

Calendars of Peace
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Yes, it begins with us...
Peace... peace...
It begins with us...

Shouting will not bring peace...
Hateful slogans and condescending stereotypes will not bring peace...
“Us” and “Them” will not bring peace...

A peaceful heart can bring peace...
Words that unite rather than divide can bring peace...
Daily re-commitment to kindness, compassion, understanding...
 can bring peace...
Work for justice can bring peace.

Yes, it begins with us...
May we rediscover that place of peace within, that quiet, that center, that love...

Readings

from the Gospel of Matthew 5:42-43

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

from the Koran, Sura 49

O humankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know and deal with each other in kindness (not that you may despise each other).

from *A Religion for One World* by Rev. Kenneth Patton (1964)

Just as we get a cozy feeling about the people who live on the same block, so we should have this sense of neighborly identification with those who live with us on earth. It is such a tiny place in such a vast universe.

When will we have the same emotions about “our world” as we have about “our native land”? What could be any more our native land than the earth itself? What could be any more our fatherland, our motherland? This *is* one world, *our* world.

We have always been but one humanity. We still are... Our great problem is, and has been for ages, how to live with each other, with our fellow human beings. Religion in its core is what Jesus and Buddha and Laotze and all the other sages have declared it to be: loving one another.

How can we fail, knowing the human situation? Yet we know that we have failed and can fail again. We have no special guarantee against disaster, whether from the elements without or from the human storms within...

We can say the words: This is one world; you are one humanity. Live therefore in peace, and till the garden of the earth, and make your days and the years of your children a glad time upon the earth. We can say it, but will they listen? Will they respond? Will they *know*? Will they, and in time?

Sermon

One of my favorite passages from the Bible are the words we heard earlier, words Pete Seeger turned into the song “Turn, Turn, Turn.”

Yet part of me wants to argue with the message. Yes, of course a time to sow and a time to reap, a time to be born and a time to die... but must there be a time to kill... must there be a time of war?

Pete ends that particular verse by poignantly adding his own six words after “a time of peace.” He sings “I swear it’s not too late.”

All this suggests the enduring question: Will there always be war? Is it simply built into our genetic makeup? An inevitable result of our reptilian brain’s response when confronted with competition for scarce resources, conflicting ideologies, differences in culture or religion, hunger of some for power and control? So inevitable that even the great religions have again and again been used to justify violence and war.

In the shadow of all of this, *can* we harness our baser impulses through some combination as yet not fully realized of political arrangements and spiritual attainments? After all, the Christianity which cursed humanity with the Crusades also blessed humanity with Jesus’ sublime teachings of peace, blessed humanity with St. Francis, with Martin Luther King, Jr.. Just as the Islam which curses humanity with suicide bombers and radical jihad has also blessed humanity with Rumi and all the great Sufi mystics and teachers of peace.

We *do* have the tools of peace, both spiritual and political. So I would choose the possibility of some combination of political arrangements and spiritual attainments – the checks and balances of democracy yoked to wisdom and love. Maybe possible.

Though truly... I don’t know. After all, our track record isn’t great.

Paraphrasing Pete again, “*Will* we ever learn?”

Will there always be a “time for war”? Even sometimes necessary wars, so-called just wars? Is enduring peace a pipe-dream, a fantasy?

For decades, like many of you, I’ve marched, stood in vigil, written letters for peace, preached about peace, the possibility of peace, pathways to peace.

And still no peace!

But *is* it all hopeless? Are so-called realists right that war is simply part of who we are as human beings?

Well, actually these are questions we cannot answer with any certainty whatsoever. And in any case, if a propensity to violence and war is somehow written into our genes... well, so is non-violence and peace.

So... what then? What are we to do? How are we to proceed? To live?

Let me proceed this morning with the intended irony of my sermon title: “Calendars of Peace.” It is, after all, so poignant to seek to stop war for just one day or one week or even one month as we humans sometimes try to do with truces and cease fires for one or another purpose or occasion.

The famous spontaneous Christmas Truce during the first winter of World War I was beautiful while it lasted, English and Germans playing soccer in between the trenches, singing Christmas carols back and forth.

But then the generals put an end to it and the carnage continued.

And how often have combatants proposed temporary truces on other Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist holy days... only to have the truce shattered as the clock turns to mark the end of the day or more often before the clock turns.

Sometimes as we’ve seen the violence is worse than ever on these days of so-called truce!

Right now we are in the midst of the month of Ramadan on the Muslim calendar. Each year there are some who urge an end or reduction to hostilities in Iraq and elsewhere during Ramadan... but alas...

And today is Peace Day, the United Nations declared International Day of Peace, celebrated since 1982 to coincide with the opening of the General Assembly, and set for this date, September 21, in 2002 – declared as a day to commemorate and strengthen ideals of peace “both within and among all nations and peoples.”

Citizens of all nations are encouraged on each Peace Day to build peace in their families and communities. Nations are encouraged to at the very least observe a global cease fire on this day of peace, refrain from war-making for at least one day.

So, yet another day on our calendars of peace. And yet another day on which violence and wars continue. For I’m guessing – just guessing mind you – that the day is being imperfectly observed.

(Though remarkably, NATO and the Taliban have committed themselves to observing a Peace Day truce!)

In any case, what is a day or a season when put side by side with the many days and many seasons of war?

Well, maybe it *is* a place to begin. To begin again. Always, every day to begin again to build what the United Nations calls “cultures of peace.”

Sociologist Elise Boulding wrote a book by that name several years ago that I wish was far more widely known than it is:

Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History.

And the heart of her message comes early, page fifteen, following her detailing the ways in which history is too-often told through the lens of one war after another. She then reminds us that in spite of all the wars, most of the time in most places the dailiness of life goes on, “the common round from dawn to dawn that sustains human existence.” She reminds us that in spite of war after war on page after page of the history books “most human activity revolves around raising and feeding families, organizing the work of production, solving problems and meeting human needs, interspersed with times of feasting and celebration, of human creativity in poetry, song, dance, and art.”

She reminds us, in short, of the cultures of peace which already exist and have always existed.

Now, Boulding, who published her book eight years ago, does not understate the grave dangers we face in this 21st century when it comes to our continued human penchant to use violence on a mass scale to try to solve our problems. But she also reminds us in great detail of the wide variety of efforts on the planet today to create and expand cultures of peace: the United Nations itself as well as the huge number of non-governmental organizations devoted to development, health, justice, the environment, as well as direct conflict resolution and peace-making.

Our own Unitarian Universalist Association, recently having passed a statement of conscience on peacemaking – not pacifism by the way, but peacemaking – is part of our shared efforts to grow and nurture widening cultures of peace... as are the efforts of other faith-centered groups around the globe.

Here’s how I sometimes think of it. At any given moment... the vast majority of people and nations around our beautiful earth... are at peace. Not perfection, not utopia, but more or less at peace, going about our lives, as Boulding puts it, feeding and caring for our families, producing, solving problems, creating the beauties of poetry and music and art.

When we have conflicts, interpersonally or internationally, more often than not we do solve them non-violently.

So... it is not that we don’t know how to make peace, how to build peace. We simply (simply!) need to expand the cultures of peace that already exist. To keep at it in other words – not just one day of peace or season of peace – but (of course!) every day.

Every day Peace Day, every day a time for *this* holy purpose.

This year, as you know, the International Day of Peace has fallen during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, this month honored by Muslims by fasting from dawn to dusk each day, and then often by sharing festive meals with family and friends at the end of the day. The fast is meant to turn the attention of the worshiper away from the mundane concerns that ordinarily hold most of our attention and toward the spiritual and ethical dimensions of our lives – toward worship of God, of Allah, as a Muslim would express it, toward our human efforts to live ethical lives of service, as we all – Muslims and non-Muslims, believers and non-believers – might put it. Increased charitable giving is encouraged during Ramadan. Living peacefully one with another is expected.

Well, knowing all this I chose the well-known passage from the Koran for one of our first readings. And from our hymnbook I chose the lines from the 13th century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Saadi (though in a slightly different translation) to print at the top of the order of worship.

The human race is a single being
Created from one jewel.
If one member is struck
All must feel the blow.
Only someone who cares for the pain of others
Can truly be called human.

When I did an internet search to learn more about this Muslim poet Saadi I learned first that these words of his are engraved on the entrance to the Hall of Nations at the United Nations headquarters in New York. How wonderful and appropriate for today is *that!*

Then I learned that Saadi was born and died in the Persian (now Iranian) city of Shiraz. I learned too that for much of his life he traveled the world: Syria, Egypt, Iraq, India, Central Asia – a kind of world citizen. He returned to the city of his birth late in his long life (he lived to the age of 101), a respected and beloved figure. In the early 1950s a new quite beautiful tomb was built in Shiraz to honor this great man.

As my search continued I discovered that a generation later the immortal Muslim poet and mystic Hafez was born and lived his life also in Shiraz – Hafez who wrote:

Even after all this time,
the sun never says to the earth,
"You owe me."
Look what happens with a love like that.
It lights the whole sky.

“A love like that...” Of course the poet was suggesting that *we* could have “a love like that” which “lights the whole sky.”

Well, I could go on about Persian poets, Sufi poets, and then before long I’d be talking about and quoting Rumi, same neck of the woods: “All religions, all this singing, one song...”

Well, in all this this morning my point is simple.

Each one of us has a part to play in lengthening the calendar of peace and in building and strengthening cultures of peace – in our hearts first, then among those closest to us, then with everyone we meet every day, then through our political choices and votes, through our memberships in one or another organization devoted to peace and justice and sustainability. (Even learning about the poets of a nation that our leaders consider to be our enemy might help a bit.)

Yes, each one of us can become *more* peaceful, can become a more intentional and better peacemaker, can learn more effectively to measure our words and deeds in the service of peace and understanding. Yes, each one of us has a part to play.

We may not all consider ourselves to be pacifists. Nor need we in order to be united in our desire to reduce if not end the violence and war which has plagued

humanity for too long, for too long, and which in our era of nuclear weapons threatens to end the human story altogether. (Separated as most of us are from the devastation and loss of war, it might be too easy to fail to understand just how brutal and de-humanizing is war... we must learn to be deeply mindful of this brutality to both body and spirit.)

Will our efforts to grow peace in our hearts and in our lives all add up to a world at peace – some day... before its too late?

Can't know the answer to that question.

But our efforts surely can't hurt! And this is, after all, how we would choose to live isn't it, regardless of what the future might hold: Every day upon waking asking ourselves (as we might wish our leaders asked themselves): How might I contribute to creating more peace today?

For this, to choose to live like this... (idealism informing realism we might say, and realism informing idealism...) it is never too late. And maybe someday political arrangements and spiritual attainments *will* give us at least more peace than we see today.

It certainly won't happen if we give up.

Peace, friends. Peace.

Benediction

May we go forth with peace in our hearts

And a kind word on our lips;

May we go forth in the spirit of love,

Knowing we are of one human family, one world, one life,

So may it be.