

“My Fight for Peace”

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Meditation:

I grew up fighting
My mother told me I came out
Clenching my fists
And wailing
Like most of us
Ready for a fight
The bell
Which sounded at birth
Announced my call
To take on all comers
Anyone who stepped into my personal ringside

I learned a lot in that first round
That I would constantly be up against those larger than I
That the feeling of being pushed around
And pushed away from what I wanted
Would not go away after that first time
I learned that having what was comfortable taken away
Is part of life
And that others experience the same thing
And they get frustrated and angry too
Just like me.
So it was never really difficult to find a fight

The early rounds were rough
I was often overmatched
And under trained
And a little scrawny
But my own sense of conviction and righteousness
Seemed just as big
And just as deserving
As anyone else's
And so I fought hard
And because I couldn't fight as well
I learned to fight dirty
Which I discovered could help me win a lot of battles.

So I used my techniques for fighting
As long as they proved effective.
And when they faltered
I refined them
I followed a similar path
Taken by fighters throughout history
Who learned that when their weapons became obsolete
It was time to modify them
Make them more sophisticated

Until they were stealth
And indefensible
And could be used to win any battle

Which is what I did
Until I became the biggest kid on the block
The irony was
That in the middle rounds
I realized something important:
That all I had actually developed
Was the instinct to be a champion in battle
Setting myself on a course where I had no hope of winning the war
Because I had never really wanted to be fighter
I had never wanted to spend my life doing battle
I only wanted what everyone else wanted
To be pulled in
Instead of pushed out
To be held instead of hit
Helped instead of hurt
Happy instead of hollow

It was just the power of the frustration and fear
That I believed would lead me to overcome all obstacles
And rise above all opponents
That led me away from the subtler call
Of love and serenity and safety
Which is what I had been wanting all along

So, now, in my later rounds
I find myself training much harder
Learning to fight not my opponents
But my impulses
Now, in my later rounds,
I am learning to fight the real enmity within me
Instead of the imagined enemies around me
I am learning to understand
Instead of undermine
To develop my wisdom
Instead of my weaponry
With an eye on how to dignify
Instead of how to demonize
And I have realized something surprising
That in my quest to relearn all I know
And everything I was taught
In my effort to trade in my instinct to battle the world
For an impulse toward to bettering it
I have finally stepped up
For the fight of my life

Sermon:

December 7th, 1941. November 22nd, 1963. April 4th, 1968. June 5th, 1968, September 6th, 1972, December 8th, 1980, October 6th 1981, February 26th, 1993, April 19th, 1995; September 11th, 2001; March 11th, 2004; July 7th, 2005...

Do you know these dates? Granted, many of them are from quite some time ago. And, like most dates, after we hear a few read off, the rest just blend together. But they're significant, so indulge me as I offer the attributions:

Pearl Harbor, John F. Kennedy Assassinated, Martin Luther King, Jr. Assassinated. Robert Kennedy assassinated, Israeli Olympic hostages killed in Munich, John Lennon Assassinated, Anwar Sadat assassinated; World Trade Center Bombing, Oklahoma City Bombing; Planes Crash into World Trade Center; Madrid Train Bombing; London Underground Bombing.

Each of these events, like the first one I mentioned – Pearl Harbor, were all days we expected would, 'live in infamy.' That we expected would define us as a generation as we lived through them. That they would be times that would change us. And make us vow, as a people, to change the times.

Today is the anniversary of one of these dates. An anniversary on which I made such a vow. A day where I prayed. Specifically, I remember praying that day for these things:

- that all the people I was close to would be spared. Not only would they, themselves, not perish, but that the human cost of the tragedy wouldn't lay claim to them.
- that however we responded as a nation – for I felt certain some military strike would follow – that we, as a people, would remain calm.
- that this horrible event wouldn't fundamentally change the principles upon which this country was founded on.
- And that, whatever threats and fears emerged, that we, as a people, would not let our imaginations get the best of us.

Today, on the anniversary of one of these dates, I want to take a moment to wonder, aloud with you, about these prayers. Not because they didn't come true – but, quite the contrary, because they DID – and I realize now, I had thoughtlessly been praying for the wrong things.

I also want to wonder with you why this matters to us: one little community in one city in one country of the world?

And finally I want to wonder with you about the dates. Did I get them all right? Or more accurately, did I forget any? Should I have included August 29th, 2005? Or any of the dates that followed? Let me begin by addressing this last part.

As most of you can tell, all the dates I began by listing involved tragedies of violence. Violence, in particular, that affected us so powerfully because they hit us unexpectedly. So why, then, would I suggest August 29th to be included? Why Hurricane Katrina?

Those of you who contend that Katrina is different are correct. Not only because it was a natural disaster, whereas all the others were humanly engineered. But also because Katrina was not entirely unexpected.

But I contend Katrina is worthy of consideration. And I say this because of the violence it brought with it.

Whereas everyone of the other tragedies I listed could be described as violence followed by compassion, in Katrina's case it is also a matter of compassion followed by violence. In the wake of rescue efforts, horrific stories of shooting, looting, arson and rape were reported.

Consider these on line excerpts from conservative freelance writer Mac Johnson:

(In the aftermath of the hurricane, lawlessness was rampant. Thugs) shot a (policeman) in the head, shot a national guardsman, (and) halted life-saving evacuations by firing on helicopters and humvees. Police had to (return fire on) a gang of six *shooting at contractors who came to repair the levee breaches*. A group of white civilians (who used their own) private boats to save as many refugees as they could, (had to give) up and turn back because people began shooting at them, trying to take their boats.

(National Guard who should have been concentrating on rescue efforts were, instead) carrying full battle gear through the streets of an American City, opening doors with rifles at the ready... In the middle of the worst American natural disaster in over a century, gang warfare, anti-authority psychosis and individual malevolence finished off the hope of tens of thousands that had survived the flood. It did more to demoralize the nation than the storm had done.

Which begs the question, which more accurately describes us: the impassioned relief efforts we have been witnessing or the violence surrounding them?

If each one of the tragedies I started off mentioning was supposed to have changed us – forced us to reckon with our violent tendencies and prompted us to change society by pursuing peace – have we in fact lived out our vows and changed? Or has our only change been that we broadened our tolerance for violence?

Consider this – a study done since 9-11. In 2004, academic Researchers in New Orleans conducted an experiment in which they had police fire 700 blank rounds into the air, in a single afternoon, in one neighborhood. No one -- not one person -- called to report the gunfire. It was just ordinary background noise.

The question I am raising on this anniversary is obviously not about foreign nations doing violence against us. But our conditioned apathy to living with violence in general. If our tendency is to blame violence on the terrorists, or to blame it on isolated incidents by a few lawless people in one city, we are missing the point. This problem, when studied over time shows that violence has been written into more than certain places in the world. More than into our history books. It is close to being written into our genetic code.

Consider these facts from Historian G. Vabert speaking about the human tendency toward war:

'From the year 1496 BC. To 1861 AD, in 3 358 years, there were 227 years of peace, and 3130 years of war, or 13 years of war for every year of peace. Within the last three centuries, there have been 286 wars in Europe (alone). From the year 1500 B.C until 1860, more than 8000 treaties of peace were concluded. The average time they remained in force was 2 years.'

Vabert wrote this 20 years before the beginning of World War I, which destroyed 10 million lives. Yet, the years which preceded that war were marked with the impression that the progress in democratic ideals, international trade, and cosmopolitanism would make war obsolete and unthinkable. And still, what followed was two world wars, followed by the 40-year Cold War (1949-89). Terms such as genocide, holocaust and 'crimes against humanity' had to be invented since that scope and scale of horror was truly unprecedented.

Now, if you're like me, most of the people you know here in Atlanta – or anywhere else in the world, for that matter - prefer peace to war. So the question then becomes why do we settle for and accept violent means if we are truly pursuing peaceful ends? Why not live by Gandhi's dictum when he said, "There is no way to peace – peace is the way"? The reason, I believe, is out of misunderstanding the sense of love and sacrifice.

Both the culture of war and the true culture of peace rest on the spirit of sacrifice, or giving one's life. How do they differ? The culture of war is asking one to die for his own people, whereas the culture of peace is asking one to live for the sake of others, even if others are not similar to him, or are not his 'neighbor'.

In seminary I learned that the Greek language has three different words to describe love. Eros, the first, is craving: the subject sacrifices – even diminishes or destroys - the object for his pleasure. Philia is the mutual attraction of a subject and an object, which brings them to practice mutual sacrifices. And Agape is unconditional love, where the subject sacrifices – or offers itself - in the aim of bringing the object to a greater place, even if the object fails to offer anything in return. Systems where eros dominates, reveal constant warfare since relationships are based on one dominating or sacrificing another. Philia brings some peace among people or countries which have something in common. But philia alone can only bring temporary truces among these camps as agreements about who is sacrificing what, when are negotiated. Agape presents the only real possibility for lasting peace since it is based on love which embraces the other and sacrifices privilege, thus raising the other to their level and creating a greater whole.

So, what does this have to do with us? Simple. We are a church. And the intent of the early churches was to form communities based not on eros, or philia, but on the principle of agape. The concept was to create environments whose goal was to always live for something greater than themselves. Thus the individual would live for the family. The family would live for the clan. The clan would live for the region. The region for the nation. The nation for humankind. Thus, each level projects its own ideal into that ideal of the greater body surrounding it. By 'sacrificing' to greater and greater objectives of love, we magnify our hearts and thus our potential and our value.

When the basic elements of society - like families, schools and churches – fail to instill an understandable motive to give ourselves to the greater good around us, the society around us becomes ripe for frustration. It begins breeding selfishness and the prevailing mentality of 'every-man-for-himself' brand of eros takes over. This eventually leads to social disorder, violence, civil war or war against other nations.

It is plain that our lack of committed, long term response has resulted in us accepting more and more of this social disorder. The only question is to where do we turn to stem the tide. I think you would agree that if we continue to wait for other countries to make and keep vows we should be prepared to accept more of the same. And even when we look to other areas, other political preferences, other classes or races or religions to make the difference – to begin the sacrifice, offer gestures of humility, reveal forgiveness, generosity and altruism – we have yet to look close enough to home, or understand the call to agape.

Likewise, if we want to explain the distrust or aggression or tendencies toward self service instead by looking abroad, we'd better start preparing to add a lot more tragic dates of violence to our list. Because as nobel laureate, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, once remarked:

"... the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties — but right through (each and) every human heart. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years (and the events which shape us). And even within hearts overwhelmed by (selfish impulses), one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an uprooted small corner (housing a demanding ego)."

No one is completely altruistic, and no one is completely selfish. We are a mixture of both natures. Our greatest hope to stem the tide of violence is to look for the impulses of selfishness, learn about how they become passed on and teach people how to deal with the conflicts that arise because of them.

The good news is that we are already doing this work.

Take, the example of a UU retreat at a UU summer camp in the northwest during the early 80's when the nuclear freeze campaign was an urgent concern for many. Word got out that a nuclear submarine was coming into port nearby. Several at the conference were eager to go and demonstrate. 'Live the faith,' as it were. They suggested that the conference activities be rearranged so that the whole camp could go.

The whole camp, however, didn't want to go. Several of the people at the conference were retired or active military, or worked in the defense industry. A strong defense capability ensures world peace, they said; they were in full support of our country's national military policy. Many others in attendance had come to enjoy and benefit from the conference and didn't want to give up a day's planned activity—especially not if it was going to generate conflict. Tempers flared. Both looked to the other side to compromise.

After much discussion it was decided that the conference would go on and that those who wanted to march instead could do so. The organizers made their posters and got ready. And though the day of the protest turned out to be nasty all around - cold driving rain and icy winds – the stalwart demonstrators, held up their signs, stood together at the roadside and sang their hearts out for peace.

This whole thing could have turned out very ugly, with animosities that grew over time and created rifts and separated former friends. But when those stubborn, soggy demonstrators got back to the camp, they found that the activity plan had been modified after all. The lodge was redolent with the smell of cocoa and fresh-baked cookies. There was a fire in the fireplace. The pro-military folks had blankets and towels, dry sweatshirts and slippers and socks all ready for them, and welcomed them back with hugs and affection.

I tell this because it is an example of how a group, in one short period of conflict, went from eros (where the demonstrators wanted everyone to go march and sacrifice the plans of the other participants); to philia (where they both got to do what they wanted and share the sacrifice); to agape (where one side sacrificed for the greater whole).

Just as each one of us once was a child and once used child-like ways to get needs met, so does all violence and war begin at the most basic level of conflict. The impulse to violence ends when we learn to

fight the real enmity within us
Instead of the imagined enemies around us
Struggle to understand
Instead of undermine
Develop our wisdom
Instead of our weaponry
And set our sights on how to dignify
Instead of how to demonize

Two opportunities stand before us in this work toward peace. The first is obvious. You are already involved in the work. And that is the peace-building in this congregation.

Notice, I didn't say 'peace-keeping,' which is term meaning 'to keep warring factions separate.' I didn't even say 'peace-making' which refers to 'mediating and resolving conflicts by the mutual commitment and sacrifice of parties involved.' I said, 'peace-building' which means 'to learn and teach the method of listening, understanding and giving ourselves to the greater good.' The Committee on Ministry is working

toward introducing some opportunities for us to participate in dialogues which help us learn this. If any of these past dates register with you, or if you want to have anything to say about future dates, I hope you will attend.

The second way is to support legislation toward creating a national Department of Peace. One of the reasons we have settled for, and accepted the atrocities of violence and war, is that we have been *reactive* in our efforts toward *peace-keeping* and *peace-making* instead of *proactive* in our efforts toward *peace-building*.

A department of peace would mean that a secretary of peace would be in the executive cabinet to offer the president, secretaries of defense and state, perspectives on proposed initiatives which affect domestic and foreign peace. It would establish a US Peace academy in addition to our military academies that would teach basic communication and conflict resolution skills to our citizenry and our leaders. And perhaps the best outcome of such a department is that it would help us generate new ideas and employ greater imagination for the world's oldest problem. It is a concept that addresses the idea that, when all you work with are hammers, the whole world looks like it needs to be nailed.

There is a story I heard from Meg Riley, director of our Washington office who told about recently going to a high school to see a series of student-written plays. The teachers had provided boxes of props to inspire the students. One class had been allowed to use the prop of a gun if they wanted; the other had not. In the class that had been allowed to use the gun, every single play, probably six of them, concluded with someone being shot. It almost became comical how that gun defined the limits of adolescent imagination in plays that otherwise bore no resemblance to each other. In the class without a gun, the endings were much more varied and interesting. This was not a sociological experiment, simply class plays, and no one but Meg seemed interested in what that gun did to youths' imaginations. But it was powerful. Multiply a gun into an army, and you can certainly see the epic crumbling of imagination.

Four years ago today, we were all part of a date. What was to be a turning point. A time with the power and authority to change us. And call us to rise up and change the times. Many of us prayed for such change. Some of us got what we wanted. Most, in the long run, didn't.

I would like, today, to amend my prayer four years ago. I hope, with a more responsible version than I offered the first time.

God,

Forgive us our ignorance that has us believe you are on 'our side' or that you will save us. Help us find the wisdom and conviction to save ourselves. Help us keep violence from being written into our genetic code by taking it seriously when it is written into our history. Remind us that even if we are fortunate enough to look back on this date – or live through future dates – without someone we truly loved being taken, it only means we haven't extended ourselves far enough into the world. Help us, in the aftermath of tragedy, to tell the difference between calmness and complacency. Grant us the insight to see that, no matter how great the principles that our individual countries were founded on, they need to be amended when they have forgotten to include the voice of peace. And, most of all, help us, in these fierce and fearful times, not to let our imaginations get the best of us – but for us to employ the best of our imaginations.

To the Glory of Life.

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