Pastors, Prophets, and Patriotism: Leading Pastorally In These Times

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At age 19, I was baptized in Lake Ontario where the Niagara River empties into that Great Lake. From where I was baptized, I could see US and Canadian soil and historic military forts in both countries. In that cold, turbulent water I stood apart from both countries and their military agenda. My baptism was on the border of two countries, the periphery of both nations. Baptism reminds us that our citizenship is not on earth but in God's Reign.

The most difficult part of becoming Mennonite was the peace position. Yet I became convinced that peace and reconciliation are at the heart of the Christian gospel, not just a quirky idea of Mennonites and other fringe believers. It was the peace position that my family found most offensive and even scandalous. My parents and grandparents lived through the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. My father and grandfathers were active in the Underground Resistance. My great-grandmother died as a result of a Nazi evacuation. After the Second World War, my father volunteered for the Dutch army and fought in Indonesia. Until the end of his life, that experience haunted him. Questions of war, militarism, and resistance are deeply important to my family. They were not impressed when I embraced the peace position, but embrace it I did.

And that position deeply informs my pastoring. September 11 provoked pastoral care issues. Some of my rural Ontario parishioners feared that they might be victims of a terrorist attack. Gifted and hospitable people named a new fear and even hatred of Muslim neighbors. So on Sunday, September 16 we faced how to respond in our worship. An important decision was to proceed with a regular service, with the usual order of worship. Early in our service we had a special prayer to respond to the horror and grief of September 11 and to lift up our longings for peace; this freed people from preoccupations and

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released them into God's hands. It was our custom to share concerns and petitions later in the service. During this time, much appropriate attention was given by people to unfolding events.

In the sermon, I did not choose my Bible text especially for that service but preached the first verses of Jonah, something planned months before. I drew lively connections to current world events. Many colleagues (especially lectionary preachers) found that God spoke more powerfully when the preacher did not choose a new text but allowed the [prescribed or previously selected] text to speak. That service functioned as Christian worship is intended. It reoriented people to God's Reign. It grounded them in God's purposes. It reminded us not to be shaped, formed, or molded by what the world tells us is true and important. Amid the clamor of calls for war and revenge, we were invited to hear God's still, small voice urging us towards healing and reconciliation.

Some say preachers should deal only with comforting and consolation. But comforting is not the same as making comfortable. And as politicians and the media rushed to exploit the terrible events as a call to war and revenge, it would have been poor pulpit stewardship to avoid addressing such concerns.

Many spoke to me of that worship service. I heard a common refrain: people felt alone and vulnerable. As friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors called for revenge, our people were often afraid to ask questions or offer other perspectives. They did not know where to turn, even as in their hearts they knew that there was something very wrong with what they were told. They looked forward to Sunday worship, because they knew that there they would be called to pay attention to God's perspective. They could proclaim their faith. They would be heartened and encouraged to stand for God's values. Many people said, both that day and subsequently, "There was no place I would rather be than at church."

For many this was the *first* time and place they felt at home. They looked for a different perspective than that offered by media and acquaintances. They found it at church, which is exactly where we should find it. At church they were renewed and inspired. They found resources, resonance, reinforcement, and a resting place when much around them felt unsafe and dangerous. This is music to a pastor's ears. But there was also a profound theological truth.

Meanwhile, esteemed friends at Christian Peacemaker Teams suggested churches cancel or interrupt Sunday worship or create alternative services and possibly attend a protest in order to make clear how serious the issues were. I admire CPT, but I was troubled. In times of serious trouble, Christians belong in worship. To cancel worship is to let the bad news of the world and the world's ways set our primary agenda.

Our church recognized that worship is the place where we most needed to be. In the aftermath of September 11, many people were glued to TV and completely taken in by what others said was real or of ultimate value. It was never more important or radical *not* to be ruled by the media's priorities and portraying of realities. At such times, one of the most faithful things we can do is immerse ourselves in worship and prayer. As John called believers to worship in the Book of Revelation, even and especially in the light of Roman oppression, drawing them to focus on God's ultimate reality, we must do same.

The gospel is all about God's first-strike disarmament strategies and initiatives at reconciling us to God and calling us to be reconciled to one another. Temptations of nationalism and vengeance, or of blessing the death-dealing prerogatives of Caesar, or of forgetting the primacy of God's Reign have tempted Christians for centuries, even millennia. These were issues at the heart of Constantinianism, and issues when Anabaptists were asked how they would respond to state enemies, and issues repeatedly in twentieth century.

Churches, Christians, and Christian leaders were coopted for the American war effort in World War I. "Holy war" and "crusade" terminology were adopted. Christian leaders said: "It is neither a travesty nor exaggeration to call this war on the part of America, a truly Holy War"; "The man who is disloyal to the flag is disloyal to Christianity; the State must be obeyed under pain of incurring the guilt of mutiny against God"; "We must keep the flag and the Cross together, for they are both working for the same ends."[1] Churches contributed to wartime hysteria, many peace societies collapsed, and war brought a revival of religion. Sound familiar? German opponents of course at the same time wore belts with logos that read "God with us."

This "Great War," a "war to end all wars," was a major cause of the Second World War. There, in this "Good War," churches were tempted to set aside the gospel. Many Mennonites in both North America and in Europe

supported National Socialism. A former parishioner confessed to me shamefacedly how he and other Russian Mennonites long thought that Hitler was doing great things.

In each war, we are told that this one is just and holy. Each time, governments withhold truth or even lie. And each time the church goes along, we corrupt the gospel. Nonviolence, unilateral reconciliation, and the rejection of violence are at the center of the gospel. They are not negotiable, not a petty idea or a Mennonite frill. Christians throughout history have been tempted by coercion, whether it is the coercion of state (which so many Christians in the sixteenth century used against our ancestors) or the coercion of the church itself.

Strangely enough, I took heart recently in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. For all its battles, it decries illusions of effectiveness, ends justifying means, might making right. In a story of world-scale wars and unmitigated evil, the small, humble, peripheral, and weak are crucial because they know their role. This book believes in hope in the small and least powerful, in the power and fruitfulness of small acts of faithfulness. An elf ruler says: "The road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere."[2]

Tolkien sounds like Jeremiah (or numerous other Original Testament prophets): "Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might . . . ." (Jer. 9.23) Mennonites can understand this vision and embrace it *as Christians*. We are not called to win at all costs or to lend our support to killing and evil means. Indeed, the ethical center of *Lord of the Rings* is a cautionary tale that even well-meaning folks must not use the Ring of Power, even for well-meant ends.

When we tell unpopular stories we fear for the effectiveness of our evangelism. I understand that; I have been a pastor, even a church planter. But I refuse to compromise our faith for other ends. More than that, I testify that God can use our truth-telling fruitfully.

For the first Sunday after the Persian Gulf War bombing began, I decided that though I am cautious about politics in the pulpit, it was crucial to present

a Christian voice. I pulled out all the stops in that sermon. The congregation was a small fragile church planting, longing for growth. I wished he had come the week before or after. That war was so popular. Why did he have to hear the most scandalous and offensive part of the gospel on his first Sunday? I was tempted to temper my words, but did not. Then, wonder of wonders, he kept coming, studied the Scriptures with me, and became more involved. After a long while I asked about that first Sunday. This is what he told me. Just prior to that Sunday, he had been laid off and spent entire days watching television, seeing the same old battle and bombing scenes over and over. He did not question what he saw or heard. But in our church worship, for the first time, he heard a different point of view. Our worship pulled him from the mesmerization of the media. He saw things differently.

In the same church an older Dutchman, Steve, started attending and took catechism. He was bitter about his young brother being killed by the Nazis in the Second World War. In catechism, we finally came to questions of nonviolence. He was resistant. I wished I could avoid it; it was like arguing with my parents. Besides, we could always use another convert in our little church. But I persisted and he wrestled hard. Eventually, he asked for baptism into the faith. Last June, Steve was buried. We heard many testimonies from his life. One was the importance that he put on his difficult conversion into nonviolence, even learning to forgive those who had killed his brother.

In every church I served, people came precisely *because of* our commitment to the gospel, our lifting high God's priorities of peace and justice on earth as in heaven. Such stories hearten me into faithfulness, although I would urge truth-telling even without such successes.

What does it take for our churches to proclaim and live (as Paul said) "by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship"? How do we honor Paul's call: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect"?

We need to worship — for reasons I discussed above. We need community. It is impossible to counteract larger trends and persuasive forces on our own. My Bloomingdale, Ontario folks gained courage in counteracting

rumours of war's necessity because of their fellowship, study, and worship together. We need mentors, saints, and models; we need to know and tell stories of integrity, where actions and practices mesh with convictions. We need witnesses and testimony. I was heartened by the PBS special, "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It," the story of World War II conscientious objectors. We would be wise and do well to tap those in our congregations who lived through wars and to learn from them. They know what it means to be different and to suffer as a minority. It is also time to engage Old Order siblings and learn from them about ways and strategies of being separate from world, embracing again opportunities of nonconformity.

We need strategies for the media, including critical questioning, developing other media, selective engagement, and at times fasting and abstinence. Too easily our hearts and minds are shaped by false urgencies and destructive hates. It is a pastoral duty to resist. Our souls are at stake. People's hearts are being eaten up by retaliation, revenge, idolatry, and anxiety. Given the strong and seductive powers of the media, a strong counter-witness is needed.

Thomas Merton was a monk when monks were not allowed to know daily news. He and his confrères did not learn about Hiroshima and Nagasaki until months later. He never followed daily news, yet was an incisive visionary on matters of nuclear weapons, race, and all manner of social issues. His prayerful distance from the media helped him see better. We are called to the same.

We need to be people of prayer and discernment, so that what Jesus' words would be true of us: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." Not only are spiritual disciplines waning, we may be losing our capacity for them. Technology forms us to be intolerant with anything that takes time, is difficult, or is not easily accessible because of depth of meaning. Accustomed to being bombarded by a host of images and information, we resist disciplines that demand patience and focus. The spiritual life is obviously at risk.

Yet rather than acting from, or being driven by, desperation and fear, or being mesmerized into hate and violence whether in our daily lives or reflecting on larger world events, we can act — from and live in, and with — conviction, deliberation, discernment, compassion, and discipline "on earth as in heaven."

As the West makes war in the East, I remember a legend about Saint Francis. During the crusades, Francis, a former soldier, was horrified by the conflict between Christians and Muslims. So he crossed battle lines to meet the enemy. He met the Muslim leader, Al-Kamil. By the end of their time together, Al-Kamil said that he would be willing to be baptized and be a Christian if he ever met another Christian like St. Francis. "But that will never happen," he was sure.

Sometimes when I am discouraged by dealing with conflicts — whether congregational or denominational or in the wider world — I am tempted to utter a dismissive curse: "A pox on both your houses." But reflecting on the violence, evil, hurt, suffering, and tragedy on all sides, the Christian response should be to offer a blessing. That is the Christian — and the pastoral — thing to do. So I urge us rather to work for this Benedictine blessing: "A *pax* on all our houses."

Notes

[1] Ray H. Abrams, *Preachers Present Arms* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press 1969), 50.
[2] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Toronto: Methuen, 1971), 181, 283.