"When your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail." You may have heard that phrase during the past election campaign. I heard it several times, aimed at the Conservative government’s emphasis on military spending and the Canadian military response to conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and the Ukraine.

Of course the point was that if we are so heavily invested in the military, our first reaction to any kind of threat will be to meet it with a violent response.

Not everyone agrees with that, of course. American president Teddy Roosevelt described his foreign policy as “Speak softly but carry a big stick.” Just because you have a hammer doesn’t mean you’re going to use it… But then again, if you spend so much money on your hammer, you might not have a screwdriver when you need one. Or an impact wrench, or a food processor, or data recovery software.

I could get caught up in the metaphor… But it’s a good question for Peace Sunday—what tools do we have in our metaphorical toolbox when it comes to conflict? How do we form our opinions and cast our votes on big world issues? And what approach do we take to the conflicts in our own lives, large and small?

I personally don’t have access to missile launch codes or F35s. My tools aren’t military. And my instincts don’t tend towards physical violence, either.

But I wonder—do I have any hammers in my problem-solving toolbox? What gut reactions, what defenses do I automatically go to when I’m faced with a conflict? Might those be hammers, a useful tool in some situations that can make a real mess if applied to all situations?

For example, one of my defensive reactions is anger. I have a high awareness of injustice, and if I sense someone being treated unfairly, I get angry pretty fast. In some settings, that’s a good thing—I might stand up for the kid getting picked on at the playground, I might confront a shoplifter, something like that. But in other settings, defensive anger is NOT a helpful tool. Getting angry at a church meeting, ranting against a perceived slight on facebook… Sometimes anger can be like using a hammer to fix a toaster.

I need more tools, more options to get at the real problems and work towards healthy solutions.
The problem with hammers, our “gut instincts” and first impulses, isn’t that they’re always wrong, but that they override everything else. They lock us into positions that we might otherwise not choose to take. They distort our vision and disregard our other values.

So my question for you today is “What are your hammers?” What are your first reactions to conflicts, big and small? What tools do you use to address problems? And are those tools doing what we want them to do?

One of the most common “hammers” that I see is in response to conflict is fear.

Fear is a useful tool. When we’re scared, our senses are heightened, our bodies tense for action. We pay attention. Our focus narrows, ostensibly on the things that we value the most. We’re ready for action.

That can be really useful. But not always.

In the Exodus story, the Hebrews were freed by the Mighty Arm of God to go to establish a homeland for themselves in Canaan. But when they got there, they grew afraid. They sent spies into the land, and they came back with reports that the land was inhabited and well-protected. There were even giants in the land—we look like grasshoppers beside them, the spies said.

And the Hebrews were afraid. They turned around and went back into the desert. Their fear dominated their thinking. Only months before, they had been chased by the greatest military might of that era, the chariots of the Egyptian army. But God had led them through the Red Sea to safety. They had been dying of thirst and hunger in the desert, but God had provided, again and again.

Their fear made all of that go out the window. They forgot the bigger story they were living in. They forgot the things that were important to them. Fear narrowed their thinking so that they could only see their impending doom.

That’s what fear does. We focus on such a narrow slice of life that we forget our other values.
I spent the day yesterday at the Mennonite Central Committee AGM in Regina. The focus for the day was on the refugee crisis in the Middle East, so that’s been on my mind all week.

Fear is a big part of this global crisis. For those in the region who are facing genuine threats beyond my comprehension, fear is a totally appropriate response to crisis. But what about those of us who are physically far removed from the situation. Is fear the right tool for the job facing us?

Many of us have picked up that hammer of fear and are holding it tightly. Will this violence be brought to our shores? What if newcomers drag down our economy? What if they change our culture? Are their needs genuine or are they taking advantage of us? What if there are terrorists among them?

We are generous people. We have plenty of resources to share—many of us far more than we need. Most of us come from immigrant families ourselves, even refugees. We have much in common with the refugees we might welcome. And many of us believe that our safety does not come from the government or from the protection of the women and men with the guns. “God is our refuge and strength” says Psalm 46. “Therefore, we will not fear”

Fear makes us forget our roots. We forget who we are and who loves us. Fear trumps our other values, personal and religious and moral.

Instead of the hammer of fear, we need to pick up some other tools.

With the refugee crisis, one of the most helpful tools can be research.

How many Muslims do you think currently live in Canada? What percentage of the population? One report says that the average Canadian guesses that Muslims currently make up 20% of the population. I don’t know who the “average Canadian” is, but the real number is 3%. Even if the Muslim population doubles in Canada in the next 15 years, as some project, that puts the number at 6%.

That’s not a small number, and the projected growth is significant. But to put it in perspective, by comparison, the Green Party of Canada has received between 3-7% of the popular vote in national elections since 2004. Anyone afraid of the Rising Green Tide?
I could cite a bunch of other statistics as well. If you’re interested, a book called *The Myth of the Muslim Tide* by Doug Saunders.

Fear draws us out of context, focuses on the small things at the expense of the larger truth. Reading widely, following more than one news source, talking with people with whom we might disagree, these tools help us to find the truth.

Not that research is the answer to everything—facts can also be misrepresented and misapplied. The stats I just quoted aren’t the only relevant ones, just the ones I chose to make my point. And statistics can also become a hammer, an excuse not to get involved, a distraction from real people and opportunities that might be right in front of us. Learning and awareness are great, but if that’s all we do then that’s not peacemaking, either.

One way to both get more information and to engage in active peacemaking is through the Mennonite Central Committee. MCC does great work to build those connections between peacemaking “over there” and our work right here. The main speaker at yesterday’s MCC meetings was a man from Lebanon, Rami Shamma. He is the Program Manager at a national Lebanese NGO called Development for People and Nature Association, one of MCC’s partners in Lebanon.

Lebanon has a population of about 4.4 million people. In the past five years, Lebanon has had more than 1.2 million refugees from Syrian, plus several hundred thousand more from Palestine. Imagine. That’s like relocating the whole population of Montreal into Alberta, in the area between Calgary and Edmonton. (I suppose that would be an interesting cultural experiment… 😊) Imagine the logistics of that, the infrastructure limitations, the chaos.

Why is that Lebanon’s problem and not ours? Does our distance make it less of an issue? MCC doesn’t think so, and so it was very encouraging to hear of the resources and work being done there. Overwhelming, but we are engaged there, doing the work of peace.

On Remembrance Day, Rami Shamma is speaking about this work at Osler Mennonite Church at 11am. I’d encourage you to go. One way to narrow the distance between their problems and our problems.
One final example of a hammer that we might need to set aside.

All four gospel writers tell the story of a woman who anointed Jesus. Jesus was invited for an evening meal in the home of someone important. He was the guest of honour, and after the meal they were relaxing and sharing conversation. In the middle of this, a woman walked in, carrying what everyone recognized as a jar of very expensive perfume. As they watched, she went up to Jesus, broke open the jar, and anointed Jesus with the perfume and washed his feet with her hair.

This seems like a strange way to honor someone, but then this kind of anointing was recognized as a symbolic gesture, a way to show respect and give tribute. The shocking thing was that this was a woman performing this ritual, to a backwater prophet like Jesus.

The religious leaders were horrified. How can Jesus allow this woman to touch him? She’s a great sinner—some traditions say she was publicly known as an adulterer, maybe even a prostitute. If Jesus really was a prophet, the Pharisees said, he would know what kind of woman is touching him.

Jesus’ disciples had a different concern. That perfume was worth over a year’s wages! What is she doing—if she wanted to give that perfume to Jesus, we could have sold it and given the money to the poor!

Both the Pharisees and the disciples looked down on this woman, distanced themselves from her. Sociology calls this “othering”—using labels and categories to emphasize differences, to make someone else the “other,” to distinguish between “us” and “them.” We use othering to disassociate ourselves from people we don’t like or don’t trust. I’m not like them, they are sinful or lazy or out of control.

Othering takes the focus off of my weaknesses by pointing out the weaknesses of someone else.

I love how the gospel stories call the Pharisees and the disciples on their othering. In Luke’s telling of the story, Jesus went right after his Pharisee hosts. They attacked this woman’s inappropriate behaviour, how she’s unclean and breaking the traditions. So Jesus pointed out their own sins, even the ways they have broken the rules for treating him as a guest that very night. They are not different from her, they are in the same boat as “those people” they liked to judge.
The other gospels go after the disciples’ indignation over the wasted money. Jesus’ called them out on their sudden concern for the poor—the poor are always present, but what are you doing about them? John’s gospel says that the one who complained the loudest was actually the purse-keeper, who liked to help himself to the communal savings from time to time.

Jesus closed the gap between the woman and her accusers, named their common need for grace. And then he lifted up the woman as worthy of honor and memory for her awareness and sacrifice.

The temptation to distance ourselves from others is great. We compare our best to their worst. We make a big deal out of cultural differences that aren’t actually that significant. We use stories about violence perpetrated by a few to define whole nations and religions.

Some of the things that “we” believe about “them” might be true. But those same things are also true of “us” if we apply the same standards.

Instead of Othering, creating distance, what if we use our tools to build connections and point out the things we have in common?

In October there was a story in the news about an anti-Muslim protest being organized at mosques across the US. In Columbus, Ohio, a lone protester named Annie showed up at a local mosque, with inflammatory signs and slogans. The Muslims that came to worship that day could have called the police to enforce their right to gather, to keep the protester from disrupting their worship. But instead, several of them went out to talk to her. They debated some things back and forth, but mostly they offered to be her friend, they invited her into the mosque. At first she resisted, claiming that she’d never set foot in a mosque because it might blow up. Get away from me, Satan, she said at one point…

But they continued insisting that they wanted to be her friends, that they shared her goals of ending violence and saving lives. Eventually she agreed to come inside for a tour. They introduced her to the president of the mosque, and shared food and drink together. She stayed for two hours, and when she left she forgot to take her protest signs with her.

That kind of connecting with people turns enemies into friends.
Jesus did this all the time, challenging stereotypes, breaking cultural taboos that divided people, calling people out on their own stuff when they were pointing fingers at others.

What hammers do you carry—fear? out-sourcing? othering? There are lots more—denial, privacy, anger, to name a few.

Again, the biggest problem with hammers is not that they aren’t useful sometimes, just that they can be very destructive if they are used for any and all problems.

We need a wide range of tools in our peacemaking toolboxes. That’s the beautiful thing about community, about church. Together, we have the right tools for almost every job. The people around us have the tools, the skills, the personalities, the connections that I lack. This is why MCC does so much good, because it’s the shared work of community. This is why our churches are the place to take our problems, big and small.

Can we put down our hammers? Can we speak softly without our big sticks? Can we walk together in the way of Jesus? This is the call.