

Stories to Sustain a Peace Church

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with Tim Schmucker and Harold Thiessen

Texts: *Romans 12:19-21; Matthew 5:38-48*

Today we celebrate Peace Sunday. It's also Remembrance Day.

It first was called Armistice Day when, exactly 100 years ago – on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month – a treaty ended the Great War– a war to end all wars, as some called it. Throughout the war both opposing forces told their citizens that God was on their side. By its end at least 10 million combatants died – two times as many were injured. And then there were the millions of civilian deaths – 40 million died in all, are the statistics I've seen.

These deaths are remembered today in Canada – beginning at our memorials in France. Who here has visited Beaumont-Hamel and Vimy Ridge? You walk on Canadian soil when you're there – land bequeathed by France – so Canada's first Remembrance Day celebration today took place there.

It's profoundly moving to walk amongst the graves, thousands of them, row on row, the figure of a weeping woman looking over the field of dead below. Guides speak poignantly to what happened – and, if you listen to the subtext, you can't help but conclude that war is a stupid way to solve problems. To me, a visit there underscored how important our Anabaptist peace witness is.

At the end of that ugly time there was little appetite for war – mostly grief and remembering – and a call to end all wars. That's what Remembrance Day was set up to remember – not only the dead, but also the senselessness of war.

But memories are short. What troubled us historic peace churches – Mennonites, Quakers and Church of the Brethren – is that the reason for Remembrance Day became reframed within a few years. By the mid-1930s drums of war were heard once again, and you know the aftermath – WWII, the Korean War and so on and so on.

Today we're called to remember the dead in celebrations of Remembrance Day from Vimy Ridge to Vancouver Island – we hear 'In Flanders Fields the Poppies Grow' – we listen to a lone bugle play the Last Post – as its echoes fade we reflect in silence for 2 minutes – we recite a commitment to remember – Lest we forget!

But, regrettably, memory fails again. To my ears at least, much of what surrounds Remembrance Day has become a platform to promote the cause of armed forces, and participation in war is elevated to a nationalistic duty, a test of patriotism.

So, to us Historic Peace Churches – churches that consistently have held to non-violence over the centuries – celebration of Remembrance Day creates a profound ambivalence.

We're not against remembering those killed in wars. Life is precious, and loss of life to violence is tragic whatever the cause. And, when warfare is seen as the only way to resolve differences, that multiplies the tragedy.

We should remember – we should weep for lives destroyed – we should pray for forgiveness, and for a more tolerant and just, if not loving, world.

But, to use those deaths to elevate war into something that we should embrace – there we draw the line. By the grace of God we seek to live and proclaim the good news of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. We believe we should love the Lord our God with all our hearts, soul and mind; and, our neighbours like ourselves.¹ It's clear to us that Jesus advocated non-violence. His admonitions are our model – not to take an eye for an eye as society says – to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you – to leave vengeance to God's wisdom.

These and other admonitions from Jesus and the apostles don't just echo Psalm 146 and other Old Testament faith expressions of God's will we could have used as today's texts, they reflect how Jesus himself lived, and they guided the disciples and converts of the first century church.

In turn, these were models for our Anabaptist ancestors of the sixteenth century for what it meant to be church.

So, instead of Remembrance Day, we celebrate Peace Sunday – a reminder that our spiritual ancestors dating back to the time of the Reformation gave their lives for such commitment – just as the earliest church did.

But, for us too, memories can be short. It's easy for the Christ message to be watered down, even forgotten – particularly when times are good. There are such examples in our history. We too are at risk.

There are those in our more conservative Old Colony Mennonites who left Canada for Latin America who say we Canadian Mennonites are “willing to go along with anything, melding into an individualistic, materialistic society...” reports Will Braun in a recent Canadian Mennonite article.

Stories to Sustain our Peace Church Mission

So, how can we safeguard our peace church mission and ourselves from becoming misled?

One way is through the power of story – telling stories of women and men from our midst that reveal what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Statistics of war don't persuade nearly as well as

¹ Matthew 22: 35-40

a good story. Stories spark the imagination. And, what makes these stories infinitely more powerful and more interesting is the narrative they support in us.

So, today, I'd invite you to reflect on four stories on what it takes to sustain us as a Peace Church. They come from our history – spanning from the reformation to the present. They're stories of heroes – heroes of peacemaking. Tim Schmucker and Harold Thiessen, in turn, will relate two – I'll relate the first and the last.

In each, I'd invite you to ask yourself – what would I have done? What can we as a congregation do to support similar responses here where we live?

Story 1: Dirk Willems

An iconic story of our Anabaptist forbearers is that of Dirk Willems. I can't count the number of times someone new to our faith has said: 'the Dirk Willems story convinced me.' His is one of more than 4000 recorded in the Martyrs Mirror, most of them Anabaptists, who endured suffering, torture, and a martyr's death because of their complete faith in the gospel of Christ.

The 1500s were a dangerous time to be an Anabaptist. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the Pope both were committed to stamping out these heretics – soon joined by followers of Luther and Calvin. The main complaint against them was that they did not believe infant baptism had any value. They chose to be re-baptized as willing adults. In fact, the word Anabaptist was a swear word. "He's an ana-baptist" they sneered – a re-baptized person. It was punishable by death.

How dangerous a time it was is described by an exiled Augustinian prior of the time:²

"The land is full of soldiers. One hears often of robbery, of fires, of arrests, of racks and of hangings or other murderings. ... Along the roads in various places people can be seen hanging from trees, gallows and on other cross pieces, shocking everyone observing this desolate state of affairs."

In this context we have young Dirk Willems – born in the Netherlands, choosing to be baptized as a young man. He's committed to his new faith, so he opens his home to worship services in secret, and the baptism of other people. When this was discovered, he's arrested and confined to a cell of a palace turned into a prison.

After months on prison rations, he manages to escape down a rope made of knotted rags onto a frozen moat, and then runs as quickly as his stiff and weak legs can carry him across a snowy

² From a 1574 diary of an exiled Augustinian prior in Gouda

field. Suddenly he hears shouts behind him – he’s being chased. Coming to a pond with a thin layer of ice, he risks crossing it rather than face sure death. The ice sways under him – but holds his thin body.

As he runs on, he hears cries for help. The guard chasing him has fallen through the ice and can’t get out. What should he do – save his own life? Or the guard’s? Willems turned back to save the life of his pursuer.

The guard was most grateful and about to let Willems go – but then the Burgomeister shouts that if he does, he’ll forfeit his own life.

Willems is brought back and condemned to death for what he readily agreed as true – being rebaptized, and holding of services in his house – “all of which is contrary to our holy Christian faith, and to the decrees of his royal majesty...” it said in the record of his sentencing.

He was [burned at the stake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_by_burning) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_by_burning) and died a terrible death near his hometown on 16 May 1569.

Story 2: Christian Schmucker (by Tim Schmucker)

Every year on Remembrance Day, I choose to remember my great-great-great-great Grandpa, Christian Schmucker, who gave a clear witness against war-making that has reverberated through the generations. He was Amish, and as a young adult, immigrated to eastern Pennsylvania from Alsace in 1752. Twenty-five years later, he found himself caught up in the throes of the U.S. War of Independence.

One day military officials arrived at his farm in Lancaster County declaring that all able-bodied men were needed to join the fight against the British tyranny. He quietly refused, saying that he would not, could not kill anyone. In spite of both persuasion and threats, he remained firm refusing to take up arms “for the cause.” The military recruiters left quite angrily.

After a number of days, they returned, offering a “deal”: Grandpa only would have to drive his team of horses and wagon to transport supplies to the army. He again refused, calmly saying that he would not, could not participate in any part of the war effort.

Seeing that they would get nowhere, the recruiters decided to make an example out of Grandpa: he was arrested, thrown into jail, and subsequently sentenced to death in a military court for treason. His little grandson – my great-great-great Grandpa – would go with his mother and father to take food to Christian during his long prison stay.

Now, there’s no evidence that the sentence was actually carried out; historians conclude that it probably wasn’t. Nevertheless, his sacrificial witness has touched untold thousands: no one can make us participate in war; no one can force us to hate our enemies; following Jesus **is** possible, even in the most difficult times.

Story 3: Oma's Story of Johann Thiessen's 1937 Arrest and my father Gerhard's refusal to report the Neighbor as a Collaborator (by Harold Thiessen)

I never met my grandfather, Johann Thiessen, who was born in the Mennonite village of Klippenfeld in the Molotschna colony in Ukraine. One night, on December 15, 1937, the Soviet secret police came and arrested my grandfather and he was never heard from again. This happened to many at that time, Mennonites, Ukrainians and Russians, arrest after arrest.

I learned of this terrible event from my grandmother, Helene Thiessen when I asked about her life history a number of years ago. She, her mother, daughter and my father managed to escape to Canada after the Second World War.

My grandmother maintained that she knew that a fellow Mennonite villager, a neighbor, had betrayed my grandfather with false allegations, resulting in his arrest. On top of that, in 1941, just before the German forces arrived, her two older sons (my uncles) were rounded up with the other remaining men and shipped East, also never to be heard from again. You can imagine her anger, despair and terror.

Then came an opportunity for justice and reckoning. When the German forces liberated the Mennonites in late 1941, they sought out Soviet collaborators, often executing them with little hesitation. My grandmother told me that she had instructed my father, then 17, to report the man that was responsible for her husband's arrest.

My father could have done so, obeying his mother's request and avenging, in a way, the arrest and disappearance of his father. However, he refused. The reason for this is not entirely clear – I never did ask him directly about this episode in his life, but I could speculate and say that he likely did not want the death of this man on his conscience.

As I thought about my grandmother's story, I was astonished at how long her pain and anger regarding this incident had continued, even 40 years later. But I was also somewhat proud and amazed that my father chose not to pursue vengeance and retribution, even though by ordinary human standards one could say there would have been ample justification to do so.

Story 4: Amish Response to Mass Murder

In October 2006, in the village of Nickle Mines Pennsylvania, a milk truck driver, Charles Roberts, entered a one-room Amish school carrying a gun. He shoed out the boys, younger children and teacher, tied up 10 girls aged 9 and older, fired at them execution style, then shot himself. Five were killed, three seriously injured.

It was an unspeakable tragedy, visited on a people committed to non-violence. It caught media attention around the world. Even so, attention might well have faded except for what happened next.

Amid grief, the Amish community didn't cast blame, point fingers, or hold a press conference with lawyers at their sides. Within hours of the shooting, they forgave the killer and his family. Later in the day, some visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their pain and sorrow for their loss.

"How could they forgive such a terrible act of violence?" news media asked.

Don Kraybill, a Mennonite sociologist who knows the Amish well, says: Amish faith is grounded in the teachings of Jesus to love enemies, reject revenge, and leave vengeance in the hands of God...Unlike those who hire lawyers at every turn to protect their rights, the Amish yield to divine providence in the case of an unspeakable tragedy – believing that God's long arm of justice removes the need for human retaliation

Twelve years later our Amish cousins continue to carry the hurt of that event, but in how they responded they wrote another story on what it means to be a Peace Church that's inspirational to the rest of us.

The courage to be a peace church

These are stories of ordinary people with a deep faith who encountered violence and the prospect of death.

They beg asking: What would I have done in such circumstances? What can we as a congregation do to support such commitment amongst us?

In mainstream society, playing with the truth when serious issues arise is taken for granted. Is that what we're called to?

And, retribution is seen as a right – in some countries and religions it's even considered a family duty. I've worked in such lands. Around the world, names of deities often are invoked to fuel cycles of revenge generation after generation.

These stories challenge that narrative. Dirk Willems could have escaped; but chose to see his pursuer as a child of God who needed help. And, he readily acknowledged the so-called crimes he was charged with. He could have recanted his faith to spare his life – but he didn't.

Christian Schmucker, like Dirk Willems, was steadfast in his faith – bearing the consequences of his understanding that Christ would not want his followers to be associated with violence.

Gerhard Thiessen chose not to seek vengeance when he had the opportunity to do so.

To the Amish community at Nickle Mines, revenge was the furthest from their minds – theirs was to forgive.

Such are the kinds of stories we need to hear and ponder. They remind us that God smiles on acts of grace that open doors for reconciliation – and encourages us to be faithful in our own daily walk.