



Poets, War and the Human Inside the Enemy

Opening

What if our theology could get up from our armchairs and move into our world? That would be something worth paying attention to. This is The Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

<intro song> Lay your guns down, down on the floor. There ain't no good in those guns anymore. Take my hand and let me kiss your cheek. Let our friendship be sweet. <end>

“Because Mennonites have usually found that the way to faithfulness is to separate from others and eventually if only I am here, then at least I'll agree with myself.”

“And I don't think that we can say we love someone and then shoot them. It doesn't make sense.”

“I always tell folks that, ‘Look at - if you're in a debate and winning the debate becomes more important than reflecting love towards the person you're debating, then do the Kingdom of God a great service and shut up.’”

“How do we encourage people to see nonviolence as something more than a position about war?”

“Because we're not just sitting around doing podcasts and theology, we're actually trying to live our lives as Christians.”

<song> This is a reckoning between you and me. The righting of all wrongs as we eat and as we drink. <end>

Introduction

Kevin Wiebe: You're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. This is episode #17, a bonus episode: Poets, War, and the Human Inside the Enemy. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

Jesse Penner: And I'm Jesse Penner and we are your hosts. War, over the years, of course, has inspired much art. We see paintings and sculptures and statues and poems that have been written about these things. And in this art, we get a key insight into how people process and wrestle with war. Even those who may be pro-war.

In many of the poems coming out of World War One, one of the things that is really engaged with is the fact that people going off to war had a sense of sort of nationalistic pride, a sense

that they were the heroes going to defeat some faithless enemy, and instead when they arrived on the battlefield, what they saw was people who looked like them.

KW: Sigfried Sassoon was a man who was one of these poets. He grew up in a privileged home. He was Cambridge educated, and he decided that he wanted to be a poet, but his poetry lacked a certain inspiration. It lacked a certain flair and he realized he didn't have much life experience.

So when World War One began and his country declared war, Sassoon enlisted on the very first day looking to gain some life experience and gain some passion and inspiration for his poetry. Now, initially his poetry was very nationalistic, very full of the typical things you might see in someone proud of his country and proud to be serving his country in war. But over the course of World War One, there was a dramatic shift in his poetry.

He survived some brutal battles, won some medals, even earned the nickname Mad Jack after one of his roles in combat for how wildly he defended his fellow soldiers. But over the course of the war, he became disillusioned.

One of his poems, called *Glory of Women*, talks about this. He talks about coming home and how he's paraded around and how the women that he would meet would honour him as a soldier and all of those sorts of things and then at the end of this poem, instead of talking about the enemy, the German enemy as a monster or in a dehumanized way, he talks about his enemy's mother, and he says this:

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

It's this really graphic kind of picture where he's no longer thinking of his enemy in terms of being a monster, but he's realizing that the men that he killed were men just like him who had mothers just like his own, mothers who loved them, mothers who were taking the time to knit them socks and realizing that the things he had been told didn't quite line up with his experience on the battlefield. These weren't monsters. These were young men with mothers.

Another poet of that era was Wilfred Owen, and he wrote a poem called *Strange Meeting*. In this poem, Owen meets a man that he killed on the battlefield. And at the end of this poem, it says this:

Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . ."

So in this poem by Wilfred Owen, he meets a man that he had killed on the battlefield in some kind of vision or dream and it talks about the wounds that were inflicted, though not by weapons. It's the wounds of the soul, that as Owen killed another soldier it also killed something within himself. And while this soldier that he killed dies, there is something within himself that also dies.

Now, as we were interviewing our guests throughout this season, in a number of the interviews, these poems came to mind. This situation came to mind. These young men in World War One were sent off to war, told that they were killing some kind of monster. Coming back, realizing that they had been killing young men just like themselves and in the process felt like they had killed something within their own soul as well, and it caused me to wonder. If, when we kill someone else, we're also killing something inside of ourselves, then if we have boundaries around violence and war, or if we even prevent someone from committing an act of violence and war, isn't that an act of mercy, not only for the people that would have been their victims, but is that not also an act of mercy for the offending party as well?

Today, we'll be hearing from Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld, from Pastor Brian Zahnd, from Pastor Melissa Florer Bixler, from Dr. Carol Penner, as well as from Betty Pries.

Is holding boundaries an act of mercy to the aggressor?

JP: We hear first from Pastor Brian Zahnd. Brian Zahnd is the founding pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, MO, and the author of ten books, including *A Farewell to Mars*. His most recent book is *When Everything Is on Fire*. In the context of these poems, Pastor Brian wrestles with this same question. If killing somebody and doing violence to somebody harms not only that person but also our own souls as we do that, when we prevent someone from committing an act of violence, does it actually help save part of them as well? Could this be a part of the reason why justice, accountability, and those kinds of concepts are actually a mercy to those who have sought to harm others, since they also prevent them from doing that damage not only to others but to their own souls? This is Pastor Brian.

Brian Zahnd: Yeah, I like that. We end up having enemies assigned to us. If someone attacks me, then I understand, OK. I've got an enemy. This person's attacking me and this very moment I'm being attacked. That's different than a government saying we have decided that this is your enemy now, go fight them. Very often, as I talk about being followers of the Prince of Peace, I mean very often, like all the time, you get World War Two thrown at you, which was, which is a bit of a conundrum because you do have such diabolical evil. You do have a clear aggressor manifesting evil purposes.

But the problem with World War Two is that it is just the continuation of World War One after a recess. Without World War One, there is no World War Two and World War One – I defy anybody, tell me what it was really about. Nobody seems to quite know. There was a shot heard around the world in Sarajevo and some guy got shot. It was the hubris of nationalism, that's where it came from. And then it led further and further and further.

So you talk about these poets, we talk about the lost generation – the generation that fought World War One and then comes after it because they saw such... it was the first to come on a world scale, mechanized warfare, the trench warfare. And it was so bloody, so awful, and nobody knows what was that all about? We don't even know what it was for. It was for abstract ideals of nationhood and that sort of thing. But I found myself face-to-face with real people 40 yards apart in trenches, we're shooting at each other and none of it even makes any sense.

I think about the Christmas truce that was made famous in the French film *Joyeux Noel*; it was one of my favourite Christmas movies and a true story about British, Scottish and German soldiers, who on Christmas Eve kind of just worked out their own truce and they came out of their... because what happens is both sides were singing carols and you don't know the same language but everybody knows the tune is *Silent Night*, so the Germans are singing in German and the British are singing in English and one thing leads to another, and they find themselves coming out of their trenches and meeting and exchanging stories and sharing a bottle of wine, even having communion together, and then it's like, OK, now we're supposed to go back in our trenches and tomorrow start shooting at one another?

See what happened is they were able to go beyond seeing the other as a two-dimensional villain. They just said “oh, these are people like me and they have families and they have hopes and they have aspirations and they're not quite sure why they're here either. They just got told, go there and shoot the British” and the British said “we're told to go there and shoot the Germans.” It's why I'd like to say an enemy is someone whose story you've not heard. OK. Again, we're saying different kinds of enemies. I'm not talking about domestic abuse. Or you're being mugged in the parking lot in the very moment, I'm talking about enemies that are assigned to us en masse, these are your enemies. Well, are they? Are they? Or maybe the real enemy is the principalities and powers that are behind all of this? And that are sending off young men into war.

So the current situation in Ukraine, I mean, you know that's a difficult one. I'm so grieved at what's happening. And if I'm watching the news and I see Ukrainians take out a Russian tank, there is a part of me that's like, “yeah.” That's that part of me. And yet I go, “OK, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Who was in that tank? It was a bunch of 19-year-olds who didn't have a choice.” First of all, they were given a bunch of misinformation and then they weren't even given a choice and they're saying “you're going to do this.” They were conscripted and you have to go do this or you're going to prison or worse.

The real enemies are these principalities and powers of hubris and pride that think that one nation needs to hold dominance over another just because. And that is the kind of spiritual wickedness in high places that really should attract our attention as an enemy, not flesh and blood, I mean famously, Paul tells us, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood,” a poetic way of saying human beings. That's not the real enemy. And so if it's flesh and blood, try to learn their story. Try to put yourself in their shoes and begin to understand. Maybe they're not really the enemy.

KW: Dr. Carol Penner is a professor and the Director of Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. We also talked to Dr. Penner about this topic of these poets, about what they went through in World War One and we asked her this question about loving our enemies because sometimes we think about loving our enemies as permissiveness about passivity. But we asked if part of loving our enemies involves accountability and holding boundaries with people in an attempt to prevent them from doing damage to themselves as well. This is what she had to say.

Dr. Carol Penner: The comment about the poem made me think of something, and I just want to say first is that a lot of violence that happens with Christians is sexual violence. Not many of us have an opportunity to pick up a gun and kill anyone, but every day, Christian people get sexually assaulted by Christians.

An example of that would be, in my youth group I knew of a number of young women that were assaulted on a date by Christian boys and how do we handle that type of violence? I would say that when someone has sex with someone else without consent, they take something away from themselves, something that is beautiful and is God-given and should be a great union of two people is instead ripped from someone. And you rip something from yourself when you sexually assault another person. And so trying to educate, especially young people, young men, about what is consent and how do we not treat each other with violence is so important in the church.

I get frustrated when we talk so much about nonviolence, and we talk about war because we haven't been at war for decades. And yet, everyday violent actions happen in the church, and we aren't addressing it. Sexual violence is the number one type of violence our churches are dealing with right now I think. Of course, racism and other types of violence against other vulnerable people. But how do we encourage people to take on the image of God, that we respect each other and we do not force ourselves upon each other? That's an important thing.

KW: Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld is Professor Emeritus of Religious and Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. He is also the author of the book Killing Enmity and the chair of the Faith and Life Commission of the Mennonite World Conference. We asked Dr. Yoder Neufeld about this as well. If holding accountability and holding boundaries with others is an act of mercy to them, to prevent them from doing violence to their own souls, this is what he had to say.

Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld: I think as a parent we know that one expression of love is to help our children not to do harm to others and themselves through certain behaviours and that it is a dereliction of our duty as lovers of children to just allow our children to act out in violent ways. We know, like that's clear to us.

It's part of my duty as a husband to allow my wife to instruct me on harmful behaviours. I might experience it as unwelcome. But it is an act of love that keeps me from doing what I would hate

to have done or behaved in ways. I mean we know that at the interpersonal level, I'm not sure, just quickly off the top of my head how this would find expression in let's say, situations of war.

I know that at present there are people trying to make appeals, for instance, to Vladimir Putin, to his orthodoxy, saying, "wait a minute, this is not the faith you claim." The problem, of course, is that he has a patriarch who is cheering him on in Moscow, but I'm mentioning this because it's a kind of example that I think has been used a number of times where religious leaders who have a sufficient platform to be heard above the din of conflict be able to appeal to people's own faith commitments or moral values, etc. So that would be one example I think that I would give.

The poet I have read more of is Wilfred Owen who is the same context as Sassoon. And it brings to mind a deep Quaker conviction that there is that of God and everyone, and maybe that's a good way to sort of bring my comments back to where we started with the text that you read.

We are all created, the just and the unjust alike, in the image of God. In some of us the image is deeply broken. But the Quakers have this wonderful way of wanting to see that of God in everyone. Mennonites haven't stressed that strongly enough in my view. We've been more obedience to "don't retaliate or turn the cheek." We haven't really gone for yearning, for seeing the face of God in the enemy.

I mean, we could talk about Jacob who's afraid of Esau, who has sworn to end his life because Jacob has so terribly stolen his life in effect. So Jacob, naturally is very afraid of running into Esau. And he sends his wives and cattle and everything ahead as a kind of buffer zone between him and Esau, and he stays behind and he fights with this man. And that's literally who it is, he fights with a man and it's going to be a fight to the death and Jacob refuses to leave him until he receives a blessing and he walks away with a limp, and in the morning he calls the place Peniel: The Face of God. And then he runs into Esau. And the moment Esau sees him, they run toward each other. They throw their arms around each other and they weep and Jacob says to Esau "in your face, I see the face of God."

That's perhaps a version of what you're pointing to; that when you kill someone else, something in you dies. Another way of saying that: when you kill someone else, something of God that you share as both being in the image of God sort of chips off the old block so to speak. This is more than just fratricide. This is deo-cide of a sort and I think Wilfred Owen and Sassoon and others were experiencing that oneness with the other.

Is it any surprise that in World War One at Christmas, there's that famous event of finding a way of making a truce for just Christmas Eve and sharing a service? Regrettably, and with mourning having to go back to being each other's enemies, that tells you that at another deep, deep level there was a level of empathy; at a human level so that war is unnatural. It's not in keeping with God's creation because it mars the very image of God.

JP: Pastor Melissa Florer Bixler is the pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church. She's also the author of *How to Have an Enemy*. As we processed these poems and these men that went off to war and experienced that as they killed, they not only killed their enemy, they also lost something inside of themselves, she wrestled with how we as people who are called to a life of peace, can intervene in these sorts of situations.

Melissa Florer Bixler: I mean, I think this is always the part of our commitment as well is also to non-coercion. We can only offer the same invitation that has been offered to us. And so as much as we I think want to prevent people from engaging in in acts of harm to themselves and others, what we also know is that if that doesn't sort of live within a person's own decision it can be... What are we actually doing? Is that just another form of violence to say I'm going to stop you from doing this. So I think about the difference between something like Mennonite Church USA is doing counter-recruitment measures again, is it for military recruitment at high schools which targets primarily black and brown students from low-income families, makes a lot of promises that we know our government can't make good on. And so how to disrupt that system to say we have this, we have this other thing instead. Let's talk about what's actually being offered to you.

I think there is something for us to consider about how much can we, if I'm understanding your question correctly, how much can we prevent other people from doing versus what is the compelling invitation to the new world that we're building among ourselves?

JP: Betty Pries is CEO and a senior consultant of a mediation company called Creedence and Co. She's also the instructor of the conflict management program at Conrad Grebel University College and the author of *The Space Between Us*. When we talked about this poetry with Betty and the way that killing someone else actually kills something in ourselves, as well as the responsibility of those of us who hold to a peace position to help intervene in these situations and save those who may be aggressors from damaging their own souls, this is what she had to say.

Dr. Betty Pries: You know in the church we often talk about Matthew 18, "If your brother sins against you" passage. If you read that passage the way it's meant, like the piece against you, "If your brother sins against you," the against you part was not there in the original. And when I read that passage it's less about interpersonal conflict and more about exactly what you're describing. If I hold you accountable, I'm helping you to be your best self and there's a way in which loving our enemies invites us each to be better, invites the person who's our quote-on-quote enemy to be better, invites ourselves to be better and maybe that's another reason why the boundaries piece is so pivotal. If all I'm doing is I'm loving you and being permissive, permissive, permissive, I'm not helping you be better. I'm not helping you be your best self. And it's courageous, I think, to invite us each to be better, but it really is, I think, consistent with the text.

JP: As Betty talked, it reminded me of some of the other comments she had made in an earlier episode, which we were unable to include at that time. Here's Betty talking about Matthew 5 and the call to turn the other cheek.

BP: And also to do this balance between loving the enemy but also waking the enemy up if you will, waking them up to the possibilities of equity, waking them up to the possibilities of goodness, generosity and grace, waking them up to the harm that they're doing.

JP: I think as we've heard our panellists talk here, what I've seen happen is that there are sort of two very different conversations that are kind of running parallel to each other and it's important to make a distinction between those two things.

As you brought up the poetry and the poetry of World War One and these poets wrestling through what it meant to be involved in war, we see these young men who were sold a lie about what it meant to go to war. A lie about what it is that they were accomplishing, a lie about who the enemy was. And as they went off and fought in these actual battles, what they found was that their enemy was not some faceless evil. It was a human being and it decayed their souls or it broke something inside of them in order to be engaged in this way. And that's a horrible, horrific thing that happened and we need to wrestle with how violence does twist us and distort us into something we were never meant to be as we do these things to other image-bearers.

At the same time, there's another conversation that came through in a few places here about a recognition of the violence that is done in our own communities. Dr. Carol Penner brought up the fact that actually a significant amount of the violence that's done isn't necessarily physical violence. It's not about going off to war, but Christian violence against other Christians so often takes other forms, such as sexual violence. And as we talk about these principles, I think they do apply there, but it's so important to clarify that whatever our response is in those places, it needs to be centred first and foremost on the victim of those sorts of crimes.

KW: I think that's a very helpful reminder, Jesse, on a very delicate topic. When we're talking about war is one thing, but when we're talking about other forms of violence, we must be careful that that's a very, very different conversation.

Our feature song today is by Dane Joneshill and it's the song we've been hearing all season in our introduction. This is First Communion by Dane Joneshill.

First Communion, Dane Joneshill

You break bread and I'll pour the wine.
And sit down at this table, we'll have a mighty good time.
Look in each other's eyes, knowing as before
and we'll drink to the memories of a love that won the war.

Oh that wine will hit like ether, in the bottom of our lungs
Every drop fragrant on the tip of our tongues.
And at first, we'll sip it slow, oh but then, as courage mounts
We'll drink right from the bottle till it runs from our mouths.

And we'll drink to the memory of a love that won the war.

Lay your guns down, down on the floor
There ain't no good in those guns anymore
Shake my hand, and let me kiss your cheek,
Let our friendship be sweet.

Tell me, can you remember before the fight began
I can see the men you were when I hear you laugh.
That doubt does not become you, but it's there behind your eyes.
So let's drink until the memories start coming back to life.

Oh I know it's hard to trust me, let me be your host.
You don't have to do it all on your own.
Rest and be reminded, it will all come back in time.
I have only been an enemy in your life.

So let's drink to the memory of a love that won the war.

Lay your guns down, down on the floor
There ain't no good in those guns anymore
Shake my hand, and let me kiss your cheek,
Let our friendship be sweet.

This is a reckoning between you and me.
The righting of all wrongs as we eat and as we drink.

Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

You can check us out online at www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca and find us on iTunes, Spotify, and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today, that was Pastor Brian Zahnd, Dr. Carol Penner, Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld, Pastor Melissa Florer Bixler and Betty Pries.

Our intro song is First Communion by Dane Joneshill and our feature song today was First Communion by Dane Joneshill.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr, our producer and audio engineer is Kevin Wiebe, and our administrative assistant and wizard of all things web related is Ruth Block.

I'm Kevin Wiebe and I'm Jesse Penner and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist. We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay as merely food for thought, but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Thank you so much for joining us this episode and this season for The Armchair Anabaptist as we have explored the life of peace and what it means to love our enemies. Be sure to join us next season for The Armchair Anabaptist.

**Edited for clarity.*