

Five weeks ago we began our Engage series, which is grounded in the biblical understanding that church is not a religious good or service we consume, but the with-God community we participate in. The courageous German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote a book called 'Life Together', describing the Christian community we are called to engage in. He said:

Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

We were created to enjoy community - with God and with each other. The community of the church is one of God's best ideas and greatest gifts. In Romans 12 Paul says that central to Christian community is Sincere Love – love we first receive from God and then in turn overflow towards others.

Paul gives us a recipe for Sincere Love, with ingredients like radical hospitality, passionate spirituality, never giving up devotion and God-honouring humility. Last week Melissa preached a cracker of a message exploring the love ingredients of patience, joy and hope. If you weren't here, I encourage you to download that message from either our church app, or from our website.

This week I want to look at one more ingredient of the Sincere Love that's at the heart of Christian community – Peace Making.

As we do, let me introduce you to a very famous man. His name is Otzi. Otzi was a shepherd. Otzi is 5300 years old and the oldest intact corpse ever found. 'Otzi the iceman', as he soon became known as, was discovered in 1991 by two hikers as they climbed through the Italian Alps.

Here is a reconstruction of Otzi's appearance. Looks a bit of a latte-sipping, shower-avoiding hipster really.

Offering a unique window into our past, scientists spent years investigating everything to do with Otzi, including how he died. In 2001, x-rays and a CT scan revealed that he had an arrowhead lodged in his back left shoulder when he died, as well as a matching tear in his coat. Otzi died of blood loss. Otzi also had suffered a cerebral trauma from a blow to the head. Further exploration revealed that the same arrow that had killed Otzi had the DNA of two other people on it – that it was likely that the same arrow that had killed Otzi had also killed two other victims.

The oldest preserved corpse in the world – 5300 years old – is a murder victim – shot in the back.

Here's my point. From near the beginning of time as we know it, conflict has infected our world. We shouldn't be surprised. The Bible records that the world's first family were riven by murder when Cain killed his brother Abel in a jealous rage.

That first act of violence established a pattern that has remained virtually unbroken ever since. In 2003, the New York Times published research that defined war as an active conflict that claimed more than 1000 lives. On the basis of that definition, of the past 3400 years of recorded history, humanity has experienced relative peace – freedom from war at least – only 268 of those 3400 years.

Conflict stains human history, and it stains our today.

Turn on your TV, surf the Internet, spend time in social media and soon you will be confronted with a world in a seemingly perpetual, never ending cycle of conflict.

But of course, conflict is much closer to home, where it may not be bloody, but can be both painful and life destroying. We experience conflict – large and small - in our homes, with our spouse, our kids - our parents.

We experience conflict with our friends, our work colleagues and our neighbours.

Here's a dirty little secret – we even experience conflict in churches. I know this will shock many of you – not.

Some conflicts resolve quickly and harmoniously, while others escalate, or go underground where they fester in bitterness waiting to erupt.

For many of us, a conflict we are living with right now is paralysing us emotionally and spiritually. Unresolved conflict, not conflict itself, steals life.

The German Philosopher, Schopenhauer, compared humanity to porcupines huddling together on a cold, wintery night:

The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth's winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness.

(Arthur Schopenhauer)

Nothing like a bit of German philosophy to feel cheery about the world! One response to conflict is to retreat to our lonely corners to avoid more pain – or to attack the one that has hurt us. But Paul offers a different vision for the deep community Christian believers are called to participate in.

Sincere Love does not run from conflict as a pain-avoidance measure, nor escalate it in a winner takes all contest, but instead addresses conflict as a means to love others, and love and glorify God.

This is what Paul said the Roman church, and charges us:

Live in harmony with one another...do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

(Romans 12:16-18)

Before we jump into the rest of the text, I want to comment briefly on the Paul's charge 'do not repay anyone evil for evil' in the context of the events unfolding on our TV screens this week – ISIL, terror raids, beheading plots, barbaric persecution of Christians and other minorities in Syria and Iraq. There is no question that at the heart of ISIL and other similar organisations is evil – a violent, rage-fuelled demonic spirit. Their clear intent is to spread their evil agenda through the world. It is deeply and profoundly distressing.

Distressing also for me has been how some – many - in our Australian community are responding to ISIL and its like, by effectively labelling all those who hold the Muslim faith as terrorists. Even worse, some are claiming such blind prejudice as 'Christian'. Muslims have been targeted with abuse. Mosques have been vandalised. In Brisbane, one Muslim woman was pulled up at the lights when a man drew up beside and without warning threw scalding coffee over her. A seventh-generation Australian Muslim woman was waiting outside a shop on Logan Road with a 12 year old girl, when a man riding by on a pushbike road past:

'He yelled f---- jihad, f--- off, go back home you c--- and continued to verbally abuse us.'

Others twice more verbally abused her and her young friend in the next twenty minutes. This is confronting language. These are confronting times – times where the temptation is to respond to undoubted evil with fear, suspicion, scapegoating and hatred.

But Paul said to the church in Rome, a church what was under persecution and where people lost their lives to hatred and fear, 'do not repay evil for evil.' For generations the church lived by that charge, and it was love in the face of barbaric evil that in the end won the Roman Empire over. In the end, love always wins – always has and always will.

In these confronting and confusing times, our world doesn't need more people to spew hate, but rather many more who will breathe love. Please hear me clearly; I passionately believe that Islam and Christianity are not mutually combatable – that they are not simply different paths to the same God. They are not – Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but through a personal relationship with Jesus. But Muslims are, like you and me, created in the Image of God and deserving of our love. More than that, Jesus laid down his life for then as much as he did us. Muslims don't need to hear more hate-filled prejudice; they desperately need to experience the love-soaked presence and power of Jesus. Primarily, that will happen through us. Tim Keller, as a pastor in Manhattan lived through the horror of September 11, says this:

Not everyone is your brother or sister in faith, but everyone is your neighbour, and you must love your neighbour.

(Tim Keller)

So folks, here are three very practical things, in Jesus' name and for his sake, I call you to do:

One, please don't disseminate via Social Media, hateful prejudiced anti-Muslim propaganda. If you see it, appropriately, lovingly but firmly challenge it.

Two, if you have the opportunity, go out of your way to engage in friendly, open conversation with Muslims you might encounter in your every day life. In fact, pray for such encounters and the opportunity to speak and model the love of Jesus. While less than 1% of the Gold Coast population is Muslim - that still counts for more than 4000 people.

Three - please pray for Muslim neighbours – that they would experience the love and grace of Jesus, as increasingly in supernatural ways, many of them are.

Two thousand years ago there was a man called Saul. Saul was an accessory to the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Luke tells us he was breathing murderous threats against all Christians. In 21st century terms, you could call Saul a terrorist. Then on a lonely road to Damascus, Saul encountered Jesus and the church's greatest enemy became its greatest evangelist. No one – no one – is beyond God's love and grace. God's arm is not too short to save!

The Apostle Peter said:

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing
(1 Peter 3:9)

This is the way of Jesus. Lets move on.

There is a story told of a young Jewish Rabbi who was encountering a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition.

Nothing the rabbi said or did helped solve the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder.

He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me," he pleaded, "was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers."

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Well," the young rabbi responded, "what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old rabbi, "that was the tradition."

Sometimes we labour under the utopian illusion that peace in this world is found when there is an absence of conflict, but the truth is wherever there are people there will be conflict. Conflict is perhaps the oldest of human traditions, tracing right back the Garden of Eden.

Human beings bear the image of God, but the image was fractured when we chose in our rebellion to ignore God and live life not as he directed it, but as we chose. The key symptom of this disease is conflict. As a result of our rebellion against God, we live in conflict with others, within ourselves and most importantly, with God.

The reality of a world that has turned its back on God is that we are at war – with ourselves, each other and with God.

Jesus elevated peacemaking as core behaviour of those who would follow him when he said:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
(Matthew 5:9)

Sincere love – agape love – self-sacrificial love doesn't simply **keep** the peace, but actively seeks to **make** peace.

Specifically, we are called to make peace with others, with ourselves, and ultimately, with God.

Each week through our Engage series we have been setting you a two-word challenge drawn from the text. One week it was 'Pursue Hospitality'; another it was 'Take Responsibility.' This week it is very simple – 'Make Peace'.

First, let's briefly explore making peace with others.

In a world marked by conflict, Ken Sande has identified three basic responses:

Peace Faking (Escape)
Peace Breaking (Attack)
Peace Making (Resolve)

These three basic responses to conflict are represented on the card you received as you came in. Escape responses are efforts to avoid, rather than resolve conflict. Basic escape responses include denial, where we pretend that it doesn't exist, or flight, where we run away, either emotionally or literally. People run from marriages, jobs, homes or a church to escape a conflict. In extreme cases, people run from life itself. Attempting to run from conflict is peace faking.

On the other side of the curve, are attack responses, where we are more interested in winning an argument than in preserving a relationship. Basic attack responses include assault, where verbally, professionally, socially or even physically we attempt to intimidate our opponent into defeat. Then there's litigation, where we take the person to court seeking a winner takes all result. Relationships hardly ever survive a court process. Then there is murder, which is extreme – but is perhaps more common than we think, as in conflict we can easily wipe someone from our lives.

Often we will have our own internal bias towards either peace faking or peace breaking. I am more of a peace faker – if it was up to me, conflict is to be avoided at all costs through denial or flight. Others of us are wired to fight - to hold our ground, to embrace the argument with the sole goal of winning. The late Phyllis Diller summed up fighters this way:

Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight.
(Phyllis Diller)

It's easy to move quickly from peace faking to peace breaking. As I said, I tend to be a conflict avoider. I remember when I was serving in my previous role in South Australia, there was a certain Pastor who knew just how to annoy me. He was my sandpaper person, the person who knew how to rub me the wrong way. You might have a person like that in your life. Don't nudge them if you're sitting next to them.

I was the CEO of the Uniting Church in SA. It seemed to me that this minister enjoyed baiting me with sarcastic comments that I felt questioned my integrity. The way I dealt with it was peace faking – I denied the seriousness of the offence, but subconsciously at least, I refused to overlook it. It was our annual meeting in the Barossa, with 500 people present, and this Minister came up to me at the close of one of the sessions and said something to me, I can't even remember what it was – but I erupted. Months of suppressed anger and hurt erupted from my heart and vomited out of my mouth. It was a scene. My fingers were pointing, my mouth was yelling, my heart was pumping and my face was reddening. It was not pretty. It was a scene, so much so that my friend Graham stepped between the two of us because he was genuinely concerned I was about to clock this guy. Peace faking had quickly erupted into peace breaking.

We are not called to fake peace or break peace, but to make peace.

By contrast with Peace Faking and Peace Breaking, Ken Sande has identified six biblical Peace Making principles, starting with overlooking an offence, reconciliation, negotiation, mediation, arbitration and finally accountability. I don't have time to detail each of these in turn, but these six biblical responses to conflict are based on some super clear teaching in scripture regarding peace making. For example, Jesus was crystal clear when he said:

If your brother or sister sins go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.
(Matthew 18:15-17)

Here we see the progress of biblical peacemaking Reconciliation – mediation – arbitration. It is in this triangle that we are called to live as followers of Jesus.

Before we move on, I want to spend just a few moments on the first peace making response – overlooking an offence. The truth is that many disputes are so insignificant they should be resolved quickly and quietly by deliberately overlooking – brushing off – the offence. The writer of Proverbs says:

A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense.
(Proverbs 19:11)

Sometimes, in our own personal insecurity, we take on board offences we should simply and quickly brush off. An offence is like a tick that seeks to first attach itself to us and then to burrow into our skin – in so doing, spreading its poison.

The best way to deal with a tick is to shake it off as soon as you see it. The same is true for a minor offence, and with a minor offence is to shake it off as soon as you are aware of it. Some of us here this morning are allowing minor offences to attach themselves to our spirit, and in the immortal words of that great 21st century philosopher, we need to shake it off, shake it off!

If we can't shake it off, if it is more than a minor offence, then we need to move to the other biblical peace making processes. This is easier said than done. There are skills to be learned in doing this well. That's why I am thrilled that In November we will be offering a peace-making seminar, led by Stu and Bronwyn Greenway. The details are on the reverse of this card. Stu and Bron have been teaching peace making across Australia for a number of years. A few weeks ago, out of the blue, I got a call from a pastor in Darwin who rang me just to say thank you for sending Stu and Bron to teach a peace-making seminar there. I didn't even know they were there!

I cannot recommend this seminar highly enough. I attended it a number of years ago and loved it. It is biblical, practical – and for those of us who struggle to handle conflict well, which frankly is most of us, it is life transforming.

Wherever there are people, there will be conflict. The difference comes in how we address conflict. Paul calls us to do all we can, as much as depends on us, to live at peace with others – to live in harmony – to be active, God honouring peace makers. Earlier in Romans, he says this:

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.
(Romans 4:19)

Peace faking pretends that conflict doesn't exist, or closes eyes to it. Peace making tackles conflict head on and sees it as an opportunity to love people and love God.

Bill Hybels puts it this way:

The mark of community--true biblical unity--is not the absence of conflict but the presence of a reconciling spirit.
(Bill Hybels)

Before we finish this morning, it's critical I point out a really confronting, inconvenient truth. It's this:

It's impossible to make peace with others when you're at war within your self.

Put another way, it's pretty much impossible to truly live at peace with others when you have no peace in your heart. The Apostle James said this:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

(James 4:1)

The terribly inconvenient truth is that because of our sin, our rebellion against God we live with a broken and divided heart. As the Russian dissident and author Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, the dividing line between good and evil runs down the centre of every human heart. But this war within our self is the symptom of an even more profound conflict – between God and us.

In our sin, our rebellion – we declared war on God, rejecting his rule over our lives. This rebellion is the root cause of all conflict in our world, and until our broken relationship with God is restored, we will never have true, lasting peace within ourselves and with others.

In the passage we reflected on today, Paul says, 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everybody.' Such is the nature of our broken relationship with God, if restoration depended on us in any way, our situation would be hopeless. Living at peace with God is impossible for us. But the good news of the gospel is that all things are possible with God!

You see God did all that depended on him to reconcile us to Him, to speak peace over us.

God did all that depended on him when he sent his Son Jesus to live our life, die our death and rise victorious – triumphing over our sin that separates us from a holy God.

Some years ago Ravi Zacharias was part of a delegation that visited Palestine seeking to broker peace. He found himself speaking to one of the founders of Hamas, Sheikh Talal.

Sheikh Talal gave them great meal, told the delegation of the eighteen years he'd served in prison, and how some of his children had been lost in suicide bombings. Ravi goes on to say:

When my turn came to ask a question, I said, "Sheik, forgive me if I'm asking you the wrong question. Please tell me, what do you think of suicide bombing and sending your children out like that?"

After he finished his answer, I said, "Sheik, you and I may never see each other again, so I want you to hear me. A little distance from here is a mountain upon which Abraham went 5,000 years ago to offer his son. And as the axe was about to fall, God said, 'Stop.'" I said, "Do you know what God said after that?" He shook his head. I said, "God said, 'I myself will provide.'"

He nodded his head. I said, "Very close to where you and I are sitting, Sheik, is a hill. Two thousand years ago, God kept that promise and brought his own Son and the axe did not stop this time. He sacrificed his own Son."

He just stared at me. The room was full of smoke with all of his security people. I said, "I may never see you again, Sheikh, but I want to leave this with you: Until you and I receive the Son that God has provided, we will be offering our own sons and daughters on the battlefields of this world for land and power and pride."

I could just see the man's lips beginning to quiver; he was sitting right next to me. Nobody said anything after that As we were walking out ... Sheikh Talal went quickly and shook hands with everyone, and then he came over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders, kissed me on both sides of the face, patted my face, and he said, "You're a good man, I hope I see you again someday."

Two thousand years ago on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem God did everything necessary – it all depended on him – to make it possible for us to live at peace with God, with others and our selves. Paul puts it succinctly when he says:

For (Jesus) himself is our peace.
(Ephesians 2:14)

There is nothing we can do to make peace with God other than accept by faith what God has done for us.

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

(Matthew 5:23-24)

