

The Preacher, the President, and Peace

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Meditation

With heavy hearts this week we come into this house.
Hearts heavy with the grief of our brothers and sisters in Haiti,
and with so many of their families and friends in and around Boston.

Our hearts break, open, yearn to help, yearn to heal, yearn to be of use...

In these quiet moments, let us hold the people of Haiti in our broken hearts...

Let us hold them with love, with prayers for help and healing...

That we may come to know that is it a broken heart which is an open heart,
Which becomes a helping heart moving helping hands...

May we pause in the spirit of love. Center in the spirit of love. Pray in the spirit of love.

Readings

Excerpts from the Nobel Peace Prize lecture given by Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1964:

...man's proneness to engage in war is still a fact. But wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons eliminated even the possibility that war may serve as a negative good.

(But) It is not enough to say "We must not wage war." It's necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but on the positive affirmation of peace.

This means that more and more our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. We must now give an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole...

Love is the key to the solution of the problems of the world.

Here and there an individual or group dares to love, and rises to the majestic heights of moral maturity. So in a real sense this is a great time to be alive. Therefore, I am not yet discouraged about the future.

...every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark confused world the kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men.

Excerpts from the Nobel Peace Prize lecture given by Barack Obama in 2009:

We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations – acting individually or in concert – will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.

As a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation... I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world.

So yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace. And yet this truth must coexist with another – that no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy.

So part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths – that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly. Concretely, we must direct our effort to the task that President Kennedy called for long ago. “Let us focus,” he said, “on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution in human institutions.”

...we do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected.... The non-violence practiced by men like Gandhi and King may not have been practical or possible in every circumstance, but the love that they preached... must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey.

Sermon

I prepared this sermon in a comfortable study, with lights and warmth and a computer and a cell phone in my pocket... just before dinner and then a warm bed.

And as I did I was – as I still am, as we all are – poignantly aware of how different life is in Haiti right now.

Of course we don't need the devastation of an earthquake to make the point. Bring to mind instead a woman sleeping in a doorway in Boston, or a child shot on the streets of any of America's cities, or the families living in fear of the next bombing in Iraq or Afghanistan... or for that matter life for so many in Haiti, the poorest country in the Americas, even before the earthquake compounded their misery.

How *are* we to live in the midst of such stark contrast of comfort and suffering?

Early Monday morning two buses drove past hundreds of us in front of Town Hall, buses taking the men and women of the Hingham National Guard on their first leg to Iraq... and then we went back home as the sun rose golden over the snow covered fields and woods of our beautiful town.

How *are* we to live in the midst of such contrasts?

The short – though not entirely satisfying – answer is to do what we can. To write the checks we are able to write. To send emails to elected officials demanding they do more in service of justice and the alleviation of poverty and the creating of a more peaceful and sustainable world.

But part of me wants to ship off somewhere to offer food to the hungry *with my own hands*, build homes for the homeless *with my own hands*, bring medicine to the ill *with my own hands*, build solar panels and wind mills...

Probably I will stay where I am, though, painfully mindful of the stark contrasts of our lives, yet doing at least something with my own checkbook and emails and hands close to home... and at Old Ship seeking ways to more effectively *together* serve life and our missions of justice and peace and sustainability.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his “Letters to a Young Poet,” wrote that we should “live the questions” of our lives. Live the questions, let the questions work inside you, not just in your mind, but in your heart, your soul. And then, as Rilke said, you might someday live into the answer.

He didn’t mean to wait until you had the answers to all your questions before you *lived*. Live *with* and *in* the questions.

“How are we to live in the midst of life’s stark contrasts?” seems to me to be a pretty important and central question in which to live.

And let’s be clear about this: The earthquake in Haiti, even as it tragically, horrifically changes everything about the lives of millions, changes *nothing* about the bare facts of the human condition. Instead, it is simply yet another reminder of how things have always been, for some of us some of the time – pain, suffering, even monumental natural disasters, often exacerbated by human selfishness and greed.

Can we improve the overall state of things? I hope so. Improvements in human rights during this past century – civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights – can be noted.

But however much we might be lulled by improvements noted, as well as by hot tea, a full bowl of food, and a warm bed – lulled into thinking that everything is basically okay, the reality is that suffering is at least part of the human condition – some of it in the form of natural disasters, some of it caused by human callousness, meanness, and greed.

So I sometimes despair as to whether we can make a better world, whether we can fend off the worst of climate change, whether we can end war... yet... I do know that I can try to be more present, more loving, more helpful in relation to each human being and in relation to the issues and realities that most pull at my heart.

This week I’ve read and have been pondering two famous speeches given forty-five years apart from one another, yet by two men whose lives are inextricably bound together, each of whom I believe lived/lives this question of how we are to live in the midst of life’s stark contrasts: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and President Barack Obama – who rightly acknowledges that without Dr. King and his generation of women and men who fought nonviolently for civil rights... there would be no *President* Obama.

Now, I don’t recall whether the award to Dr. King was controversial at the time or not. I would imagine that his opponents – and he had many – didn’t think any more of the prize than they did of him; particularly when he broadened his concern from civil rights narrowly understood to poverty and then to the Vietnam War and the arms race.

We do know that the awarding of the prize to our president was indeed controversial, and that even his supporters were left shaking their heads. The president himself metaphorically shook his head at the outset of his Nobel Lecture. He noted the controversy, and agreed that in comparison to “the giants of history who’ve received this prize – Schweitzer and King; Marshall and Mandela – my accomplishments are slight.”

Acknowledged too that “perhaps the most profound issue surrounding my receipt of this prize is the fact that I am the Commander-in-Chief of the military of a nation in the midst of two wars.”

Then President Obama presented his case – we heard the heart of it in the reading – which essentially boils down to this: Abhorrent and foolish and tragic as war is, war is sometimes still necessary in the service of the ends of security and justice and peace and to confront what he named as “evil” in the world. Indeed, he said that “we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.”

This even has he went on to quote Dr. King, who had said that “Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones.”

Well, you have to hand it to our president. He skirted none of the contradictions of his position in receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

He then talked more directly about peace, “a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual,” pointing out that this was the “insight that drove the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” For “if human rights are not protected, peace is a hollow promise.” Human rights, he said, which include economic rights and in our time confronting climate change which will increasingly affect those least able to adapt or respond.

Finally, speaking in language that echoed Dr. King, the president declared that we will only be able to move in the direction of greater peace and justice and equality if we continue to expand our “moral imagination,” based on an insistence that we are inextricably linked to one another, based on, as you heard in the reading, love as “the North Star that guides our journey.”

Quoting Dr. King again, he affirmed that we must reach for how we believe things *ought* to be, and not resign ourselves to the idea that a world of injustice and inequality and violence is how things must always be.

As for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Nobel Lecture. He said at the outset something that was true then as it is true today, that there is what he called a “spiritual and moral lag” in human affairs, that for all of our technical and economic progress there has not been a “proportionate growth of the soul.”

Having set this context King then focused on three major evils “which grow out of man’s ethical infantilism,” three problems linked to one another: “racial injustice, poverty, and war.”

He outlined the extraordinary progress in civil rights, progress which has largely continued since his time, even though still incomplete.

He then described the vastness of the problem of global poverty as a second great evil; yet though he said that “there is nothing new about poverty,” what is new is that we now “have the resources to get rid of it.” As he said we must. And still we must.

Then he addressed the question of the third great evil, which is war. It is clear, he says, that our “proneness to engage in war is still a fact.” But he then proclaimed, diverging here from our president, that at this moment in history “wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete.”

Just saying this is not enough, though, so King then outlined some of the positive things that must be done to build peace – much as President Obama did forty-five years later.

Finally, King, like Obama, concluded with love, love which “is the key to the solution of the problems of the world.”

Well... I am left with questions as I've pondered these two speeches, both of which are compelling intellectually and morally, and which indeed have much in common. Both affirm that we must be motivated and guided by love. Both affirm that only when justice and human rights and human needs are honored and met can we have genuine peace.

But the preacher declared war to be obsolete whereas the president says war, however tragic and foolish, is still sometimes morally necessary.

Would the preacher, Dr. King, have a different opinion today as we confront a stateless terrorist enemy? What do we think?

What would the preacher think of the president's escalation of troops in Afghanistan? What would the preacher think of drone attacks in Pakistan and elsewhere? What do we think?

Here's one thought: To begin with, no one becomes president of the United States on a pacifist platform. We should hardly be surprised that this president like every American president before him is employing military force in the service of what he believes to be the national interest.

But this doesn't mean we ought not speak up and speak out if speaking up and out we feel we must.

For every president needs to hear other voices – needs to hear the voices of Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Dalai Lama, of you and me if we disagree with his military policies. Needs to hear the message within the work of Greg Mortensen, building schools for girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan even in the midst of war, building schools which means building peace.

And if we hope that someday a war without war is possible, as I surely do (I reject the defeatist attitude that war will always be with us) then *we* need to *raise* our voices, however inarticulate our voices might be in the particulars, our voices saying “no” to war, declaring there must be a better way, another way, indeed there *is* another way, a better way, calling to begin with for at least some of the billions, the trillions of dollars supporting the largest military in the world ever – larger than the rest of the world *combined* – to be redirected to growing more food, to developing alternative sources of energy, to building schools and hospitals, to peacemaking instead of war-making.

I believe that most hearts are good hearts, don't you? We see this whenever disaster strikes. Time after time the paradox holds that the worst disasters bring out the best in human nature.

“Just tell me how to help!” we say “and I'll help.” And we mean it.

Why then can't we harness that *heart* energy in the service of justice and peace and a sustainable world *before* the next disaster strikes? Can't we take our eyes off the trivial entertainments of our time long enough to help create a better world, using peaceful means to achieve peaceful ends?

Someone tell me why not. Someone tell me that this isn't what Martin Luther King, Jr. would be asking of us today – yes of course in relation to our brothers and sisters in Haiti... but yes too in relation to the entire human family, what King called in his Nobel Lecture the World House of many peoples and cultures and religions, and yes too in the midst of all the painful and stark contrasts of our lives, of the human condition, of meanness and greed.

Because part of the human condition also is that we *do* have moral imaginations, we *do* know how to love, we do know how to move the compassion of our hearts into the work of our hands to make a more peaceful world.

So may it be.

