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August 23, 2026

Matthew 5:38-42

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

Matthew 26:50-56

But Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came and grabbed Jesus and arrested him.

One of those with Jesus reached for his sword. Striking the high priest's slave, he cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put the sword back into its place. All those who use the sword will die by the sword. Or do you think that I'm not able to ask my Father and he will send to me more than twelve battle groups of angels right away? But if I did that, how would the scriptures be fulfilled that say this must happen?" Then Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come with swords and clubs to arrest me, like a thief? Day after day, I sat in the temple teaching, but you didn't arrest me. But all this has happened so that what the prophets said in the scriptures might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left Jesus and ran away.

Good morning, welcome again to University Mennonite Church. It's good to be here together as we continue to reflect on our summer series, looking at *Why we believe what we believe*.

Today we arrive at what might be our most difficult topic, and perhaps the thing that most clearly defines our tradition, and that is our commitment to peace and nonviolence. Thank you Leah, Marvin, and Fidele for sharing and leading so beautifully already.

From the early Anabaptist movement to the Mennonite churches of today, we have wrestled with what it means to be people of God's peace. Not merely a refusal to take up arms during times of war, but an active commitment to the peaceful way of Jesus in our daily lives.

Those of us who grew up in peace church traditions may find it hard to fathom a Christian understanding that justifies violence or warfare, but there are plenty of spaces where this is the case throughout much of Christian history. (SLIDE) Roman Emperor Constantine the Great became a convert in 312 CE after reporting a battlefield vision of a cross in the sky. His experience and conversion tied Christianity to political power and might for the first time, and changed what had been primarily a peaceful Jesus movement into one that embraced the sword and military power as part of their Christianity. And of course, this has carried throughout history up to and including today.

(SLIDE) Almost a decade ago I was invited to be part of a panel discussion on WPSU, following a documentary that explored the relationship between Christians who embrace a pro life stance on abortion yet insist on their right to bear arms. On the panel with me was another minister, this one advocating for just that very thing. Here's a moment from that conversation...

(SLIDE)

That slip of the tongue was not lost on me. While Pastor Gary backpedaled from Jesus telling his disciples to buy a gun, the spirit of what he was suggesting was clear. Jesus is calling us to arm ourselves.

I don't offer this clip to poke fun at Pastor Gary, but to note that he represents a significant group of Christians who don't see a contradiction - and in fact use scripture as a way to affirm their commitment to personal self defense, violence to be used - if deemed necessary.

Forgotten in that scripture interpretation, of course, and sadly something the host of that panel never circled back to, is that the second scripture we read this morning should be part of the interpretation as well. As Amy/Jess read, a disciple took Jesus' words seriously and bought himself a sword. Yet the moment he pulled a blade out and used it, he was chastised by Jesus for doing that very thing. If you live by the sword, you die by the sword. In that way when we lay down our reliance on weapons, perhaps that offers us a more meaningful life.

In naming our historic Anabaptist Mennonite commitment to peace we should also acknowledge a moment in time where this wasn't the case. In the midst of the Reformation, (SLIDE) the city of Münster in northern Germany stood as a unique place of coexistence, a place where Catholics and Protestants navigated their differences with a spirit of neighborly cooperation. This tolerance made Münster an appealing refuge for the early Anabaptists, and for a time, our ancestors in faith were even invited to participate in the civic leadership of the city. As word of this sanctuary spread, thousands intrigued by the Anabaptist movement, seeking a new way of life began to migrate there.

Under the influence of three prominent leaders - Bernard Rothmann, Jan Matthias, and Jan of Leyden - the peaceful Anabaptist vision began to shift. A radicalized desire to establish a literal earthly kingdom emerged, diverging sharply from the humble way of Jesus into a political stronghold.

(SLIDE) By 1533, leaders moved to consolidate their authority, forcibly expelling the Protestant and Catholic residents who had once been their neighbors. In a departure from the nonviolent values of the early movement, they used violent methods to secure their Anabaptist stronghold. Their list of oppressive actions is horrific - anyone thought to be in opposition was banished inhumanely or killed. A patriarchy-focused structure was imposed in which men were encouraged to have multiple wives, while women who attempted to have multiple husbands were banned or executed. All in the name of the new Anabaptist movement. This era serves as one more sobering reminder of what can happen when power corrupts, and when the sword is chosen over the path of peace and grace.

(SLIDE) After a year-long siege, trying to take back control of the city, the Anabaptist leaders were finally brought down. They were tried and tortured, eventually being publicly displayed in iron cages on the town cathedral (SLIDE) - cages which remain to this day - as a reminder of their crimes and to discourage common folk from attempting to rise up against state power.

Prominent Anabaptist leaders, such as Menno Simons and Dirk Philips, (SLIDE) began emphasising a peace-centered theology as a reaction to the Münster uprising. With their Christ-centered understanding of scripture, they leaned into passages like the ones we read this morning, emphasising moments when Jesus

called his followers to turn the other cheek, and that those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

As the Anabaptist movement continued to take shape, Münster served as a reminder and warning of the pitfalls of violence, and encouraged the movement to remain peaceful or to escape to regions or communities where they could quietly coexist. What had started out as a vocal movement pushing back at civic authority, became a quieter one, attempting to simply survive.

Centuries of Anabaptist attempts to peacefully and quietly survive meant that their peace witness became primarily a rejection of military involvement. Here in Pennsylvania, the Mennonites who were facing a draft to participate in the American Revolution, formally addressed the Pennsylvania Assembly declaring their conscience against destroying human life or assisting in war efforts. This Fraktur artwork captures the words of Mennonite minister, Benjamin Hershey, who wrote in 1775, "We have dedicated ourselves to serve all men in everything that can be helpful to the preservation of men's lives. But we find no freedom in giving or doing or assisting in any thing in which men's lives are destroyed or hurt."

And for decades this was our primary public witness - whenever legislation was passed requiring young men to go to war, those from Mennonite circles would join their Quaker and Brethren peace church siblings in declaring their opposition.

The Mennonite commitment to peace and nonviolence in this country also extended to the abolitionist movement - especially church leaders in the Germantown community of Philadelphia. But this Mennonite conviction was also criticized at times, when the rejection of slavery was also met with a refusal to serve in military action to end slavery during the civil war.

(SLIDE) During paradoxical moments like these, old teachings of people like Menno Simons and Dirk Philips were re-emphasised. Philips had written that the call to follow Jesus includes the willingness to endure suffering rather than inflict it. He also believed that non-violence was a hallmark of faith. For early Anabaptists, a staunch commitment to non-violence was a testament to the kingdom of God that operated differently and separately from the kingdoms of the

world. In this way, even if the call to take up arms was righteous or seen as just by the society at the time, Mennonites felt like they were held to a higher standard.

Our call to an active form of peace, rather than a passive and silent one has been bubbling just beneath the surface throughout our 500 year history. (SLIDE) However in 1984, Ron Sider challenged the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France with these words:

Over the past 450 years of martyrdom, immigration and missionary proclamation, the God of shalom has been preparing us Anabaptists for a late twentieth-century rendezvous with history. Never has the world needed our message more. Never has it been more open. Now is the time to risk everything for our belief that Jesus is the way to peace. If we still believe it, now is the time to live what we have spoken.

That message from more than 40 years ago still rings true today. Out of his nudging, Christian Peacemaker Teams was formed, (SLIDE) an organization that took an active call to peace seriously, with the willingness to lay life on the line in the same way that those who might feel that God is calling them to war.

Today, CPT, recently renamed as Community Peacemaker Teams, is an international organization that places trained nonviolent peace workers into areas facing lethal conflict and human rights abuses. (SLIDE) Their calling, still rooted in the peaceful way of Jesus, takes its commitment to nonviolence seriously enough to act in some of the most difficult places on earth. Currently serving in conflict-torn places like the West Bank, Colombia, Iraqi Kurdistan, and others, they take the words of Jesus seriously. Our conference minister, Amy Yoder McGloughlin, leads delegations to Israel/Palestine from time to time. I believe some of us have traveled with her, or plan to in the near future.

Refusing to serve in the military, or condemning violence at a national or global level - those things are different from a personal decision to live peacefully. And Fidele touched on some of the importance of the intentionality of internal peace. (SLIDE) I remember my grandparents reflecting together on how they might protect their family from a home attacker - my grandpa being more inclined to politely invite the person to the family kitchen table for conversation about why

they were intruding on their home, while my grandma would more fiercely, but non-lethally, insist that she might hurl some hot water at an invader to their home - even as a child I found it funny that my grandma thought she would have the foresight to put a pot of water on the stove in order to protect her family.

This idea of self-preservation seems extremely relevant during a moment in time where American Christians may be more inclined to reject international warfare, but continue to be the strongest defenders of the second amendment and its right to bear arms. (SLIDE) And yes, as sad as it is, you can currently buy this t-shirt in a wide variety of colors from Amazon.com.

(SLIDE) Today our Mennonite peace church movement is all over the spectrum - from conservative or Old Order Mennonites who function quite like the quiet in the land- closed Amish communities in many ways; (SLIDE) to left-leaning, LGBT-affirming, protest marching, t-shirts/birkenstocks/crunchy granola/activist types. We've got Mennonites who insist that their political party of choice is the more peaceful one, while others refuse to vote because they don't see a party capable of being peaceful. Yet it seems like a desire for a more peaceful world is one thing we still hold in common across the vast spectrum of our tradition.

Our journey through this history of peace and nonviolence - from the failures at Münster to the conscientious witness of those declaring peace in times of war, and now into our modern calls for active, global peacemaking, but also peace in our daily lives - reminds us that our commitment to peace is not a stagnant part of our past, but a living, breathing, and often challenging daily practice. It is not just the avoidance of violence, but the active pursuit of justice and the daring - often counter-cultural - choice to love our enemies. It requires us to listen for the Spirit's movement in our time, just as our ancestors did, recognizing that the way of Jesus is not a path of passive survival, but of courageous, faithful, *peaceful* witness.

As we move forward from this place, may we carry that same spirit of active nonviolence and peace into our daily lives. Whether that means a centering practice offering us personal peace, advocating for the vulnerable in our own communities to create local peace, standing against the systems that perpetuate conflict, or simply finding ways to turn the other cheek when our instincts scream for retaliation, let us be people who embody the peace of Christ. Let us continue

to be a blessing, daring to risk everything for the belief that Jesus is indeed the way of peace. May we move from this space to live out our convictions, becoming instruments of God's reconciling love in a world that needs it now more than ever.

Amen.