Judgments Inexorable

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Readings

Isaiah 2:3-5

> Many peoples will come and say,
>
> Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
> to the temple of the God of Jacob.
> He will teach us his ways,
> so that we may walk in his paths."
> The law will go out from Zion,
> the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
> He will judge between the nations
> and will settle disputes for many peoples.
> They will beat their swords into plowshares
> and their spears into pruning hooks.
> Nation will not take up sword against nation,
> nor will they train for war anymore.
>
> Come, descendants of Jacob,
> let us walk in the light of the LORD.

"Reconciliation" from *Drum-Taps* by Walt Whitman

> Word over all, beautiful as the sky!
> Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage,
> must in time be utterly lost;
> That the hands of the sisters Death and Night,
> incessantly softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world:
> …For my enemy is dead – a man divine as myself is dead;
> I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin – I draw near;
> I bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

Sermon

In the summer of 1865 a woman named Mary Dunbar Williams of Winchester, Virginia, organized a group of women to give proper burial to Confederate dead whose bodies were found in the countryside, and then to decorate those graves annually. So-called "Ladies Memorial Associations" sprung up all over the south in the years immediately following the Civil War with this purpose of encouraging this practice of decorating graves of the fallen as a way of honoring the sacrifices made for the southern cause.

Then in 1868 General John Logan of the Union veteran's organization the Grand Army of the Republic called for a nationwide observance of what had come to be known

as Decoration Day, and what eventually was named Memorial Day. And now, as we know, on Memorial Day we honor as well American war dead from all the wars before and since the Civil War.

And the wars, I hardly need remind us, continue.

Which means that Walt Whitman's Civil War poems have more than historical relevance to us still today.

For example… speaking in the voice of the divine of many names, Whitman wrote during the Civil War:

> …let none expect mercy – Have the seasons, gravitation, the appointed days, mercy? – No more have I;
> But as the seasons, and gravitation – and as all the appointed days, that forgive not,
> I dispense from this side judgments inexorable, without the least remorse.

"Judgments inexorable" – For wars, like everything else, have their causes and have their effects; there is no escaping "judgments inexorable" – only, we can hope, learning and perhaps changing.

Whitman's Civil War poems were published in a single volume not long after the end of the war (which he most often called not the Civil War, but the Union War). And as was frequently the case, he was not his own best editor. These poems which he collected into an edition titled *Drum-Taps* are, as with all the poems of *Leaves of Grass*, of dramatically uneven quality. But putting questions of quality aside, the *Drum-Taps* poems reflect Whitman's (and perhaps our own) mixed and shifting perspectives on the Civil War (and to a degree on all war).

The original edition opens with a triumphalist poem describing the mustering of troops in Manhattan (which he called "Mannahatta"), which included these lines:

> War! an arm'd race is advancing! – the welcome for battle – no turning away;
> War! be it weeks, months, or years – an arm'd race is advancing to welcome it.
>
> Mannahatta a-march! – and it's O to sing it well!
> It's O for a manly life in the camp!
>
> …now you smile with joy, exulting old Mannahatta!

And from "Song of the Banner at Day Break":

> I hear and see not strips of cloth alone;
> I hear the tramp of armies, I hear the challenging sentry;
> I hear the jubilant shouts of millions of men – I hear LIBERTY!

And in "City of Ships":

> I chant and celebrate all that is yours – yet peace no more;
> In peace I chanted peace, but now the drum of war is mine;
> War, red war, is my song through your streets, O city!

It's not that Whitman loved war. But he believed at the outset, and to a significant extent always, that this war was at heart about high purposes, about the union, about democracy. He was anti-slavery to be sure, but he was not an abolitionist – he was wary of extremists on both sides of the divide (something like his hero Lincoln). So for Whitman, the poet of human unity, the Civil War was above all else to be the next chapter in the human march of that unity under the banner of liberty and democracy. Slavery would end – he had nothing good to say about it – but it would be not a primary purpose of the war; rather it would be a consequence of restoring and strengthening the union. Further, and yet more grandly in the Whitman way, in the end, in the distant future the poet had a vision ("Years of the Unperform'd"):

> Are all nations communing? is there going to be but one heart to the globe?
> Is humanity forming, en-masse? – for lo! tyrants tremble, crowns grow dim:…

Yet… all this triumphalism aside, the most poignant and powerful poems in *Drum-Taps* are those which chronicle with an often dispassionate yet at the same time deeply moving and loving spirit the sufferings of the soldiers, regardless of which side they had been on.

As you may know, mid-way through the war, Whitman, whose home was in Brooklyn, saw in the newspaper his brother George's name on a list of the wounded. So Whitman went to Washington, searching for his brother in the camps and hospitals. And though he eventually found George; and even better, found him healing from his wounds, Whitman remained in Washington for years, visiting the hospital wards almost daily, bringing gifts to the wounded soldiers, bringing his robust spirit to, as he believed, help them heal, writing on their behalf letters home to their loved ones, and sitting, keeping vigil, with the dying.

All of which birthed lines such as these, from "The Dresser" (later titled "The Wound Dresser"):

> I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep;
> But a day or two more – for see, the frame all wasted and sinking,
> And the yellow-blue countenance see.
> *
> I am faithful, I do not give out;
> The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
> These and more I dress with impassive hand – (yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)
> *
> The hurt and the wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
> I sit by the restless all the dark night – some are so young;
> Some suffer so much – I recall the experience sweet and sad;
> (Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
> Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

And there is his unutterably poignant poem "Come Up from the Fields Father" chronicling the unimaginable grief of father and mother as they learn of the death of their son in the war: "…in the midnight waking, weeping, longing…"

Well, 150 years later, we can still ask what *was* the Civil War about? Whitman biographer David Cavitch (commenting on lines from Whitman's immortal elegy to

Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd") suggests that for Whitman anyway, "No principle was redeemed, no caused upheld, no side victorious or defeated. It was a family tragedy, and the pity of it drowns all other issues. Everyone mourns; no one is blamed."

Others would of course, and quite understandably, perhaps rightly, argue that in fact a great principle *had been* redeemed and a great cause upheld. Speaking at a Memorial Day commemoration at Harvard's Memorial Hall in 1896, a northern veteran of the war, Susan's Quaker great-grandfather Norwood Penrose Hallowell, affirmed that we must not:

> …be caught by the sentimental sophistry that since there were heroism and fidelity to conviction on both sides, we may commemorate those virtues of both armies as American, and thereby try to forget that there were ever two armies or two causes. Fidelity to conviction is praiseworthy; but the conviction is sometimes very far from praiseworthy… Such monuments as Memorial Hall commemorate the valor and heroism that maintained certain principles, - justice, order, and liberty.

He went on:

> So long, then, as there is a distinction between the principles of liberty and those of slavery… may this Memorial Hall stand for those Harvard men who fought for liberty, and not for those who fought for slavery.

(And it is not insignificant to note that Hallowell went on in his remarks to honor also the courage of those Quakers, both north and south, who by virtue of principle had refused to fight.)

Matters of war and peace are so complex. Though a pacifist at heart, it is not for me an easy pacifism – anymore than it was for Quakers who chose whether or not to fight in the Civil War. Would I, like the Quaker Hallowell, have fought for higher principles than pacifism: the abolition of slavery and the universal cause of freedom and democracy for all? Yet… by ending slavery through war were we doomed to 150 years of the delayed promise of true freedom and genuine equality? Judgment inexorable of war even in a good cause?

And today – what about ISIS? Though war is always brutal, the brutality of ISIS seems to be of a different order of magnitude, a brutality that it seems must be confronted and beaten before it reaches even these shores, as some suggest it might if unaddressed.

But *is* it different in kind from the general brutality of war? And whether or not it is, whose battle should this be? And whose responsibility is the rise of ISIS anyway? A case can be made, after all, that the rise of ISIS is another of history's "judgments inexorable" – judgment on our engagement in the Iraq war to begin with, not to mention on the legacy of western imperialism in that part of the world that extends back decades if not centuries. If so, one might well query history as to what would be the "judgment inexorable" of our continued and even deepened involvement there with more troops, more airstrikes, more drones…

I don't have the answers to these questions. I don't know that anyone can be certain of answers to such questions. But I surely do believe we must be asking the questions.

Yet I am certain of this: that whatever the answers to such questions might be, a world of greater peace than we now know can only be achieved if there are those who, whatever else is going on in the world, are weaving and weaving and weaving again, however often the threads are broken, the tapestries of peace and unity.

It is in such spirit, after all, forty years after the end of the Vietnam War, we note the return to Vietnam of American veterans of that war to help with land-mine removal or other good works.

It was, we can note as we honor the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, in this spirit that then Senator John Kennedy connected with the captain of the destroyer that had sunk his PT boat – who he named "my late enemy and present friend" – and that he later invited the crew of that destroyer to his inauguration.

And it was in this spirit that Whitman penned one of his most poignant *Drum-Taps* poems, "Reconciliation" – which, as we heard earlier, ended with these words:

> …For my enemy is dead – a man divine as myself is dead;
> I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin – I draw near;
> I bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

In like spirit, in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" – Whitman's elegy to Lincoln – Whitman imagined placing a "sprig of lilac" on Lincoln's coffin as it passes, but then goes on:

> (Nor for you, for one, alone;
> Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring…)

So then, easy enough one might say to honor the war *dead* on all sides after the guns have gone silent and the political issues of a past time may have mostly been resolved or become irrelevant.

Harder to honor the living on all so-called sides.

But this is of course our task; and it is as much a spiritual as a political task, to find ways of honoring all the *living* by working for justice for all, from Ferguson to Fallujah, from Baltimore to Benghazi, by ensuring that all on our shared home have enough to eat and roofs over their heads; honoring the living everywhere by working for universal human rights; honoring the living planet itself by caring for this bounteous earth which gives and sustains our life and all life.

And in so honoring the living by deepening the bonds of life and love among us all, creating ever wider circles and neighborhoods and communities of peace, we would also with far more than flowers on a grave, be honoring the dead, honoring those who gave their lives in war, that the sentiments we heard earlier this morning would someday be realized: that the nations and peoples of the world would finally turn their swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.

So may it be. Amen.