondingly, much has been written about Mennonites and policing. In *The Gospel or a Glock? Mennonites and the Police*, Alexis-Baker asserts that violence is inherent in modern policing. They further remind us that North American Mennonites (and Brethren) are known to focus on the restoration of an offender to community life, which is impossible, if the offender is killed.

S.S.T. Falanga in their rebuttal to Alexis-Baker, argues that it is not in fact possible to sustain a non-violent community in the midst of a violent world. This point can be debated at length, for Jesus' own time was a very violent period of history. Hauerwas, in his book *The Peaceable Kingdom* states, "In effect, the peace of God, rather than making the world more safe, only increases the dangers we have to negotiate" referring to the fact that following Jesus necessitates the opposite of order – even anarchy – because all social orders and institutions are built on the falsehood that we, not God, are the masters of our existence.

Live In The World, But Be Not Of It

Where, then, does our responsibility lie? To God. Always. If we know that killing, even violence in thought, is a sin, then there is no debate here at all. We trust in the divine God of the universe, and act according to the call that has been placed on our lives: to live as Jesus lived, to seek justice, but to love mercy

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