There is much for us to lament in this time. In the news from Nigeria this week, Samuel Dali, the president of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria said that they had vacated their village and were “on the run.” Churches and homes have been burned. Pastors have been killed or have fled. It may be the end of the church in that area as they have known it. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, including Dali, are leaving the area to go to Cameroon or elsewhere in Nigeria. We continue to hear horror stories of warfare and violence in the Congo, in Palestine, in Iraq, in Syria. And we are not immune to injustice and violence here in the United States with the recent shooting of Michael Brown which has brought the issue of racism to the forefront of our consciousness. We continue to hear about incidents of gun violence and gun deaths in the news. We have been shocked by the revelation of the militarization of our domestic police force and even the militarization of school districts. The news is overwhelming and often the problems seem unsurmountable. It can be paralyzing. What can we do? What should we do?

Scripture tells us that we are called to a ministry of reconciliation. Paul even repeats himself and says that this ministry of reconciliation was entrusted to us. One of the preachers at the Church of the Brethren National Youth Conference this summer, Rodger Nishioka, called on the youth to be witnesses to Christ’s peace. He said, “You are one of the historic peace churches! C’mon, Church of the Brethren! Do your job!” Another preacher at National Youth Conference, Jarrod McKenna, called the youth to a life of radical discipleship including the way of non-violence, asking youth to commit to be a “Dunker Punk.” They are right. This is our job. We
have a unique voice that the world really needs to hear right now. We are entrusted with the message of reconciliation. Peacemaking is our “thing.” It’s our “thing” because it was Jesus’ thing. And what Jesus offers is a way of life that offers an alternative to this endless cycle of violence – this need to control through force, this desire for retribution. And the way is through the Brethren values that have been with us since there were Brethren – simplicity, serving others, humility, and the non-violent power of Jesus.

But non-violence doesn’t necessarily mean non-action. In fact, saying nothing and doing nothing is still a reaction. Lack of response to injustice is an action. As ministers of reconciliation, we must both pray and act. We must move from tolerance to advocacy. As our banner out front says, “Pray and work for peace.”

I have recently been invited to community meetings with the police about the events in Ferguson. The questions addressed at these meetings seems to be, “Could something like Ferguson happen in Elgin?” and “What can we do to prevent such a violent reaction if an incident happens?” While I’m glad we’re having conversations about Ferguson, I’m a little troubled by the questions that are being addressed. The conversation seems to be focused on calming and containing the reaction to an incident, rather than preventing the incident to begin with. Being called to pacifism is not the same thing as being called to pacify. How can we be pro-active instead of reactive? How can we build relationships and trust between people and groups in our community? From my observation, the people of Ferguson had every right to be angry and indignant. And we must admit that the sin of racism runs deep and wide throughout this country. How do we acknowledge that and work towards God’s shalom? How are we bearers of God’s message of reconciliation?
Violent solutions to conflict are rehearsed over and over again – in movies, in stories, in videogames. We need to develop our own imagination and enlarge the world’s imagination for peaceful solutions to conflict. We need to tell stories of creative non-violence in our culture so that when we are confronted we can imagine a different response. We become the stories that we tell. And we have the best story of them all! The story of Jesus who conquered through the cross and was raised in triumph. This is why we trust in the power of peace. Because we trust in God.

You know, non-violence doesn’t always work for us. In worldly terms, it isn’t always effective. It’s no secret that it can be a hard sell. I mean, look at Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., John Kline who was shot as a traitor because he ministered to Brethren on both sides during the Civil War, Ted Studebaker who served as a farmer rather than a soldier in Vietnam and was killed by the North Vietnamese. They achieved great things for many people through non-violent action but it didn’t turn out so great for them personally.

So peacemaking is not always effective, depending on one’s idea of effectiveness. Some people might look at the situation of the Brethren in Nigeria and say, “So, that peacemaking idea… How’s that working for you?” They might even be asking themselves that question. I’d probably be tempted. It’s easy to counsel non-violence when you are not the one that has to suffer. In fact, on the cross, that’s pretty much what the crowd asks Jesus, “How’s this cross thing working for you? If you are the Messiah, why don’t you get down?”

As followers of Jesus, we are not called to be effective or successful. We are called to be faithful. We are peacemakers because of who we are. We are followers of Jesus. We are people of God’s peace. We don’t do it because it works. We do it because we trust in God that God is at work in the world and one day God’s reign will come and God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
This does not necessarily mean we are going to be good at the ministry of reconciliation. We are probably going to be awkward. We are going to make mistakes. After the shooting of Michael Brown, Nora and I went down to a gathering for a moment of silence and a protest against police brutality that was held in Chicago at the Daley Plaza. After the official gathering, the crowd “took it to the streets,” marching around the loop chanting, “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” As white people we were in the minority in that march and it did feel a little uncomfortable. For a while, we were lifting our hands with the others saying, “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” Then we became uncomfortable raising our hands. I mean, really, we don’t have to worry about being shot by the police when we have our hands up. So then we just started chanting, “Don’t shoot!” at the appropriate time with the others. It’s awkward. How do you stand alongside without appropriating? We did get a few funny looks.

But funny looks and awkwardness and embarrassment at our own mistakes should not keep us from acting. They are a small price to pay, really, for constantly living in a position of power and privilege in our society. If some black people wonder what the heck you know about racism and how dare you speak about the issue, I have also recently heard from black people that they are tired of bringing up the issue of racism. For them it is a relief to have white people come alongside and name it so that they don’t have to. Because they are tired – tired of fighting for justice, tired of pointing out the problem, tired of being the ones advocating and educating. Michael Brown is not a new story for them. It’s an old, old story that doesn’t seem to change.

So although certainly our first job is to listen to the voices of those who are marginalized, we should not let our fear of being judged or our fear of making a mistake keep us from speaking up, keep us from proclaiming Christ’s gospel of liberation, justice, and peace. We have been
reading the Gospel of Mark in Wednesday Bible study. And in Mark, the disciples are so clueless. We read those stories and think, oh stupid disciples... why can’t they catch a clue? And we’re right. They don’t get the big picture. They often miss the point. They do make mistakes. *But that doesn’t keep them from following Jesus.*

Martin Luther said, “Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly. For he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness but, as Peter says, we look for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” We are called to humility, to get it wrong, to be uncomfortable, to look like an idiot for the sake of the Gospel. The disciples didn’t give up even though they got it wrong over and over again.

Jesus announced that the Reign of God has begun. We are to live as people of God’s new creation. And we don’t just live in the new creation, we are a new creation. We proclaim God’s reign. We live it. We embody it as the Body of Christ, the Word made flesh.

God entrusts us with the ministry of reconciliation, and we trust in the promises of God. It’s a matter of trust - a matter of mutual trust. It’s not glamorous. It’s messy. It can be discouraging – even heartbreaking. We are not peacemakers because we know that our efforts will bring us success, or because these methods will be an effective way for us to win. We are peacemakers because, as followers of Jesus, God has entrusted us with the Gospel of Peace, and because we trust that one day the God of Peace will reign and all of creation will share in the victory.