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### Being a Peace Church Today

Good morning church. I've had this end of the Afghanistan war in my mind all week and so this sermon is my attempt to wrap my brain around this issue in the light of scripture. I want you all to know that this is a controversial issue that I know very little about. You are all free to disagree with me and free to think about what nonviolence means to you. But I am trying to find my own path and invite you all to walk with me to figure out what it means to be a peace church together.

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. Our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Sunday after the twin towers towers fell in 2001, I was coming home from a somber Mennonite church service in a van filled with subdued silence. When a 10 year old in the back suddenly piped up, "I don't think there will be peace until aliens invade." To which the rest of the car responded with an exasperated "okay." Thinking to themselves, where is this child coming from? Perhaps this child has a vivid imagination from watching too many science fiction movies and books. Perhaps showing this child "Independence Day," (a movie where an alien invasion can only be stopped if humanity unites) was an ill advised decision. Some may have even thought how inappropriate it is for someone to talk about something as fanciful as aliens when just 5 days before nearly 3,000 people lost their lives in a very public and tragic manner. At the very least this statement should be dismissed as the desperate attempt of a child trying to wrap their mind around an event that is almost incomprehensible to adults.

That foolish, imaginative child was me. And if I might be so bold, I think I had a point. Peace is really really hard. And as I remember the last 20 years as a manhunt, turned into two revenge invasions, turned into a nation building exercise in both Iraq and Afghanistan, I have to ask what was it all for and how should we respond as Christians.

Who are our enemies?

In some ways, these wars are easy to criticize since the U.S. has not entirely won either of them. After the U.S. left Iraq, ISIS rose to power and after the U.S. left Afghanistan the Taliban took Kabul in a matter of weeks. I've heard these wars are called the Vietnam of the 21st century, but really, I don't care if these wars are popular or not. What I do care about is how they made us think about what it means to be a peace church.

So what does Paul have to say about what it means to be a church that proclaims the gospel of peace? After telling people to renounce their pagan ways and for slaves to obey their masters, Paul launches into how our fight is not against blood and flesh, but against rulers, authorities, powers, and principalities. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. That is interesting, because I've never heard of fighting anything behind flesh and blood. So who are our enemies?!

Throughout history, Christians have taken this in many ways.

In the early church, the church was persecuted by literal authorities, like Emperor Nero who executed Peter, Paul, and countless other Christians in response to the burning of Rome. Or Emperor Diocletian who demanded that Christians sacrifice to Roman Gods or die a martyr's death. So for them, yeah, Christianity was illegal and the laws and policies of the Roman Empire were really coming down on them.

But we all know that Christian nonviolence did not last beyond Constantine and in a few centuries Christianity was no longer disallowed, but required for military service. So, Christianity needed to reckon with this text, and declared that their enemies were under the spiritual force of the devil. And thus we could kill people as long as they were of the devil.

Who are our enemies, governments that make unjust laws or people who are of the devil?

I think the answer lies in how the text tells us that our struggle is not against flesh and blood? For me, it means that for a peace church, there can be no distinction between our side and their side. We pray for all sides, praying that people do not have to die for their countries. Afghanistan or the Taliban or US soldiers are not our enemies, but are all human beings beloved of God and trapped by the power of the State that asks them to kill for their country. In that way we are alike, both sides are killing and trying not to die for their country, both sides are doing what they think is right. I believe that a peace church does not pick sides, but mourns the pain of all. I mourn when young people in our country can feel like they have no choice between joining the army or a life of crime and poverty. I mourn when civilians are caught in the crossfire. And I mourn how after 20 years of occupation, the Afghan people are going to have to figure out how to live under different authorities. None of these people are our enemies!

But let's return to the text. Paul is asking us to put on the full armor of God, Paul is asking us to get ready for something and be prepared for the days to come. So that we can stand firm. Today, I want to focus on just two things. The breastplate of righteousness and the shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace. Righteousness and justice ask what is fair for all people. I believe that as a peace church we want everyone to live in peace, but this peace must be based on the Old Testament concept of Shalom, that includes health, well-being, and wholeness. The work of peace is the

work of making sure everyone has enough food to eat and is free from the fear of violence. Today, this means remembering our peace workers, people working with refugees. And the gospel of peace is at the center of our mission. Gospel means good news. So what good news do we have to share about peace? In our day and age, the benefits of war are clear, the nation gets its revenge and its honor is restored. pacifism is the belief that to use violence to achieve peace is inherently problematic. violence is like a virus, its use leads to more violence. So let us proclaim the benefits of the diplomatic solution and the negotiated settlement. Let us proclaim how we can live in peace with one another, agreeing and disagreeing in love, settling our disputes with repentance and forgiveness. Let us proclaim the promises of God, that one day the nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord and God will settle their disputes, that the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and people shall forget how to make war.

Let us recognize how our enemies are not of flesh and blood, but the forces of darkness that proclaim that violence was necessary.

Paul tells us that this struggle is not to win or conquer, but to stand firm. It is enough to proclaim if justifications for war are not good enough for you. That we cannot bomb our way to peace or women's rights. That peace is won by the long and careful work of relationship and trust building.

It is enough to be faithful to the gospel of peace and to make peace with our neighbors. It is enough to be a small people dependent on God. It is enough to proclaim our truth to any who will hear us and listen to their truth as well. Because we know that one day, God will break every bow and turn every spear into a plowshare. Praise be to God, Amen.