

**Dr. Paul Tellström**  
**Hiroshima Sunday**

**Irvine United Congregational Church**  
**August 5, 2007**

**Hebrew Testament** *Amos 5:24*  
**Gospel Reading** *Luke 6:43-45*

**word count: 1,728**

In March of 1942, Japanese-American men were taken out to remote places to build internment camps where their families would be sent to live a month later. General Dewitt of our armed military forces had charge of the evacuation. His motto was “A Jap is a Jap,” and soon camps were built with names like Manzanar, Tule Lake, Poston, and Gila River. There were ten camps built in the Southern California area.

Citizens were required to report to schools or churches with a minimum of luggage, (two suitcases in many cases) where they were transported to the Rose Bowl or Santa Anita Race Track, and taken there to these camps. At the camps were tar paper barracks, watchtowers, barbed wire, and the cruelty of the guards who thought of them as enemies of their own country because of their Japanese descent.

Today I want to take a look back through what I learned about being a Christian by being the pastor of Mt. Hollywood Congregational Church, a community that once walked the talk in the simple demonstration of how it viewed and acted on Christian principles. I also want to take this time to recognize where we were over sixty years ago when we remember the events of another war and how people lived out their faith when their world was threatened. How they were still compelled to live as Christians might help us as we struggle to understand how to act on our own principles today.

Hollywood Independent Church was a new Japanese-American church in 1942. Although banks were ready to help evacuees dispose of their property, many took advantage of their diminished position of power, and their belongings and property fetched as little as ten-cents on the dollar.

Mt. Hollywood had a friendship with this church. Their former minister went to Hiroshima to lead the Methodist church there, and the new minister bonded with Dr. Allan Hunter of Mt. Hollywood.

When the evacuation came, Mt. Hollywood took legal responsibility for their church. On the day of the evacuation, their members came with their possessions, far more than the two-suitcase limit, and stored them in the church. When their church was full, Mt. Hollywood built shelves in closets and cleared rooms for the belongings of people who were being unfairly removed from their homes and livelihoods.

A bus was waiting for them to board in front of Hollywood Independent. Inside, members of Mt. Hollywood were serving their sister church sandwiches and coffee, and there were many tears as these members left their church and homes in another church’s hands and left their last day of civilized life for an inhospitable atmosphere at the hands of their country.

Last year at this time, our sanctuary was filled with paper cranes and a koto player provided music. Two of the little girls that once stood outside of their church waiting to board the bus that would take them to a town of open, unfinished barracks in the desert, stood here at this pulpit and told you about their experiences. They spoke of the great difference it made to have a Christian community looking after them, providing them with friendship when they came back; even returning their church, their possessions and some homes to them, when most of the city shunned them. They hold no bitterness—only forgiveness for many and love and a sense of awe for those who showed them best of human nature acting in the worst of times.

During wartime and after, the church and its minister were known for a series of unpopular stands. Hate mail and threats came to Dr. Hunter and to the church.

Here at IUCC, your decision to become an Open and Affirming church and to be the most vocal church in opposition to an anti-gay measure in Irvine caused some threats to this church as well. The vote to become a Just-Peace church emboldened many here to support peace and justice organizations and to organize peace rallies. It is imperative to living out our Christian witness that even more will continue to unfold.

Then and now, the gospel message is preached in how it is lived. That message is of course, to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. How we respond calls up the words of Amos—“Let justice roll down like waters,” and justice rolls down in the way we live out our witness. And, in the words of Micah that you know so well. How we act in the world says the most about how we perceive what our faith is telling us—“You shall know them by their fruits,” or as Luke says, “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good.”

We are at the time when violent and deadly weapons will be at any madman’s disposal and where groups of unconscionable thugs try to set the world apart from one another in the hope of Armageddon in the name of God. Let us stand firmly on the side of peace and justice. Our young people have purchased a Peace Pole, and we are looking at ways to try to find a suitable place to have it show our community what we stand for. And for that we will need your help and blessing to make this symbol show what it is we stand for.

It’s easy to look back at what one church did for another during wartime and say, “Of course they did the only thing one could do.” But if this is true, then one wonders why there aren’t hundreds of stories like this one? In fact, at the time, the church was denounced for loving the enemy in wartime, and for being “too political.” I wonder, though, was this church “too political”? Are *we* too political when our actions in the world are born from the convictions of our hearts, and interpreted in how we live out our faith?

The blurring of politics and religion in faith-based initiatives and voter guides in churches leave many of us to wonder where the lines are drawn.

What about separation of church and state? It is true for example that voter guides should not be in churches—we are not allowed to take a position on any candidate, only on issues.<sup>1</sup> A church in Binghamton, New York lost its non-profit status forever when it printed a full page ad in a magazine telling people that if they voted for a certain president, they were committing a sin.

In my former church office, I found a voter guide filed away from 1927 that presented a case for why Christians shouldn’t vote for Herbert Hoover. This has been going on for a while.

But there can be no separation of church and conscience. My former pastor once said that, “A primary religious task these days is to think straight. Seeing clearly is even more important than good behavior, for redemptive action is born of vision. Religious faith, far from being a substitute for thought, makes better thinking possible. You can’t think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart’s a stone, you can’t have decent thoughts—either about personal relations or about international ones. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.”<sup>2</sup>

When we think about our faith, we think about the commandment to love. When we think about the commandment to love, we think of how we fall short in the world, and we make attempts to equalize, to comfort, to change, to show our love to the world and to each other by trying to change it. When we do that, we are not only acting out our faith, we are by necessity being intensely political.

“But let no one say that for being more political, an issue is less spiritual. A fine prayer reads, ‘To those who have hunger, give bread; to those who have bread, give a hunger for justice.’”<sup>3</sup>

Theologian Paul Tillich said that in order to be a church, there must be three elements present: Worship, time for prayer and reflection, and committing good works in the world. These three must be in perfect balance. Without one, you do not have a church, but only a religious club.<sup>4</sup>

Allan Hunter once said that you must walk with one foot in inward prayer and meditation, and the other in outward social justice.

So then, spiritual issues become justice issues, and inevitably these *are* political issues, but as Tillich points out, within a structure. This is our time for the church to be at worship, and so Christians need to recognize the need for religious balance. Using Tillich’s model of the three ways we are a healthy church:

1. Help support worship by lifting up your spirit to God in word, song and prayer. Let it be a meaningful time of inspiration for everyone, where our attention is lifted up to the Source of Creation and to members of our community who need our care.
2. Pray, meditate and take advantage of opportunities to learn more about your faith and your place in this world. And,
3. Support the mission and work of IUCC in the community and in the world, pitch in and help support the food drives, the walks, the discussions and actions. Volunteer to help as often as possible.

Let each of these important aspects of faith life function as they were meant to and a couple of things may happen. First, a life of the spirit may co-exist alongside a yearning for justice. Second, we will be able to accommodate each other by recognizing that we do not all share the exact same perspectives, (and that is all right) but in the love we feel we will honor this community where each of us can respect the tiny, mysterious fire of another’s personal integrity.

St. Paul ends 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 with, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three. And the greatest of these is love.” And he begins the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter with these words, “Make love your aim.”

“Love is our business. If we can’t love, then we are out of business. And all this, Christians learn through the words and deeds of ‘that love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down.’”<sup>5</sup>

1. Source: [www.au.org](http://www.au.org). Americans United for the Separation of Church and State
2. William Sloane Coffin, “Passion for the Possible,” Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky. 1993 page 2.
3. Ibid. pages 2-3
4. Paul Tillich, loosely quoted based upon my memory—the gist is correct.
5. William Sloane Coffin, “The Heart is a Little to the Left,” Dartmouth College University Press, Hanover, NH, 1999 pages 11-12