

A WORD FROM PASTORS

From nonresistance to antiviolence

A DECADE BEFORE Jesus was born, the Roman Senate commissioned a monument called the *Ara Pacis*, an altar on the edge of the city where citizens would gather to worship their God of Peace—*Pax* in Latin, the national deity whose providence established the *pax romana*, an era of empire pride. The citizenry flourished with unprecedented prosperity, while noncitizens endured the incessant oppression of imperial dominion.

The Roman military had dispossessed land from others on the empire's frontiers, and soldiers policed the everyday life of residents in order to quell revolts with vicious swiftness. The people were pacified with a burgeoning economy dependent on a social order of indentured servitude and the slavery of foreigners.

The center of the imperial order was the family unit, the *paterfamilias*, households governed by the men of the familial clan, the patriarchs. They were the owners of the estate; the women, children and slaves were their property. The *paterfamilias* provided the organizational structure for the imperial dominion. The family was the foundation of the empire.

That's why, when Jesus explains the meaning of the gospel movement, he declares war against the family. "I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother" (Matthew 10:34-35). God's peace will not be like Roman peace. The kingdom of God will be a kin-dom, as *mujerista* theologians have put it. Jesus begins the work of organizing

a life with God and each other that opposes the empire's order for society—to be made kin in defiance of the *paterfamilias*.

Jesus strikes through that peacefulness with the sword of his gospel. He confronts the *pax romana* with the truth about itself—that their peace is no peace, that their justice is no justice, that their laws were written to protect the status of the powerful. Jesus doesn't negotiate with the political and religious authorities responsible to maintain the social order. He doesn't propose a vision to unify a polarized people.

Instead, Jesus unmasks the violence of his society through his life, death and resurrection.

Life: The love of God at work in his incarnation marks him as an enemy to the systems of subjugation in the world.

Death: Jesus' execution reveals the social order's commitment to cruelty as a tool for stability.

Resurrection: Through resurrection the Spirit vindicates the kin-dom of Jesus as the work of God, a way of life in opposition to a world dependent on violence. Resurrection is the Spirit's movement of abolitionism.

The witness of Jesus has inspired Mennonites to develop a peace theology, an ethics of nonviolence, noncoercion. Previous generations used the word "nonresistance." These commitments have been internal to Anabaptism from the beginning. This tradition has sustained the church members who have resisted conscription, refused to enlist their lives in policing the globe through military service or policing our

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streets as officers of the law.

This tradition, however, has tended to turn inward, focus on what we as church people are allowing or disallowing among ourselves, and neglect our dependence on a conflux of economic, social, racial and political violences that sustain our livelihood. We concentrate on personal behavior and ignore the structures of oppression that inject our money with value and promise to protect our security. We absolve ourselves of the violence inherent to the *Pax Americana*—as long as we don't get blood on our hands or hear the sobs of undocumented children in cages or exchange a glance with the 2.3 million people in prison.

I propose that we, like Jesus, come with a sword for this world of cruelty, not with violence against people but that our faith in Christ oppose us to the policies and institutions that sustain the vicious inhumanity of the *Pax Americana*. The peace enforced by the police is no peace, and justice preserved by threat of incarceration is no justice. Jesus has invited us into an ethics of antiviolence, that we love our neighbors enough to dismantle the state's professionalized violence.



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