

Gospel Reading: scriptures on peace from various traditions

word count 1,528

Today the message of peace is better spoken in the words of all of the faith traditions that we have heard than in mine. It is lifted up in the glorious music we hear, symbolized in the dedication of our peace pole by our mayor and in the flock of released doves that will take place outside. I hope that the message of peace will be kindled once again in each of us, where it will grow. So, today I plan on being short in my own words, especially when so much of what I want to say is a lament.

In his book, “Why the Christian Right is Wrong: A Minister’s Manifesto for Taking Back Your Faith, Your Flag, Your Future,” UCC minister Robin Meyers breaks down some of the illusions about warfare as we have practiced and understand it, even when the conflict can rightfully be described as a “Just War.”

He says, “In World War II, when American GIs were going through the personal effects of a slain enemy soldier, they would often find more than they bargained for. In addition to securing his weapon, they would go through the soldier’s personal belongings only to discover that he was not subhuman at all. In his wallet were pictures of a wife and children, smiling and eager for his return. They looked exactly like the pictures that our soldiers carried into battle, the kind they retrieved at the darkest hours, fingered for good luck, whispered to, kissed.”¹

Meyers goes on to point out that the realization of our soldiers while they were fighting the evils that were occurring in Europe and on the Pacific stage, when they crossed the battlefield and saw who they had slain, a new dimension was raised to this faceless “other” that might have otherwise embodied the worst atrocities of Hitler’s regime. In fact, in their pockets they found many real names etched across photos of children: Meyers says that they had “names like, Hans, Otto, Hilda and Frieda—names given to real children who loved their real fathers and prayed real prayers at their bedside. At school, they sang patriotic hymns and waved little flags and believed that God was on their side. Perhaps there was a love note recovered or a fragment of verse or just a receipt from the cleaners. The realization at such moments was as painful as it was enlightening: this was not something expendable. This was someone just like me.”²

My father would say that serving his country in World War II was one of the sources of his greatest pride, and I share that pride knowing what responsibility and leadership he took as a twenty-year-old captain of an LST in the Pacific Theatre. At his memorial service, a fellow Navy man and friend came and told the story about my father’s role in the repatriation of Japanese soldiers at the end of the war. Broken and dispirited, they were loaded onto his cargo-transport ship, and my father noticed that unless he exhibited the kind of leadership that reflected the best of his own values, his crew, who were tired by this time and just wanted to go home, would treat them like animals. It was a risky thing to do, but he went out onto the deck and shook hands with their commander, and asked their officers to share dinner with his own. This surprised his officers, and they were not happy about it at first.

Soon after, teams were set up on deck between the former enemies. I cannot recall if it was basketball or volleyball, but they went out to play. The “faceless ones” on both sides soon had names. When they reached the disembarkation point for the Japanese troops, the last one off was their commander, who turned to my father so they could both salute. Whoever this Japanese commander was, years later my father received a medal from the Japanese government to commend him for his treatment of their troops. He was most proud of this particular medal, and I keep it on my desk.

This war claimed 70 million lives and ended in devastation from an atom bomb. With time, our cunning capacity to kill has only grown, from suicide bombs to commercial airliners to the phrase, “pre-emptive war.” What makes any of us think that if we gather around our new peace pole and read the words, “May peace prevail on earth” that anything of the kind will happen. Yet the point of observing World Peace Day is to ask the question, “Is peace possible?” and despite our doubts, to know that the only answer that spells the continuation of our species is the affirmative one.

Every world religion points to the way of peace; their sacred texts embody the way of peace, and yet conflict and war still exists between people of all faiths.

Also, we have plenty of evidence from primitive and modern societies that the will to be aggressive is promoted or inhibited by different cultures, so that some are relatively pacific while others are warlike. Spartans were taught to be aggressive, while Athenians were less so. Among our native peoples, Iroquois were aggressive, while Algonquins were not. Thus, the problem of making more peace and less war amounts to societal restructuring of an environment that promotes peaceful behavior patterns rather than warlike ones.³ We shall see if our preferences for a peaceful world are likely to achieve our goals, yet it is clear that each of us has a stake in making a peaceful tomorrow.

Yesterday, some of us represented IUCC at the world religion tent at the Irvine Global Village. Over twenty-five faith traditions were represented, each having sacred texts that point to the way of peace and understanding. In a country that is known for its religiosity, three years ago people flocked to the polls to vote on the great moral issue of the day that had been touted all through an election season—gay marriage and how to stop it. At the same time, children live in poverty and go without insurance so that a great preemptive war machine running without a plan and with open checkbook can continue to be fed. How many more need to die in this folly?

Three years ago, I sat listening to my father’s best friend, a Jew who said he had never spoken in a church before, but who came to stand up tell the story of my father’s treatment of the repatriated Japanese troops in his command. And at the same time we mourned my father, the news outlets carried pictures of humiliated Iraqis wearing hoods or leashes or naked in Abu Ghraib, and I could not help but mourn for my country.

Our World War II veterans are dying at the rate of 1,000 a day, and they represent a different way of looking at our place in the world when conflict arose. They were led in wisdom by leaders who knew how terrible a thing a war was because they themselves had tasted it, and knew not to enter into it unless it had become inevitable, and then to act with dignity and pride.

Today, we face new threats of terrorism, but we face them as a divided people because we have been misinformed, misused and misled. We have been set against each other and speak in air too angry to breathe. Is peace possible? Only if the present culture of physical, mental and spiritual violence is made to disappear to be replaced by a culture of peace and justice, and that requires a top-down change.

From the Gospel of Matthew we hear, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” The peacemakers, however few of them there are, and however unbowed they stand after all the slogans have been hurled at them, are both our best hope and the ones at the end of the day who stand closest to living out the central tenets of their faith traditions. A year ago, we witnessed one of the few faith communities in America that truly walked the talk of their faith, as a small Amish community came together to mourn their children who were lost in a school house shooting, while forgiving the killers. Why did that strike such a chord with us, if not because it spoke of real authenticity of spirit; people being led by what they believed God wanted them to do?

Is peace possible? Can the words we say and the symbol of peace that we dedicate today do anything to make this a more peaceful world? It’s just a symbol, after all, just a piece of wood standing in the ground. Nevertheless, it represents what each of our great faith traditions says is what brings us closest to God. We profess to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, and therefore, there can be only one answer, and that is the affirmative. May peace prevail. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with us, right here and right now.

Sermon Resources

1. Robin Meyers, “Why the Christian Right is Wrong: A Minister’s manifesto for Taking Back Your Faith, Your Flag, Your Future.” (John Wiley and Sons. San Francisco) 2006. p. 41
2. Ibid. p 41.
3. Kamela Serup “World Peace Day, Is Peace Possible?” 2007, NewsBlaze, [Daily News](#). I used this paragraph as a source, but greatly adapted it.