

Compelling Vision

Together, as the Church of the Brethren,
we will passionately live and share the radical transformation
and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood
engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and
equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Bible Study Series

Session 6
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Focus Question

What is the nature of the holistic peace of Jesus Christ, and how are we called to embody it?

Scripture Texts

Matthew 5:9, 38-48; Ephesians 2:11-22; Micah 4:1-5

Focus Statement

The Church of the Brethren holds an understanding of peace that the world needs so very much. We have declared that “All war is sin.” Yet, the holistic peace of Jesus Christ goes far beyond war to touch on all aspects of life. We live in the tension between personal peacemaking and systemic peacemaking (addressing systems, policies, and procedures that perpetuate a lack of shalom). Because both lessons are taught by Jesus Christ, and both are important, we have the opportunity in a divided world to bring about justice with peace for all God’s children and all God’s creation.

Supplies

- Prepared cookie batter, bag of chocolate chips
- Newsprint or whiteboard
- Markers
- Internet-connected device

Media Suggestions

- **Books:** *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*, *Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* by Drew I.G. Hart or view [Drew Hart’s presentation at NOAC](#), starting at 19:00
- **Video:** [RAWtools: Gardening with Guns](#) (YouTube)
- **Articles:** *Messenger*, “Choosing to be Black and Brethren,” by Eric Bishop, May 2019; *Christian Century*, “Why do Christians protest?” by Benjamin D. Wayman, November 2020.
- **Song:** [“We Are One in the Spirit”](#) by Mark Swayze Band (YouTube)

Tip: “Holistic” is defined as “the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.” **Holistic peace** illustrates the Hebrew concept of **shalom**, or **total well-being** (which includes wholeness of persons and all of God’s creation). **Personal peacemaking** represents the peace of Christ that the world cannot give and the world cannot take away (John 14:27). **Systemic peacemaking** represents the systems, policies, and procedures that call forth a society or “Kingdom of Heaven here on earth” that promotes justice and peace for all.

Reflecting on the Texts

Who was Jesus talking to in these scriptures found in Chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel?

Evidently, people were following Jesus, and crowds gathered when word got out that he had paused in his travels to speak with them (Matthew 4:24-25). In came the sick with all sorts of diseases and pains, as well as great crowds from Galilee and other countries to hear his sermon. The first thing that Jesus does for this crowd is to bless the people who are not usually blessed. There is no blessing for the rich, powerful, successful, and sophisticated.

Jesus did say some earth-shaking things like "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (5:9). This is one example of the *Upside Down Kingdom* that Mennonite author Donald Kraybill invites us to see. This demonstration of "another way of living" allows the ways of heaven to come bursting in upon earth.

Our peacemaking did not die out with Jesus' death. This has been one of the treasured gifts that we have helped shape for the times we live in and passed on to each generation of Brethren. Not only a historic peace church, the Church of the Brethren is called to be a Justice with Peace church. (See Eric Bishop's article in the May issue of *Messenger*, p. 10-13).

What else did Jesus say? "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 'Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. . .'" (Matthew 5:38 ff) Theologian Walter Wink (*When the Powers Fall*) offers a different twist regarding how the crowd might have understood those words of Jesus. It was not a call to be a wimp. It was a justice wake-up call!

Turning the other cheek to a "superior" who has backhanded an "inferior" is an act of defiance, not submission; stripping naked when a creditor demands one's outer garment brings down shame on the head of the creditor for causing the poor debtor's nakedness; . . . (Matt. 5:39-41). These acts do not *at all* mean acquiescing passively in evil, but are a studied and deliberate way of seizing the initiative and overthrowing evil by the force of its own momentum. (9)

Howard Thurman, author, student of Gandhi, and Christian theologian, was a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr and thousands of men and women. While in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) with a student-to-student "friendship delegation," he was asked by a Hindu man,

"What are you doing here? More than three hundred years ago (now 400 years) your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Why are you, a black man, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition?"

In *For the Inward Journey*, Thurman explained that Jesus grew up in the Roman empire as part of the underprivileged, non-powerful disinherited. Those who are also disinherited know, "Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage, for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred. . . need have no dominion over them." (133)

Perhaps this is the treasure that Jesus asks us to share which helps bring about holistic peace!

Gathering

Choose one of these activities to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—Invite participants to imagine two strands of a rope. One strand represents the personal peace that we can experience in relationship with Jesus. A second strand represents systemic peace experienced in society's systems, policies, and structures that promote justice and peace. Which of these two understandings of peace do you think is stronger in your life? In our church? How does weaving these two understandings of peace together make our witness to the world stronger?
- *Option 2*—Holistic means "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Set out prepared cookie batter and a bag of chocolate chips. Ask participants if they prefer having the batter baked with or without the chocolate chips mixed in. What do the chocolate chips add to the cookies (texture, flavor)? How do you think the cookies will taste without the chocolate chips (bland, salty)? Many ingredients make up the Hebrew concept of shalom or holistic peace (note the tip on page 26). What happens to our peace witness as the Church of the Brethren if some of those ingredients are missing?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Share today's text using the "Good News and Good Trouble" Scripture Jam on page 30. You will need three readers.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into today's texts using these questions.

- Why do you think people traveled 70 to 100 miles on foot to see Jesus? Check out Matthew 4:23-25. What lack of peace in their lives might have motivated them to seek Jesus? What motivates you to seek the holistic peace of Christ?
- Watch the 3-minute "RAWtools: Gardening with Guns" video listed in Media Suggestions. How does this almost literal interpretation of the Micah passage of beating "swords into plowshares" apply to Jesus' idea of holistic peace in today's world? In your neighborhood?
- In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul says that Christ has made Christians and Gentiles into one group, "breaking down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." While Christ has accomplished this work, what is our responsibility?
- Using newsprint or a whiteboard and markers, make a list of issues that divide people today. Highlight in yellow issues that are best addressed within personal relationships? Highlight in green those issues that need a more systemic approach. What difference might it make if we addressed these divisive issues with holistic peacemaking? In what ways might this counteract negative stereotypes of Christianity that turn people away?
- What insights and tools from today's texts nurture a sense of Christ's peace that passes all understanding? What insights and tools from today's texts might help us tear down divisions in our own families? In our church family? Our community? Concerning the ongoing global pandemic? Concerning the care of God's creation and the ongoing climate crisis?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Reflect on the meaning of the texts using these questions.

- The Howard Thurman quote in *Reflecting on the Texts* speaks about the disinherited. Who are the disinherited in Jesus' day? In your neighborhood or our society today? What would holistic peace look like for those who are disinherited or outsiders? Invite participants to share stories from their lives or your congregation about welcoming and including someone considered an outsider.
- In what ways does the vision of holistic peace inspire you? In a world that attempts to undermine our personal sense of peace and create divisions, what Church of the Brethren "treasures" of holistic peace would you want to introduce or re-introduce into your daily life? Or pass along to the world?
- In the November 4, 2020 edition of *Christian Century* magazine, Benjamin D. Wayman writes, "Our faith does not align with any political party, but our politics displays how we choose to live together. As Christians, we are commanded to live with our neighbor in love, pray for our enemies, and bless those that persecute us. It's a peculiar politics, but it's the politics of the kingdom of God." (25) How would living out this "peculiar politics" change your daily life, your interactions with neighbors and co-workers, or even life within your faith community?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Congressman John Lewis challenged justice and peacemakers to get into "Good Trouble." Describe how your congregation or our denomination has accomplished "Good Trouble" in the past. If you or your church community wanted to start a new "Good Trouble Initiative" inspired by the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), what would be the first step that you could take?
- *Option 2*—Invite participants to think about how they might illustrate the concept of holistic peace or shalom. One famous example is the painting *Peaceable Kingdom* by Edward Hicks. Provide art supplies for individuals or groups to create their own illustration of shalom. Allow time for people to share their creations.

Sending

Challenge participants to look for ways to be a holistic peacemaker, chipping away at dividing walls this week. Close your time together by singing or listening to "We Are One in the Spirit" (see lyric video link in Media Suggestions).

Good News and Good Trouble

Voice 1: Hear the Good News of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount.

Voice 2: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Voice 3: If we are called “children of God” does that mean we will look like God?

Voice 1: Does that mean we will all have white hair and beards?

Voice 2: Of course not. But we might learn that the Hebrew word “Shalom” means total well-being. And we might start implementing new ideas on how to be God’s children.

Voice 1: Does this mean that we might get into Good Trouble, as God’s children, like Congressman John Lewis learned from his Christian mother and father?

Voice 2: Well, the Sermon on the Mount does say, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

Voice 3: So, what do peacemaking children of God do anyway?

Voice 1: In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says we get to build up the kingdom by tearing down the dividing walls.

Voice 2: I love tearing down stuff.

Voice 3: And then you get to replace all that hostility with shalom: total well-being, peace that passes all understanding, caring for all God’s creation, and belonging in the family of God.*

Voice 1: Just like Jesus taught us.

Voice 2: Good Trouble. Like turning the other cheek and getting into Good Trouble by sharing another way of living.

Voice 3: Like the prophet Micah said:

Voice 1: They will beat their swords into plowshares.

Voice 2: And their spears into pruning hooks.

Voice 3: nation shall not lift up sword against nation.

Voice 1: Neither shall they learn war anymore.

Voice 2: But they shall all sit under their own vine and fig tree.

Voice 3: And no one shall make them afraid.

Voice 1: Do justice.

Voice 2: Love mercy.

Voice 3: Walk humbly with God!

*Psalm 122:6, Philipians 4:7, Psalm 24:1, Ephesians 2:19