

Why Not Peace?

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
November 11, 2018
100th anniversary of the WWI Armistice

Readings

“In Flanders Fields” – by John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

from Matthew, chapter 5 (trans. by Stephen Mitchell)

You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor. But I tell you love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the wicked and on the good, and sends rain to the righteous and the unrighteous.

For if you love only those who love you, what credit is that to you: don't even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you do good only to those who do good to you: don't even the Gentiles do the same? But love your enemies, and give, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind even to the ungrateful and the wicked. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Sermon

We heard the poet, speaking in the voice of the dead in Flanders Fields, invite us to “Take up our quarrel with the foe” to not “break faith” with the those who had died in battle.

This certainly sounds like an invitation to continue the battle... so that the dead, as it is often put, shall not have died in vain.

Well, this morning I would like to invite an alternate reading of these lines. Could we not “take up the quarrel with the foe” by means other than war? Could we not keep faith with the dead, indeed all the better, by peaceful means towards peaceful ends?

During the first few years we were here in Hingham there were still a few World War I veterans at Veteran’s Day ceremonies and in the Memorial Day parade.

A few of you remember Wilmon Brewer who was a World War I veteran, though I can’t recall if he was in the parades or not. Dr. Brewer died some twenty or so years ago, over 100 – he might have been the last WWI vet in Hingham.

Any veterans of that war are now gone, as we now witness the slow and steady passing of the World War II generation. Next to leave this mortal coil will be the last of the Korean War vets, in a few decades the Vietnam veterans... and on it will go for many decades hence... Iraq, Afghanistan...

Will it ever end? Will there ever come a time when there are no war veterans left... because no wars have been fought for a generation?

Why not peace?

Well, the first thing I’d say in response to that question is that there is already lots of peace going on; there always has been.

Think of it for a moment. Imagine if you will everything going on around this earth home of ours right this minute:

Millions of others in places of worship, praying, singing, preaching, listening, learning.

Others having breakfast... or lunch... or dinner depending on the time zone... many eating with family or perhaps having lunch or coffee with a friend or on their own.

Millions hard at work – in the fields, in offices, in factories. Others playing or resting.

And of course maybe a quarter or so of the world’s human beings sound asleep.

Yes, we know that at this same hour, millions are not eating a meal, in fact are hungry pretty much all the time. We know that all too many do not have adequate or any shelter, and all too many are living in fear of violence in their own homes or in the streets or on the battlefields of wars that are indeed still raging.

Even so, a complete perspective on the human condition at this moment in time includes more peace than war, more full stomachs than empty ones, more who have homes than who do not, and far more who are living peacefully with their neighbors than those who are not.

Includes much, in short, to build on... to grow from.

For none of this is to say that the amount of peace in the world is peace enough, or that there is enough human well-being.

Rather, my point is that we human beings do know how to live in peace, in fact are living in peace most of the time. This means that the challenge is not to invent peace, but to grow more peace from the foundations we already have.

To grow peace beginning in our own hearts and lives:

Which begins with each one of us nurturing a core insight and experience common to every religious or spiritual tradition:

That there is no such thing as an isolated, completely separate individual; that, rather, we are part of a thoroughly interwoven web of connection among all human beings, among all beings. Christians call this the Body of Christ, Hindus the Net of Indra, the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh calls this the reality of inter-being.

Then we heed the universal ethical teaching that grows from this universal and undeniable insight, namely the Golden Rule, variously expressed – in Jewish, Christian, Confucian, Buddhist... – but with the same essential meaning: Treat others as you

would wish to be treated; and conversely don't do to others what you would not want done to you.

Because we *are* each other.

Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye puts the rule this way in one of her poems:

“Let's change places,” the teenagers said.
“For a week, I'll be you and you be me.”
Knowing if they did, they could never fight again.

Amen to that.

So, we can nourish this experience of oneness and interrelationship in our individual hearts and lives, and then we have a rule which has grown from that experience to apply to our interpersonal relationships, a rule which certainly helps to grow peace on these relatively intimate scales of our lives.

Next we grow peace in widening circles.

Growing peace through the many institutions and communities of daily living, all the ways we interact following that Golden Rule: from the playground to places of business and work, in our religious congregations and communities, town meetings, tribal councils, legislatures, United Nations forums.

And in the midst of conflict applying that core insight of interdependence and oneness along with the essence of the Golden Rule to methods of conflict resolution: mediation, negotiation, nonviolent resistance to injustice in any of a hundred forms – from marches and boycotts to strikes and civil disobedience.

And all this it really does ripple, really does grow peace, truly is the foundation for building peace, more peace.

Thoreau, near the end of *Walden* wrote “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

So you might say that visions of universal peace, whether in our religious traditions and myths or in literary utopias, have been humanity's castles in the air for thousands of years. But not only are these castle visions of peace “work” that has never been lost; humans have also, in fits and starts and always, been putting foundations under them for a long time: as I've been saying this morning, foundations of family and civil society, and foundations of peacemaking in the midst of conflict that can lead to ever more enduring peace.

Now, the twentieth century is often described as one of the bloodiest centuries in human history, with the two world wars at the very center of this brutal era, and with all too many other military conflicts as well.

Where were those foundations of peace-making?

Well, something else was going on during the same hundred years: the evolution of sophisticated methods of non-violent conflict resolution, resistance, and social change: from Gandhi's non-violent struggle for self-rule in India to the Solidarity movement in Poland and velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia leading to the almost entirely peaceful collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union; from the civil rights movement in our own nation to the peaceful end of apartheid in South Africa, the restoration of democracy in the Philippines, and much more, on scales large and small.

Gandhi, as James Carroll noted in his book *House of War*, affirmed that on September 11, 1906, when men of Indian descent in South Africa took an oath not to

obey new laws that would make them second-class citizens, “a new principle” had entered human history. For it was the beginning of what Gandhi came to call *satyagraha* – “truth force” – his method of non-violent resistance to injustice and oppression which, Carroll wrote, “would generate the great counterstory” of nonviolence during the most violent century in history, a parallel and powerful stream.

Gandhi, not incidentally, was building on an already long lineage and foundation. He traced the roots of his theory and practice of nonviolent resistance as far back as his beloved *Bhagavad Gita* and to the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus. He also had been inspired by New England’s own Henry David Thoreau (also a reader of the *Gita* and the Sermon on the Mount) who after spending a night in jail for refusing to pay taxes to support the immoral Mexican war and the abhorrent institution of slavery, penned his essay “On Civil Disobedience” - an essay which inspired not only Gandhi, but Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others.

So, yes, in so many ways there is and always has been a powerful stream, a river, of history other than the river of war and violence.

And every day we, individually and collectively, can choose which river we will join, which side we will be on – from, as I’ve said, our daily mundane interactions one with another to how we are in the midst of struggle and conflict.

For peace really does begin with us, as the song says. Will we harden our hearts toward those we consider our “enemies” – whether personal or political? Or will we, while never relinquishing our core values, while continuing to work for justice, open our hearts even to our enemies?

This was the message of the reading we heard earlier, Jesus enjoining us to love our enemies.

Love our enemies? Those who curse us? Mistreat us?

How can we do that?

Well, if you think “love” is too strong a word here, consider that the “love” Jesus was talking about is of course not about a romantic feeling, but about behavior. In this Jesus was drawing upon ancient Jewish teachings having to do with helping your enemies, feeding them if they are hungry, bringing a lost ox back to them, and so forth – all loving behaviors sometimes in spite of how we might be feeling, and all behaviors that are conducive to peace-making.

After all, we serve meals at Father Bill’s without asking for political opinions or affiliations.

And if a neighbor is grieving we’ll bring a casserole or plate of cookies even if we haven’t resolved the question of who should pay to have that dangerous tree taken down on the boundary line of our properties.

And I’m pretty sure if a Democratic member of congress suffers a grievous injury or loss, her or his Republican colleagues will be at the bedside or the funeral. And vice versa.

And so on.

I conclude this morning with a poem of Naomi Shihab Nye's with which many of you are familiar. It may at first seem a little off-topic, but to me this poem, "Red Brocade," is another metaphor for ways we can help to grow peace in our lives and in the world:

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.

Civil rights leader A.J. Muste said, "There is no way to peace; peace is the way." Which does not at all mean we stop speaking up for justice, for equal rights for all, for welcome to all, for sustainable ways of living. Quite the contrary, all this is part of the way to peace.

All this is what we're talking about – how to live, in our personal lives, our national politics, on the planet.

So that perhaps someday no more Flanders Fields, no more monuments to war, no more war.

Yes, peace as the best way to keep faith with the fallen.
Why not peace?

So may it be.