

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Peacemaking”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore December 5, 2010

READINGS

The first chapter of the first book of Maccabees tells what is known about the origins of the Hannukah celebration. Palestine had been conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. The territory was administered by the Syrian Se-leu'-cid rulers, but Judea remained a Jewish theocracy. An-ti-o-chus IV Ep-i-phanes came to power in 175BCE. Six years later he captured Jerusalem and a year later desecrated the temple and outlawed the practice of Judaism.

The king sent letters by the hands of messengers to Jerusalem, and to all the cities of Judea: that they should follow the law of the [Empire], ... And should forbid holocausts and sacrifices, and atonements to be made in the temple of God. And should prohibit the sabbath, and the festival days, to be celebrated... And he commanded altars to be built, and temples, and idols, and swine's flesh to be immolated. (1 Maccabees 1:46-50)

The result was the Maccabees' rebellion.

Now for a different voice in response to oppression – Jesus of Nazareth (King James version):

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Based on the religious universality of the golden rule in religious teachings and tradition, religious scholar Karen Armstrong has inspired the creation of a charter for compassion she would like to see as a force for peace in our world today. I'll speak more about it later but I want to put it before you now. You'll find it on the back of the new member ingathering responsive reading.

Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women ~ to restore compassion to the center of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

Sermon

My son Andrew was home on Thursday morning writing a paper on torture for his English class. I was home trying to get started on these words about peacemaking. Thinking about peace doesn't exactly go with breakfast table conversation about waterboarding. But Andrew did have a thought provoking quote for his paper from Stephen King: Permitting any torture spreads like a malignant tumor on the body politic. This comment stimulated my wondering: what, in our society, should be operating like an immune system to fight the disease of hate. As I thought about the ancient Hebrew prophets and Jesus and Mohammed and Buddha, I wondered if a core message of religion can be a powerful social defense system to help us resist the urge to harm others.

One of the greatest peaceniks of all time was Jesus of Nazareth. That line from Matthew, Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God, has more to it than might

be apparent at first glance. The Greek word the King James version translated as 'children,' is actually 'huios' which literally translates as sons. This is important because it is the same phrase, son of God, that is used to refer to Jesus. Thus, peacemakers will be called sons of God just as Jesus is called son of God. So, as Unitarian Universalists tend to be followers of Jesus' teachings rather than worshippers of Jesus, being a peacemaker puts one right in his footsteps. The core of Jesus' message was making peace.

And other religions have peace as a core message. From Judaism comes tikkun olam, to repair the world. Jews believe performing mitzvot, or religious obligation, is a means of tikkun olam, helping to perfect the world, Mitzvot are thought to hasten the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic age. The Quran says, "... make peace between your brethren and observe your duty to Allah that haply ye may obtain mercy (2:224). And make not Allah, by your oaths, a hindrance to your being righteous and observing your duty unto Him and making peace among mankind. Allah is Hearer, Knower. (49:10) " From India comes the principle of ahimsa, avoiding violence or doing no harm. Ahimsa is a prominent feature of Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Violence of any kind is thought to be very bad for one's karma so all killing is to be avoided.

Unitarian Universalists connection to peacemaking comes through the values we affirm and promote. Drawing from multiple religious sources and philosophic frameworks, we affirm the fundamental unity and interdependence of all existence coupled to the transforming power of love. The security of each nation is entwined with the security of all others. Seeing everyone as our neighbor calls us to create relationships of compassion, respect, mutuality and forgiveness. We see each person as worthy of dignity with the right to meaning and fulfillment that includes safety and social and economic well being. Freedom and choice are integral parts of that worth and dignity as well as personal accountability and the demands of justice.

From all these sources, we affirm peacemaking as an ultimately valuable purpose and action. Yet, paradoxically, when peacemaking is discussed, mostly what the conversation turns toward is war.

The reason for this is the association between peacemaking and pacifism, the commitment to peace and opposition to war. The word pacifist has its source in the Latin translation of the Greek word for peacemaker used in the Gospel of Matthew. The origins of the concept of pacifism is tightly coupled to Christian theology. Today, many pacifists' conviction is rooted in their religious faith, be they Mennonites, Quakers, Jains, or other faith tradition. There is ample material in the Christian scriptures to support such a conviction. After all, Jesus lived his life nonviolently, advocated nonviolence, and passively went to his death.

And that passive submission to the will of another that may result in slavery, suffering,

destruction and death quickly becomes the center of conversation once someone argues for pacifism. Test cases are thrown out: what would you do if you are attacked? Your family was at risk? Your friends and neighbors? What about Hitler? What about Stalin? What about genocide in Rwanda? The killing fields of Cambodia? Darfur? Do you let that happen or must you act violently to stop it?

Lest we forget, we're in the middle of the celebration of Hanukkah right now. That nasty Antiochus desecrated the temple by installing statues of their Gods and sacrificing unclean animals to them seeking to break the spirit of those stiff necked Jews. The Maccabees would have none of this. Respect for their religion and justice for their people called them to violent resistance.

The value of peacemaking can easily get lost in parsing just war scenarios. This was what bogged down the Unitarian Universalist Association's first attempt to come up with a "statement of conscience" on making peace. Last year, they managed to get their minds out of debating just war theory to focus on successful strategies to promote peace. The work of peacemaking is much larger than deciding whether to go to war or not.

When one powerful ruler dominates, oppresses and subjugates people, there are many responses besides passive submission that are nonviolent. Gandhi's satyagraha, or truth force, while nonviolent was anything but passive submission. The velvet revolution at the end of 1989 brought the end of communism in Czechoslovakia with little bloodshed. But my favorite nonviolent revolution was The Singing Revolution that liberated Estonia from the Soviet Union. I was deeply moved watching the 2008 movie that told the story.

Singing is a national pastime with huge choirs gathering for performances. After World War II, no patriotic Estonian songs were permitted in these performances. In 1947, during the first song festival held after the Soviet occupation, one tune set to the lyrics of an old national poem, Land of My Fathers, Land That I Love, slipped by the censors. It got banned in the 1950's but in the 1960's, Estonians started singing the song without permission. At the 100th anniversary of the poem, choirs and the audience sang it defiantly as they were ordered off the stage. A hundred thousand singers drowned out a 100 piece Soviet military band. That song became the center of the resistance that eventually brought an end to Soviet occupation.

Thus there are many, many ways to advocate nonviolently for oppression to end and justice to be served. The statement of conscience on making peace that finally passed in June focused on three very important dimensions of the work: peacebuilding, peacemaking, and peacekeeping.

Peacebuilding is the creation and support of institutions and structures that address the roots of conflict, including economic exploitation, political marginalization, the violation

of human rights, and a lack of accountability to law.

Peacemaking is the negotiation of equitable and sustainable peace agreements, mediation between hostile parties, and post-conflict rebuilding and reconciliation.

Peacekeeping is early intervention to prevent war, stop genocide, and monitor ceasefires. Peacekeeping creates the space for diplomatic efforts, humanitarian aid, and nonviolent conflict prevention through the protection of civilians and the disarmament and separation of those involved in violent conflict.

Since the urge to violence is a genetically determined human characteristic that is unlikely to change without evolutionary intervention, we must build effective ways of justly managing those drives in constructive rather than destructive ways. If that management isn't effective, peacemaking and peacekeeping can guide hostile parties to reconciliation. Once conflict ends, the repair begins. Whether at the global, national, or local level, whether in the family or community, or within our own hearts, peacemaking can be an active multilevel path to violence prevention.

Now peacebuilding, peacemaking, and peacekeeping are all done by the state too. So why can't we just turn the work of peacemaking over to the state and let them do this work for us? Because the state's guiding ethical principle is the use of power to protect and advance the self-interests of its sphere of influence. The use of power may and usually does conflict with the good of the powerless, the vulnerable, the weak and the disadvantaged, particularly if they are designated as a threat to the state. Religions, on the other hand, are organized to serve greater goods than state power, be it their understanding of God, the teachings of their prophets and scriptures, or universal moral and ethical principles that apply to all people. At the center of those greater goods in most religions is love. Love rather than power is at the heart of peacemaking.

Which brings me to well known scholar of religions, Karen Armstrong. In 2008, she was given the TED prize. The TED Prize is awarded annually to exceptional individuals who receive \$100,000 and, the chance to make "One Wish to Change the World." In her February 28th acceptance speech, she asked the world to assist her in creating a "charter for compassion" to unite the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, around the common center of the golden rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The world responded. 150 thousand people from over 180 countries contributed suggestions for such a charter. Then scholars sifted through them, adding their own insights and thoughts to draft the Charter. It was unveiled just over a year ago in November. I deeply regret we didn't celebrate it at that time, but am pleased to bring it to you today.

I bring it up in the context of a sermon on peace, because the Charter can provide a pan-religious foundation for the work of peacemaking and a critique of the exercise of state power. The Charter provides a multi-religious ethic for treating everyone justly, fairly and with respect. It rejects torture, inflicting pain and the use of violence even against our enemies. It affirms the power of love and compassion to cross and break down political, ideological and religious boundaries. Without love and compassion, we cannot create a just economy and a peaceful global community.

I thank Sybil Stock for helping to inspire and to motivate us last Sunday to advocate for peace in the world and in our community. There is much we can do as a congregation following the principle of love and compassion to add our voices to counter political abuse of power. My challenge for you today, is to become a peacemaker in your daily life as well, through deepening and widening your empathy and compassion.

Where the work of peacemaking becomes real for most of us isn't in debating foreign policy or analyzing congressional legislation, valuable as that is. It becomes real in our daily interactions with our family, our coworkers, our friends, receptionists, telephone support people, store clerks, bus drivers, and the many other people we see or talk to every day. How do we bring love and compassion into the relationships that matter most? How do we demonstrate the value of peace by the way we live peacefully?

I'm sure we all know how hard this really is. Trash carelessly left on the kitchen counter is enough to move me out of the peaceful place that I've cultivated in meditation and experience a flash of anger. Someone's condescending tone of voice in conversation can warp my perception of the message being communicated. On a day to day basis, It can feel like my emotional life is at war with my religious values and personal commitments to be peaceful in word and deed.

That's why we need a place to practice, again and again, the paths of peace knowing full well we'll make many mistakes. I believe this congregation can be a sanctuary for us to learn to be better peacemakers. We can create guidelines, boundaries, procedures and expectations that improve the odds on peace. From the most basic level of using rules of order to run meetings, to creating a covenant of right relations between us, to providing classes in nonviolent, compassionate communication and other methods of reducing conflict, we can be a congregation that actively values and promotes peace inside as well as outside our walls.

Inner peace isn't real until it manifests in fostering outer peace. And outer peace will never be possible without cultivating inner peace. May this congregation be a place where making both inner and outer peace are central to our purpose and identity.

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