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Peace be with/in/through you  
Martin Grove United Church  
September 23, 2018  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37

I remember when I was a bright young student at the University of Saskatchewan in the 1980s and I discovered the SCM - The Student Christian Movement. It was a club where we discussed social justice issues from a Christian perspective. The SCM was my earliest window into understanding how the world works - or to be more precise - how the world does not really work for majority of human beings on the planet. Through the SCM I learned a great deal about the economy, politics, food, global hunger, the environment, greed, stupidity. Most of those issues were quite well understood in the 80's, and had solutions that were practical and possible. I remember thinking I'm glad I learned all about these problems before they were all solved!

I think I'm perhaps just a bit more wise now. And now, 25+ years later, I think I finally understand what was wrong with my assumptions in the 1980's. I had assumed that people want to live in peace. But I'm no longer sure that's true.

Consider this: Let me ask you, does anyone here know a story in the Bible that describes people living in peace? I can't think of any. We have stories where someone says how great it will be to live in peace (perhaps, after we kill those other people), but no actual stories of people just doing living peaceful lives.

Consider this: Think of what you see when you visit a museum. Artifacts in museums are rarely items that were used by normal people living normal lives. Artifacts are either military hardware, or royal jewels, or expensive vases. Museums do a good job of representing the lifestyles of the rich and famous, and representing military combat - which was the main hobby of the rich and famous. But museums generally do not depict the peaceful life of normal people. There are perhaps 2 reasons for that. One reason is that while rich people had items made of metal and jewels that survive over the centuries, normal poor people usually owned items made from wood and cloth, items that simply don't last very long. That is true of course, but I think that's only part of the story.

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The larger truth is that we don't have stories of people living in peace in the Bible, or in museums for the very simple reason that those stories would be extremely boring! Living normal, peaceful life is one thing, reading about someone else doing it is another thing. I was reminded of this fact this week at the UCW meeting. Joan asked people what they had done this summer, and a few people said they did "nothing". What they meant was nothing that they felt people would enjoy hearing about, but in fact those people probably had moments of peace during the summer. Living in peace would be fine if it wasn't so boring.

Do you ever wonder - as I do from time to time - whether it's possible to really be a Christian? I'm not quibbling about the underlying basis for baptism and membership in global Christian community. I'm talking about Jesus's statement that those who want to be first need to be last. Is that a requirement of a Christian life? Really? Is the "bar" of Christian discipleship higher than any of us care to achieve?

Who here wants to be last ... hands up ... See, and even if you did just put your hand up now, you've just failed because you are bragging about being last, which means you still want to be first. In the world that I know, the only time that anyone wants to go last is when they want to have the last word in an argument. That's why the words of Jesus are so startling ... that's why the words are so powerful.

And so far, I've been gentle anyway. The requirement - according to Jesus - is not to be last, but rather, to support and help "the least". To take seriously that the best expression of faith requires caring for the least in our community, the powerless, the vulnerable, people with fractured lives. If by "community" we mean Rexdale, then "the least" are perhaps unemployed or disadvantaged people. Maybe we could handle that. But if by "community" we mean the global community, then "the least" includes all kinds of people, including refugees, particularly refugees without money, or papers, or other forms of support.

Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany has taken a lot of heat over the past few years for proposing that Germany should absorb 800,000 refugees - equivalent to 1% of the German population. Merkel's opponents have been pushing back saying that would alter the German culture significantly. And around the world, people (or at least

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the media) are saying that absorbing refugees would have an impact on national identity and culture. North Americans are particularly concerned about non-Christian refugees, and - let's be honest - with Muslim refugees.

I believe the current, ongoing refugee crisis raises a huge dilemma for Christians. Because if we agree with Jesus that we should support “the least”, what exactly are we to do? Some say that if Canada absorbs too many non-Christians we will lose our identity. Some people say we will lose our Christian identity. But I say that if we do not absorb enough refugees - many more than what will be comfortable - then we are throwing our Christian values away ourselves. We must support “the least” or we need to stop saying that we are Christian. That's a very challenging call.

Another way to look at the refugee situation is to realize that many refugees are products of war. The (independent) media is full of examples of how consumer-focused, power-based regimes like our own contribute to global conflict. Perhaps we should stop creating so many refugees in the first place by doing what it takes to end all war and create peace. Sept 21 was the United Nations International Day of Peace after all.

What do we think of world peace anyway? Some of us think that world peace is just a dream. This is sometimes reinforced during beauty pageants, where the contestants all say that what they want is world peace, but speak about world peace in terms that are just naive, simplistic, really just a joke. Paul Chappel<sup>1</sup>, a graduate of West Point and veteran says that If human beings are naturally violent, then war is inevitable, and world peace is a joke. But if human beings are not naturally violent, then world peace is possible. For him, the important question is, “are human beings naturally violent”. And perhaps in 2018, the assumed answer is yes.

But consider this: 300 years ago, women could not vote in any country. Over the past 300 years, and mainly in very recent history, in most countries now, women can vote. The main reason why women could not vote was the belief that women were intellectually inferior. Science and common sense have both proven that women are not inferior, that was just a myth that society accepted. But 300 years ago, it was a working assumption. Now, women's rights are still restricted and we do not have equality yet, but

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpGTMjYGUcI>

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the point is that the myth of women being inferior (which never had any basis anyway) has been discarded, and society has and is moving forward.

Today, in 2018, it is a working assumption that human beings are violent. But perhaps in our future, people will look back and wonder how we could have been so stupid to believe such an idiotic myth without any proof. The myth already seems wrong to me, or explain to me why children naturally get along with each other regardless of colour, culture, religion, etc. Children get along with each other right up to the time when adults start telling them to hate each other.

And what is peace? Some people think peace is simply the absence of war. But I think that peace is the environment in which there will be no desire for war. Nobel peace laureate Jody Williams said, "Peace is not singing Kum Bah Yah. Peace is sustainable peace with justice and equality, in which the majority of people on this planet have enough resources to lead dignified lives. Where people have access to education and health care so they can live in freedom from want and fear. This is called human security."

And yet, we rarely talk about human security. We usually talk about national security. And national security means spending money on military infrastructure because of another myth - the myth that war makes us safe. Our leaders choose whether to spend on human security or on national security, and they seem to always favour national security. The cruel irony is that spending on human security reduces the need for national security in the first place. As one example, in 2015 the estimated cost to solve world hunger was \$30 billion. Too expensive, right? But that year, the US had no problem spending \$737 billion on its military. These estimates are likely not accurate, but there is no doubt that we spend FAR more on "national security" than we spend on "human security". Or to put it in the terms that Jesus used, we spend FAR more on making sure we are first, and much much less on "the least".

We cannot create world peace in one day. But even in one day - perhaps even this day - we can start to build peace. Let's start right here in our own community. Peace be with you. Peace be in you. Peace be through you. Peace is for you - to give and to receive.

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I would like to close with a poem - or perhaps it's a meditation - entitled "Easter is Breaking" by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

### EASTER IS BREAKING

Somewhere across the world, Easter is breaking not the Easter we may think of, with arms upraised and "he is risen" echoing from canyons, but a much quieter, less dramatic Easter.

Somewhere in the world - perhaps not this day, but some day soon, a woman and a man rise from their beds, shaking the sleep from their eyes, and find their children already awake and preparing for their morning prayers. There has been no gunfire, no drug wars, no yelling or shouting or screaming, only the quiet of the night and the peace of silence around them.

And somewhere in the world, perhaps not this morning, but soon, very soon, a soldier is packing his duffle bag, has emptied out all his bullets, is changing into civilian clothes, and is coming home, for peace has long been established, and there is no need for his presence.

And somewhere in the world, Easter dawn breaks over the earth, not only on this day, but every day, and the familiar pulse in our veins throbs of "peace, peace, peace."

*Amen.*