

The Path of Peace – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, UU Church West, Brookfield, WI
09-21-08

FIRST READING

From Thich Nhat Hanh – “Living Buddha, Living Christ”

“We often think of peace as the absence of war, that if the powerful countries would reduce their weapons arsenals, we could have peace. But if we look deeply into the weapons, we see our own minds our prejudices, fears, and ignorance. Even if we transport all the bombs to the moon, the roots of war and the roots of the bombs are still here, in our hearts and minds, and sooner or later we will make new bombs. To work for peace is to uproot war from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women.”

SECOND READING

from the Dalai Lama

Peace, in the sense of the absence of war, is of little value to someone who is dying of hunger or cold. Peace can only last where human rights are respected, where the people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free.

SERMON -- The Path of Peace – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch (COPYRIGHT 2008)

How do we create peace in a world filled with conflict and fear?

Today, on this International Day of Peace as established by the United Nations, that is our worthy question.

The UN General Assembly, in 1981, passed a resolution declaring an International Day of Peace, and in 2001, they named September 21 as the day on which peace would be held high each year.

The resolution declares: "... that the International Day of Peace shall henceforth be observed as a day of global ceasefire and non-violence, an invitation to all nations and people to honour a cessation of hostilities for the duration of the Day..."

The resolution further “Invites all Member States, organizations of the United Nations system, and non-governmental organizations and individuals to commemorate, in an appropriate manner, the International Day of Peace, including through education and public awareness, and to cooperate with the United Nations in the establishment of the global ceasefire.”

Those of you who were here last Sunday may recall that at the end of my sermon on love, I asked you to take a moment to call to your conscious mind all the ways you had already shown love to others that morning, and also to think about all the ways in which love had been shown to you so far that day – including the ways in which you had shown love for yourself.

Today I find I am impressed by the UN Resolution's phrase, that nations and people shall "honor a cessation of hostilities for the duration of the day..." and thus I ask you now, in all seriousness, to consider this question: have you shown hostility to anyone today? Think about that for a moment....

Now, I am sure that some of you are thinking, "Well, I wonder what she means by hostility...?"

Yeah, I'd want to know that, too. So let me attempt a definition. Hostility is any act – large or small – which disrespects another person or group's inherent worth and dignity. So that means if you looked in the mirror this morning and thought to yourself, "I look terrible," you have not ceased from hostilities. If, as you were driving to church this morning, you called another driver a name, even silently, you have not ceased from hostilities. If you, like me, kicked your child's dirty socks down the basement stairs toward the washing machine, each kick accompanied by punitive thoughts, you have not ceased from hostility.

On one level, surely this is not what the UN resolution is talking about. It is meant to result in actions like those which took place on Friday in Afghanistan. In response to an announcement made by President Hamid Karzai, who ordered all international troops in his country to honor the International Day of Peace, NATO's top general in Afghanistan has ordered the 48,000 troops there to refrain from engaging in offensive operations until midnight tonight. Karzai also called on armed militant groups to observe the peace and "stop destroying their country." And as a result, even the Taliban has pledged to lay down weapons for a day. The separate U.S. forces in Afghanistan will also observe the peace, according to a coalition spokesman.

But is there a relationship between this kind of cease-fire and the absence of personal hostilities in any individual life?

Before I answer that question, let me say something about peace.

Peace is more than the absence of war. We know this, of course. I have always liked the meaning of peace as it is contained in the Hebrew word "shalom." Shalom comes from a root that means wholeness or completeness. In the Bible, the word shalom usually refers to a state of affairs, a state of well-being, tranquility, prosperity, and security. Peace isn't limited to the political realm, or the social one – it's a moral quality, an overarching, cosmic principle. And in the rabbinic texts, seeking shalom is both the obligation of the individual and the goal of many laws and social structures.

(Reference is http://www.tikkun.org/nsp/spiritual_visions/spiritualvision.2006-01-26.8706770293/view?searchterm=peace)

And so the answer to the question is yes. And so it is that we are here, today, together, pursuing the path of peace.

In our first reading, Thich Nhat Hanh said, “To work for peace is to uproot war from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women.”

I’ve heard it argued that we can never do this, because violence is a basic part of our human biology. We’re predators, after all, with binocular vision and sharp teeth designed by evolution to rend flesh. Debra Niehoff, a neuroscientist who studied 20 years of research on the brain and violence for her book, “The Biology of Violence,” would seem to agree, for she writes, “Aggression, the ability to use force, is a natural part of the behavior repertoire of living things. Aggression is important. If we couldn’t be aggressive, we couldn’t defend ourselves, or our children.” But she also says that the biggest lesson learned from brain research is “that violence, like all complex human behaviors, is the result of a developmental process, a lifelong interaction between the brain and the environment.” In other words, our native aggression need not be conditioned into violence, but when it has been, it can still be unlearned.

Peacemaking is in part, therefore, a process of unlearning violence. It’s a process of building trust, of building understanding across lines of difference, a devoted honoring of the humanity of another person, even when we disagree with them. Peacemaking is a discipline – it calls for cooperation and collaboration, not competition; for recognizing that there will be no true peace, no lasting sense of safety and security until all people have what they need to live.

Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, believes that part of unlearning violence and building peace involves using a particular kind of communication that emphasizes compassion as the motivation for action rather than fear, guilt, shame, blame, coercion, threat or justification for punishment. He gives the example of the Orang Asli people of Malaysia, whose culture is virtually free of violence. Rosenberg was called as a consultant to work with this tribe when logging companies began to invade their territory lured by the prospect of harvesting and selling the huge trees there. Rosenberg writes, “I’ll never forget what my translator was saying before we got started. He was going over how he was going to translate. He pointed out [that] his language has no verb “to be,” like [you are] good, [you are] bad, [you are] wrong, [you are] right. [Now,] You can’t classify people if you take away the verb to be. How are you going to insult people? You take away ninety percent of my vocabulary! So I [asked him] what are you going to say if I say “You’re selfish”?

And the translator replied, “It’s going to be hard -- I’d translate it like this: ‘Marshall says he sees you are taking care of your needs but not the needs of others.’” The translator then said, “In my language, you tell people what they are

doing and what you [would] like them to do differently. It would not occur to us to tell people what they are.” Rosenberg reports that the translator then paused and looked at him in all sincerity and asked, “Why would you ever call a person a name?” http://www.nwcompass.org/anger_and_domination.html

Why indeed? We label and name-call all the time – in the English language, “to be” is a frequently used verb form. We are encouraged to label both ourselves and others by the very structure of our language and by our culture of individualism – it’s the way we differentiate ourselves. We say, “I am this, but he is that.” Or “We are this kind of group, and they are some other kind...” It is in this moment of “us and them” that the potential to lose sight of peace arises.

Let me give you a very concrete example [“Obsession” DVD sent out to newspapers in “swing states” during the election... as a strategy to create divisiveness – “us and them” thinking....]

Non-violent communication, by contrast, builds peace because it focuses on our common humanity. A key aspect of it is that it asks us to understanding our own and others’ unmet needs.

Lynn Miller, a volunteer for the Mennonite Volunteer Service in the East Garfield Park neighborhood of Chicago tells a story that illustrates how this works.

Miller and his wife Linda were walking to church one day, when they were held up at gunpoint. A guy came up to them, pointed a gun at Lynn, and said, "Give me your money or I'll shoot."

Now the Millers had been warned that this might happen in that neighborhood, and Lynn says he had practiced a number of ways to respond non-violently. But the whole scenario unfolded so quickly, he didn't have time to think of any of them.

What Lynn Miller did do was to tell the man that he didn't have any money, but that if the man would come with them to the church they would try to find something for him. The man shouted again for Lynn to give him "the money," and Lynn repeated that he didn't have any and again invited the man to go into the church with them, where they would find something for him.

Then Linda Miller told the man that they needed to go visit a woman whose mother had just died, and the Millers both turned and started to walk down the narrow path that led to the back of the church. Halfway there, Lynn turned back and said, "Come on," and motioned for the man to follow them. The man just stood there for a minute, and then turned and ran away.

What really happened there? Were the Millers crazy to act as they did? Were they just lucky not to have been shot? Lynn Miller writes, “I think that giving our assailant an invitation that had his needs in mind is what made [the difference]. So now I am practicing something different for these occasions. Instead of

responses that are self-protecting and non-violent, now I am practicing responses that seek good for my assailant.” (Story found on the website of the Mennonite Volunteer Service.)

So how do we create peace? Clearly, we can begin with ourselves, paying attention to how we communicate, how we interpret others’ intentions, and offering those with whom we interact our compassionate listening and acknowledgment of their needs, and so on. We also know that we can create peace by working against war through peace vigils and other actions, as well as through letters and lobbying directed at our elected officials.

But on a larger scale, I recently finished a book that showed me a radical kind of peacemaking that is taking place, quietly, on the international level.

The book – which no doubt some of you have read as well – is called *Three Cups of Tea*. It is the story of a mountain-climber named Greg Mortenson, who survived a failed ascent of K2, one of the highest and most rugged peaks in Pakistan, indeed, one of the most difficult climbs in the world. After abandoning his climb, Mortensen found himself alone, lost and injured in the high valleys of Pakistan’s Baltistan region, and his life was saved by the hospitality of the chief of a village called Korphe.

While in Korphe, Mortensen experienced the beauty of the Balti culture, and the desperate poverty of the people. One morning while he was there recuperating, he watched the village girls attend school. They were sitting outside on the frosty ground, scratching out their lessons in mud with twigs. A girl approached him and asked, “Can you help me build a school?”

Mortensen returned to America determined to aid his hosts by raising funds to build a school in their village – and since 1996, he has helped build 63 schools for children not only in Pakistan but also in Afghanistan through the nonprofit group he founded called the Central Asia Institute.

How do these schools create peace? In part it is through the relationships of trust Mortenson has developed with the Pakistani and Afghani people, and the way in which he collaborates with them on their goals, not imposing a Western idea of progress or success upon them. But it is also that the schools equip students to succeed in the world and provide a much-needed balance to the extremist education promulgated by the Taliban and other violent groups. The Central Asia Institute encourages girls to attend school as well as boys, not only to learn valuable life skills, but also in part because their education will later help them teach tolerance to their children, ensuring a better future for everyone. As Mortenson says, “The real enemy is ignorance [for] ignorance breeds hatred.” He adds, “[And] working over there I’ve learned a few things. I’ve learned that terror doesn’t happen because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan or Afghanistan simply decide to hate us. It happens because children aren’t

being offered a bright enough future that they have a reason to choose life over death.” (“Three Cups of Tea,” p. 292)

You don’t have to go to Pakistan, either, to be part of this kind of radical peace-making. A week ago Thursday I participated in a protest vigil in Milwaukee that took place on North Avenue, yes, our very same North Avenue, only 113 blocks east of here – in the Walnut Way neighborhood. Linda Meurer, Becky Steffes, Ruth Heimler, my husband Young Kim, and several other UUs were there, too, along with about a hundred residents from the neighborhood and beyond.

Why were we protesting? Midwest Hospitality LLC, a corporation that specializes in fast food, had applied to the Board of Zoning Appeals in Milwaukee for a permit that would allow them to put a greasy fast-food chicken restaurant at the corner of 17th and North, and the neighbors didn’t want it. You see, low-income neighborhoods, in Milwaukee and many other cities, are often dramatically oversupplied with fast food outlets – instead of restaurants and businesses that offer healthier food options. Too often, those neighborhoods simply have no choice – the permits are applied for and approved and the outlets pop up before anybody can do anything about it (and taking up valuable real estate where a local, healthy business might have gone in.).

But not this time. The Walnut Way neighbors, led by Sharon and Larry Adams of the non-profit Walnut Way Conservation Corps have been building a coalition of support and solidarity aimed at empowering the residents to re-shape their neighborhood toward their own vision of greater health and wholeness.

What was I doing there? That’s not my neighborhood, after all, is it?

Oh, but it is. It’s my neighborhood, and it is yours, too.

It’s our neighborhood because the path of peace calls us to consciousness of the interdependence of our well being. It’s our neighborhood because the path of peace invites us to use our power to work together with others to meet the needs of all concerned. And a healthier Walnut Way neighborhood means a community of people whose lives are better, whose self-esteem is raised, a neighborhood of people who can better reach out to the surrounding areas, who can help push the tide that will lift all boats in our metropolitan area.

Today is the International Day of Peace. A day to cease from all hostilities, a day to educate ourselves about what it means to make peace – to build peace. So many of you, I know, are peacemakers! On this day – and for all the days to come – how will we follow the path of peace?

Shalom, Salaam. Shanti. and Amen