

# A Community Worth Fighting For: Waging Peace with Healthy Conflict

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## Abstract

*"I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."* These words from Jesus, the "Prince of Peace," are challenging and call us to think again about what it means to be a peacemaker. How can we reconcile the idea that Jesus came to bring a sword, with the message he shares during his arrest, telling his followers to put away the sword?<sup>1</sup> This paper will explore ways that we can engage in healthy conflict as we wage peace in our communities and seek to embody *shalom* in ourselves and our families.

## Introduction

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:34-39, NIV)

Hearing Jesus say that he has come to bring a sword may cause some readers to cringe, while others hear it as a powerful battle cry, or even justification for war. What could Jesus be telling us here? Author Brian Zahnd notes that in Revelation, the sword of Jesus appears "not in his *hand* but in his *mouth*... the sword is not a sword; the sword is a symbol."<sup>2</sup> The words from Jesus' mouth are his "sword," but rather than using these words to fight against humanity, Jesus' fight against evil is a fight *for* us. Yet Jesus knew that his words would inevitably cause conflict, even within our households. These conflicts can leave a path of destruction in their wake, but they can also be a sign of growth and toward a more authentic, diverse, and inclusive community.

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 26:50-53, Luke 22:49-52 and John 18:11

<sup>2</sup> Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* (New York: WaterBrook, 2017), 178.

## A More Christ-like Community

*Christianity is about helping others and controlling yourself. When it becomes about controlling others and helping yourself, it ain't Christianity.*<sup>3</sup>

Rather than using a literal sword for violence and destruction, Jesus' metaphorical sword is the message on his lips for the people he loves- a people who continually hurt each other, which simultaneously hurts Christ. Yet rather than perpetuating the cycle of violence and revenge, Jesus "doesn't wield a sword in his hand to kill people, Jesus wields a sword from his mouth to set people free."<sup>4</sup> This is a beautiful reality that is emphasized throughout the New Testament, but instead of allowing Jesus' words to set us free, many Christians have fallen into the same pattern that Jesus and Paul warned us against by becoming slaves to the law. When we turn the text into a weapon to wield against others who do not interpret the text the same way we do, we not only limit their freedom, we cause them real harm.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, many of us are fulfilling Christ's prophecy that his words would set us against each other when we argue about what his message really means—but there *is* a way to disagree without hating or hurting the one we disagree with. Scripture reveals many occasions where Jesus challenged the religious views of his time, following the Jewish tradition which frequently engages in discussions with conflicting views. In this setting, study and reasoning by exercising our intellect are seen as a "*mitzvah*," "an act of worship," and "a form of *imitatio Dei*."<sup>6</sup>

In Judaism, rational, legal argument pursued according to recognized principles and processes is the most highly commended path to encounter and engagement with God. Moreover, within this same religious tradition, 'holy argument' embraces not only argument about God, about His nature (theology), His way (theodicy) and His will (halakhah), but also argument with God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jim Heath, quoted by Anthony Cutty in "Bite-Sized Wisdom," *Flying in the Spirit*, last modified September 8, 2018, <http://www.flyinginthespirit.cuttys.net/2018/09/08/bite-sized-wisdom/>.

<sup>4</sup> Zahnd, *Sinners*, 177

<sup>5</sup> Existentialist author Fyodor Dostoyevsky offers a stunning critique of the Church's failure to embrace the freedom of Christ in "The Grand Inquisitor," a short story within the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*

<sup>6</sup> Tidwell, N. L. "Holy Argument: Some Reflections on the Jewish Piety of Argument, Process Theology and the Philosophy of Religion." *Religious Studies* 32, no. 4 (1996): 477.

<sup>7</sup> Tidwell, "Holy Argument," 477.

The Psalmists offer us an example of how even our relationship with God reflects the natural, healthy conflict that happens when we bring our true selves to the table. We are welcome to cry out to God. The flip side of this reality would be to hide our views in order to “keep the peace.” Trying to maintain a human relationship while withholding all of our own thoughts and questions would be an example of attempting to love a brother or sister more than we love Jesus and his way of honesty and integrity. The false sense of peace that accompanies this attempt has been described by psychiatrist Scott M. Peck as the first of four stages of community building. In his book *A Different Drum*, Peck traces the trajectory of groups as they work toward peace, beginning with “pseudocommunity,” followed by “chaos,” “emptiness,” and then “community.”

The first response of a group in seeking to form a community is most often to try to fake it. The members attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement. This attempt- this pretense of community- is what I term “pseudocommunity.” It never works.<sup>8</sup>

While this first stage may present as a lack of conflict, it is not a reflection of the true *shalom* that flourishes where there is grace, justice, and love. But the path forward is not often easy. Peck notes that as groups mature, they typically enter into a phase of “chaos” when members begin to share their opinions and are met with pushback. This is not always healthy conflict and can quickly devolve into a struggle that is “noisy,” “uncreative” and “unconstructive.”<sup>9</sup> Even when individuals are motivated by a need to solve problems, love can quickly take a back seat when we attempt to fix, convert, and win against each other:

In the stage of chaos individual differences are, unlike those in pseudocommunity, right out in the open. Only now, instead of trying to hide or ignore them, the group is attempting to obliterate them. Underlying attempts to heal and convert is not so much the motive of love as the motive to make everyone *normal*- and the motive to win, as the members fight over whose norm might prevail.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Touchstone, 1987), 86.

<sup>9</sup> Peck, *Different Drum*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Peck, *Different Drum*, 91.

As painful as it is, the turbulent phase of chaos can be just that- a phase- and communities can push through it in different ways.<sup>11</sup> In this time of transition,<sup>12</sup> communities have a choice to enter into what Peck describes as “organization” (which is merely another psuedocommunity), or “emptiness,” which invites us to let go of expectations, preconceptions, and our desire to control others.<sup>13</sup> This too can be a scary and painful process, but it does not “imply we should utterly forsake our sometimes hard-won sentiments and understandings”- emptiness is **not** obliteration.<sup>14</sup> Jesus’ admonition for us to lose our lives in Matthew 10:39 isn’t asking us to lose or hide our personal convictions, our particular beliefs, or our sense of justice, but instead asks us to release our ego and the pride that keeps us clinging to our way at the expense of anyone else along the way. Emptying ourselves of prejudice and selfishness and can also be understood as an act of kenotic love that mirrors Christ who ‘emptied himself’ by taking on human form<sup>15</sup> and resisted three temptations to ‘find his life’ through the use of self-serving power.<sup>16</sup> Thus rather than cloaking our true selves, we are called into a disrobing<sup>17</sup> that reveals our Divine image as we shed conceited defensiveness by lifting the veil (or removing the plank)<sup>18</sup> that prevents us from seeing the different ways that our neighbors share the same values as us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer outlines this beautifully in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.<sup>19</sup>

Yet as a pastor and theologian who lived during Hitler’s reign, Bonhoeffer was deeply grieved and angered by views that were not simply different from his, but were extremely harmful, and he knew that something must be done to put an end to the tyranny that he was witnessing. Unfortunately, tyrants

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<sup>11</sup> In Chapter 2 of his book *I Really Like Baseball*, Dr. Peter Fitch explains the importance of resistance to new ideas: “Resistance provides the cocoon that must be broken in order for a new idea to be strong enough to hold the day for its period in history.”

<sup>12</sup> Author/activist Valerie Kaur relates the idea of a community in transition with the metaphor of labour and delivery, arguing that the darkness we see in our world today may be that of a womb rather than a tomb.

<sup>13</sup> Peck, *Different Drum*, 94.

<sup>14</sup> Peck, *Different Drum*, 96.

<sup>15</sup> Philippians 2:7

<sup>16</sup> See Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>17</sup> In “Kenotic Love and the Soul’s Transformation,” Jessica Williams beautifully illustrates how we are called to follow Christ’s example of incarnational ‘disrobing’ by shedding privilege and exploitative power.

<sup>18</sup> See Matthew 7:3-5

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship* (United Kingdom: Touchstone, 1995), 185.

are often hailed as heroes during the distressing upheaval of the chaos phase, as people grope for a way out of the havoc toward anything that appears more organized:

In some sense they are quite correct; their chaos is a natural response to a relative lack of direction. The chaos could easily be circumvented by an authoritarian leader- a dictator- who assigned them specific tasks and goals. The only problem is that a group led by a dictator is not, and never can be, a community. Community and totalitarianism are incompatible.<sup>20</sup>

Keeping this in mind can help us to resist the temptation to be controlled or be controlling, but how can we collectively pursue justice and liberation when we (or others) are being harmed by those in power? In the face of oppression, silence puts us on the side of the oppressor, and to justify inaction with the excuse that we are ‘refraining from judgment’ is to completely miss the point of loving our neighbors *and* our enemies. Loving our enemies is not only our Christian duty, it is a practice that transforms our relationship with opponents, simultaneously transforming us and them. Love is a vital part of how we can overcome evil with good.

### **From Dehumanizing to Disarming**

*One of the most important things to do is to keep cutting deliberately through political lines and barriers...and emphasizing that these are largely fabrications and there is a genuine reality, totally opposed to the fictions of politics; the human dimension.<sup>21</sup>*

When we, or others, are being actively harmed, one of the strongest temptations we face is to dehumanize or even demonize those who are causing the harm. In many ways this is understandable; we recognize that to be *humane* is to be compassionate and considerate, and we call injustice *inhumane* because it reflects cruelty and a lack of care for others. Throughout history, theologians and lay people have accused their enemies and ideological opponents of being the Antichrist or his followers (a notable example of this occurred during the Reformation era). This kind of accusatory rhetoric has persisted and remains prevalent in the political discourse we hear today. In October 2024, a “friend of Donald Trump’s”

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<sup>20</sup> Peck, *Different Drum*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Jim Forest, *Loving Our Enemies: Reflections on the Hardest Commandment* (Mayknoll: Orbis Books, 2014), 3.

spoke at a rally in Madison Square Garden, calling Kamala Harris “the devil” and “the antichrist.”<sup>22</sup> During the lockdown in Canada that was mandated during the Covid-19 pandemic, a friend commented that I was “speaking in the spirit of the Antichrist” after I explained why I agreed with the rule that churches should temporarily refrain from gathering in large groups. Years later this has become something I can laugh and joke about, but at the time those words cut deep and widened the gulf between my friend and I. This experience galvanized a new conviction in me; while we absolutely must call out evil where we see it, insulting people by accusing them of following the devil may actually do more harm than good.<sup>23</sup> It does nothing to persuade, pull someone over to our side, or help them understand us better- if anything, this sort of accusation pushes others further from us, and excuses us from listening and understanding their point of view.

To dehumanize and demonize someone is to hate them, but to love them is to see and treat them as fully human, and as a divine image of God. By choosing to believe that the spark of divinity resides deep in the soul of the other despite the pain they inflict, we have the chance to begin drawing forth their goodness and seeing it bloom into fruition.<sup>24</sup> C.S. Lewis illustrates this in his famous sermon “The Weight of Glory;”

It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour...It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.<sup>25</sup>

Even if we have faith that all will eventually be restored to glory, Lewis points out something very important here: each of the actions we take toward our neighbor has the potential to either further uncover or further hide the divinity they carry. If we want to see oppressors stop, an important step is believing that they can. Without trusting that something good in them remains buried, how can we ever

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<sup>22</sup> Justin Rohrlich, “Trump backer calls Harris the ‘antichrist’ as he waves crucifix onstage at New York City rally,” *Independent*, October 27, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-rally-david-rem-msg-b2636545.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Note that Satan is called “the accuser” in Revelations 12:10

<sup>24</sup> A beautiful example of this is portrayed by the character Sonya in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.

<sup>25</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Transposition and Other Addresses*, (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1949), 39.

hope to see it unearthed? Responding with courage from some of the most devastating conditions, Palestinian Reverend Dr. Munther Isaac offers us a poignant reminder of why the call to love our enemies is both radical and imperative for today;

The Christian response to aggression is not revenge and is not one of neutrality; rather it is to challenge evil and injustice with good. It is choosing to see the image of God in the other, even in our enemy. This logic of love seeks to engage the humanity of the other and transform an enemy into a friend. This is the ultimate Christian mandate.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the difficulty of this mandate, theologian and peace activist Jim Forest also emphasizes that we are not exempt from attempting to follow Jesus' challenging instruction for us to love our enemies.<sup>27</sup> This is a costly kind of love that goes beyond the initial step of intellectual assent to another's inherent goodness. While explaining our duty to seek the glory of our neighbour, C.S. Lewis declares that "our charity must be a real and costly love...no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love,"<sup>28</sup> which Bonhoeffer would call "cheap grace."<sup>29</sup> Loving our enemies means refusing to dehumanize them with violence or harm, but this doesn't mean we should tolerate or avoid talking about the dehumanization they are causing- in fact, if we believe our opponents are good people, we are more likely to try and succeed at seeing that goodness. As stated previously, the cost we are called to pay is not to hide ourselves and our convictions, but to uncover ourselves, which can bring conflict to a head.<sup>30</sup> We may lose the peaceful life we once had, but as Peck points out, this was a false sense of peace anyway, and, as Jesus states, we must lose our life to truly find it.

Musician Jesse Welles shows listeners a courageous example of the use of satire to 'stir the pot' by giving a voice to the oppressed. Rather than demonizing the perpetrators, his lyrics hold up a mirror that reveals the harm they are causing by demonizing others:

War isn't murder, good men don't die, children don't starve and all the women survive.  
War isn't murder, that's what they say, when you're fighting the devil, murder's okay.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Reverend Dr. Munther Isaac, St. Stephen's University (@ssu\_theology\_culture), Instagram photo, July 9, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/ssu\\_theology\\_culture/p/C9Mg6e3RNC\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/ssu_theology_culture/p/C9Mg6e3RNC_/).

<sup>27</sup> Forest, *Loving Enemies*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, *Transposition*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> The story of Esther exemplifies standing against oppressive rulers with courage and costly grace.

<sup>31</sup> Jesse Welles, "War Isn't Murder" lyrics, May 3, 2024, <https://genius.com/Jesse-welles-war-isnt-murder-lyrics>, accessed November 16, 2024.

By writing in this ironic tone, Welles uses his words as a sword that cuts through the veil of self-righteousness blinding us to the harm our actions cause, revealing the humanity of those whom we've tried to justify our violence against in the name of 'freedom' and 'peace.' Another stunning example of this is found in the film *Moana*, where the titular heroine realizes that the terrifying, destructive foe she faces is actually the goddess of life, Te Fiti, who has had her heart stolen. Standing to face her with bold determination, Moana sings to her:

I have crossed the horizon to find you, I know your name. They have stolen the heart from inside you, but this does not define you. This is not who you are, you know who you are.<sup>32</sup>

Remembering her true nature is what causes Te Fiti to stop destroying everything in her path, allowing her heart to be restored. It's a beautiful and powerful story, but it is imperative to recognize that the story reveals a truth that exists beyond the fictional world; it is found in our reality too. In his book *The Moral Imagination*, John Paul Lederach, a distinguished scholar and practitioner of conflict resolution, presents readers with true stories that contain a miraculous turning point within communities torn apart by "a violent, protracted setting of conflict."<sup>33</sup> In each of these stories, Lederach notes the importance of the *moral imagination*, the leap of faith that opponents take in trusting the good of the other, and living up to the other's expectations of goodness which led to disarmament and lasting peace.<sup>34</sup> Facing our enemies without weapons in our hands is more than nonviolent resistance; it is a way of seeking the *imago Dei* in the other, which can transform our relationship. Justice Jersak sums this up beautifully:

To 'turn the other cheek' and not the heart is merely resentful pacifism. To turn the other cheek is to turn our faces from past pain and toward the face of Christ.<sup>35</sup>

When we are able to do so, we may be surprised to see the face of Christ in those who have opposed us.

## **Conclusion: The Lion and the Lamb**

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Mancina, Lin-manuel Miranda, Opetia Foa'i, "Know Who You Are" lyrics © Walt Disney Music Company, Wonderland Music Co. Inc., November 23, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19.

<sup>34</sup> Simone Weil elucidates eloquently on the power of turning our attention toward the good in "Attention and Will," found within *Awaiting God*, translated by Bradley Jersak.

<sup>35</sup> Bradley Jersak, "Turn the Other Cheek." Plain Truth Ministries, December 21, 2024. <https://www.ptm.org/turn-the-other-cheek-brad-jersak>

*Frequently, fully developed communities will be required to fight and struggle. Only they have learned to do so effectively”<sup>36</sup>*

I’m both grateful and hopeful that the hardship my daughters will face is unlikely to be a warzone outside their front door. My prayer is that they will follow Jesus by standing up for those who have been oppressed, both within and outside of their communities, and by standing up for themselves as well. I have to admit that one of my six year old’s favourite songs has become a favourite of mine too, and I can’t help but beam with pride when I listen to her singing her heart out to these lyrics from the backseat of our car:

I used to bite my tongue and hold my breath, scared to rock the boat and make a mess, so I sat quietly, agreed politely. I guess that I forgot I had a choice, I let you push me past the breaking point. I stood for nothing, so I fell for everything. You held me down, but I got up, already brushing off the dust. You hear my voice, you hear that sound? Like thunder, gonna shake the ground. You held me down, but I got up, get ready 'cause I've had enough. I see it all, I see it now. I've got the eye of the tiger, a fighter dancing through the fire, 'cause I am a champion, and you're gonna hear me roar. Louder, louder than a lion 'cause I am a champion, and you're gonna hear me roar.<sup>37</sup>

Like Jesus’s nonviolent sword, the roar of Christ signifies a love that suffers with the suffering, giving a voice to the voiceless without engaging in harmful retaliation. One example of this is when Jesus flipped the tables of the moneychangers, opposing their harm without harming them. Even when facing death on a cross, Jesus submits on his own terms, showing that his power is revealed through his **choice** to lay down his life.<sup>38</sup> By extending costly grace in this way, we abstain from violence and revenge in a way that can break the cycle, as activist Jarrod McKenna describes:

What Jesus invites us into is something where we stand our ground, where we no longer let them name us as victim but we demand our dignity in such ways that not only do we

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<sup>36</sup> Peck, *Different Drum*, 92

<sup>37</sup> Bonnie Leigh McKee, Henry Walter, Katy Perry, Lukasz Gottwald, Max Martin, “Roar” Lyrics © Concord Music Publishing LLC, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd., Warner Chappell Music, Inc, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> See John 10:17-18: “I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”

remember that we're a child of God, we help create situations where they can encounter the Holy Spirit and discover that **they** are a child of God.<sup>39</sup>

This is the roar of the lion that acts like a lamb- anything else is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Some Christians today look forward to a day when Jesus will return "like a lion," brandishing a sword in his hand, taking vengeance on all who are evil and deserving of eternal punishment. This image is akin to a lamb baring a huge set of canines dripping with blood as it devours other lambs- horrific, isn't it? Contrast this with the image displayed by C.S. Lewis of the kind and gentle lion who walks and talks with curious young children in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. But we should not mistake this lion as powerless or neutral in the face of evil- his almighty roar will transform our very lives; as Lewis writes, "he isn't safe. But he is good."<sup>40</sup>

Brian Zahnd notes that the robe worn by Jesus in Revelation is "drenched in blood *before the battle begins*," signifying that this is not the blood of enemies but is his own blood shed for every one of us.<sup>41</sup> We too are called to embody this sacrificial, co-suffering love, and our cross to bear is each other. Standing in solidarity with those who suffer is an important part of bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice.<sup>42</sup> As Bonhoeffer writes:

It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short, from the perspective of the suffering.<sup>43</sup>

The human being is called upon to share in God's suffering at the hands of a godless world. He must therefore really live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jarrod McKenna, "Nonviolent Activism and Personal Peacemaking" January 27, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/313716623/e417daa186> Accessed Nov 15, 2024 via [https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/5995536/discussion\\_topics/16882311?module\\_item\\_id=7825819](https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/5995536/discussion_topics/16882311?module_item_id=7825819)

<sup>40</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Scholastic, 1995), 80

<sup>41</sup> Zahnd, *Sinners*, 176.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. speaks of the moral arc of the universe as long, but bending toward justice in his speech "Our God is Marching On," delivered March 25, 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>.

<sup>43</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942–1943," *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Fortress Press: 2015), 480.

<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 26.

Instead of perpetuating the suffering and oppression that we see, or brushing it off by regarding it as simply a given in our fallen world, we must bear with each other in love.<sup>45</sup> My desire for the Church is that we focus on where sin is actually causing harm and take action, rather than using our Christian lens to judge others as sinners and create more oppression. This is how many people regarded the Jews in Hitler's time, and a modern example of this might be the "Christian" crusade against women's rights and LGBTQ rights—our modern attempt to explain and control what is seen as a godless world. Engaging in these conversations will not be easy, but with faith we trust that the life of our communities will not be lost but ultimately will be found. Peck states that even though most disagreements remain respectful within mature communities, they will occasionally engage in heated arguments, but the aura of the group is often “excitement over the consensus that will be hammered out.”<sup>46</sup> Describing the kind of community that we all long for, he writes:

When I am with a group of human beings committed to hanging in there through both the agony and the joy of community, I have a dim sense that I am participating in a phenomenon for which there is only one word. I almost hesitate to use it. The word is “glory.”<sup>47</sup>

May we strive to seek the glory of our neighbours, and in doing so, become the kind of communities that are worth fighting for.

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<sup>45</sup> Ephesians 4:2, Colossians 3:13

<sup>46</sup> Peck, *Different Drum*, 92.

<sup>47</sup> Peck, *Different Drum*, 106.

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