

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, November 11, 2018
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

Peacemaking

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.”

In my mind's eye I can see all those men and boys and perhaps some athletic women or girls climbing up ladders into belfries all over The United Kingdom and most of Europe to wrap the clappers of the bells. Belfries at the best of times are places for bats and pigeons and all manner of wildlife. So, it is always an adventure to go up there. This week all the clappers will have been wrapped across Europe and at 7 am this morning the bells will have been rung with muffled softer sounds.

Why do this?

It is the centenary of Armistice day which ended the first world War. It was at the end of WW1 that the two minutes of silence and the act of Remembrance was first instituted, lest we forget. The softened bells remind us of the tremendous sacrifice of those who died. Today in this service we will celebrate the full two minutes of silence and remember in unison with millions across the world. Following the Act of Remembrance today, the clappers of all the great bells of Europe will be unwrapped and they will ring free.

Why do this?

The unfettered bells are rung in gladness for Peace over all the earth and goodwill towards human beings, something the angels promised so long ago!

Today there are so many people and events to remember. Most of all we remember those who made the supreme sacrifice in defending their country, who gave their lives for others so that we might live in freedom. The Scripture reminds that: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

For these sacrifices we have a debt of deep gratitude. We honor them today in this service.

We also remember that the first World War was Horrific. Ten million soldiers were killed. 20 million were wounded. Cities towns and countryside were wrecked. Animals and wildlife died. And ordinary people. In total, including civilians, 40 million people died. The war was fought with horses and over 8 million horses died with countless mules and donkeys. It was said at that time that this war was the war to end all wars. A League of Nations was formed so that war would be no more. But that did not stop the next war which was only 21 years away.

The Second World War exceeded the totals of deaths from WW1 with 60 million people killed or 3% of the world's population.

As a minister I have always held the teachings of the historical Jesus to be important. I also think that they have meaning concerning war. Jesus taught non- violence in the context of the Middle East. As a rabbi, he criticized the law and tradition of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, that still plays in every act of retaliation for both sides in the Middle East.

He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?”

Martin Luther King Junior always thought that these words applied to our personal lives only. They were not political. But after reading Gandhi he changed his mind. He said: “Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. The

"turn the other cheek" philosophy and the "love your enemies" philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict, a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.

I have come to see more and more the need for the method of nonviolence in international relations. While I was convinced during my student days of the power of nonviolence in group conflicts within nations, I was not yet convinced of its efficacy in conflicts between nations. I felt that while war could never be a positive or absolute good, it could serve as a negative good in the sense of preventing the spread and growth of an evil force. War, I felt, horrible as it is, might be preferable to surrender to a totalitarian system. But more and more I have come to the conclusion that the potential destructiveness of modern weapons of war totally rules out the possibility of war ever serving again as a negative good. If we assume that mankind has a right to survive then we must find an alternative to war and destruction. In a day when sputniks dash through outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, nobody can win a war. The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence.”

He says... “I am convinced that the church cannot remain silent while mankind faces the threat of being plunged into the abyss of nuclear annihilation. If the church is true to its mission it must call for an end to the arms race.

If we follow Gandhi and Martin Luther King’s insights, non- violence does not mean non- resistance.

During the Second World War, Raoul Wallenberg was a young Swede and a Christian who was sent to Hungary as part of an effort to get Jews out of Hungary.

He manufactured passports in the Swedish Embassy and handed out passes to Jews on the way to death camps even on the very trains that were leaving for the camps. He had immense courage and daring.

This story about Wallenberg gives a picture:

“Wallenberg climbed up on the roof of the train and began handing in protective passes through the doors which were not yet sealed. He ignored orders from the Germans for him to get down, then the Arrow Cross men began shooting and shouting at him to go away. He ignored them and calmly continued handing out passports to the hands that were reaching out for them. I believe the Arrow Cross men deliberately aimed over his head, as not one shot hit him, which would have been impossible otherwise. I think this is what they did because they were so impressed by his courage. After Wallenberg had handed over the last of the passports, he ordered all those who had one, to leave the train and walk to the caravan of cars parked nearby, all marked in Swedish colours... he saved dozens off that train, and the Germans and Arrow Cross were so dumbfounded they let him get away with it.”

Raoul’s courage saved the life of Vera Goodkin a professor in New Jersey. She was only 12 years old at the time. She writes that Wallenberg would give out food water and medicine and fake passes that he printed to fool the Nazis. He gently sang to frightened children and once even scared a Nazi general stopping him from killing thousands of people.

Vera has visited schools and churches and synagogues to talk about Raoul. The children listen quietly, their eyes often misting with tears as she tells them about the man who saved her life.

Near the end of the war Raoul was taken prisoner by the Russians and he died in Russia mysteriously in their hands.

In 1981 the United States recognized his courage and made him an honorary citizen, the second person so honored, the first being Winston Churchill. His name is also found in the Guinness Book of Records for having saved the lives of more people than any other human being. **And here’s the point: He saved them all without violence.**

Prophets predicted that South Africa would be a bloodbath if apartheid were to be ended. But instead the words of Jesus were followed, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up by Bishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela. The hard work of Reconciliation was begun, and it saved South Africa,

In India following the second world war, Gandhi practised non-violence until the conscience of the British rulers was overcome and Indian independence from Britain was achieved non-violently.

So, are Jesus words unrealistic? Do they not work in the real world where bullets and missiles fly, and bombs explode?

Or do we cling to war as a method of solving disputes because we think that war is the only way to solve some problems?

After World War 1 and World War 2, I think that the concept of war as problem solver is very, very seriously flawed.

Perhaps then, it is as G. K. Chesterton once said: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”

So, I am happy to say since the second world war, that the Christian ideal now has been tried by Martin Luther King, by Gandhi and by South Africa. Its track record is amazing. Difficult? Yes! Very difficult indeed! Whoever said that authentic Christianity was easy?

But just how difficult is war?

Martin Luther King was also right about the personal level and the magic of Jesus’ difficult words in terms of helping solve relationship challenges.

There was a man called George whose wife Dorothy believed in non-violence and its efficacy. He did not believe in it. Although they often talked about it, he remained unconvinced.

Then one night he took his wife and daughter out to a restaurant after a show in New York City. Afterwards he went for the car, while his wife and daughter waited. It was a dirty night and snowing.

It was late and there was little traffic. Turning a corner, he saw three men in the middle of the sidewalk between him and his car. Not till he got a lot closer did he suspect that he was in trouble, for the men had spread out denying him passage. “I am going to be held up,” he thought. He thought to himself “I wonder if there is anything to what Dorothy has been telling me? And besides what I have I got to lose?”

He now reached the men who had spread their arms out to show that they intended to detain him.

When he came within feet of the larger man in the center, he spread his own arms out, smiled and greeted the man as if he were a long-lost friend, giving him a tight embrace and slapping him on the back.

In the embrace the man whispered to him “You stupid SOB. Don’t you know this is a stick up? Those other two dudes are apt to kill you. Give me all the money you have.”

“I don’t have any money” said George. I just ate at a restaurant with my wife and child and paid by credit card. I have eighty-five cents, but I live in Nyack and need fifty cents to get across the George Washington bridge.”

“Dammit!” the man said: “Then give me the thirty-five cents.”

George did so, and the three men let him pass.

There is an echo here; “Offer the evil man no resistance”

Often work can be a war zone for people. The number of heart attacks and strokes on a Monday morning is not accidental. Workplaces can become toxic.

Laurie Beth Jones, as a consultant, was attending a resort conference for a large hospital system in the US.

A staff exec took Laurie aside and told her that she was going to resign. She was angry with the new CEO. She said: “He has created distrust and tension. My health means more to me than my job!”

Laurie knew she was in for a long weekend. The group of tense faces that were before her told a tale of distrust and suspicion all directed at the CEO.

As a consultant she believed in transparency and her Christian faith told her that everything hidden would soon be revealed. She also believed in the teachings of Jesus about reconciliation.

She had tried transparency once before and it had flopped and so she was rather unwilling to try it again.

But she thought I need to do this and so she said: “Name the thing that you are most afraid of!”

Suddenly the CEO got up and said that the thing that terrified him the most was failure. This was the man who the staff had identified as ‘Atilla the Hun’. Was **he** going to admit vulnerability?

He paused for a moment and said: “I know I have been very rough on you since I came on board and I guess this is the reason why. I am afraid to fail.”

His honesty opened up the group and one by one they began to share their individual fears. By the time the exercise was complete there were few dry eyes.

On the last day Laurie asked the group “I would like each one of you to tell the people seated at your table two things: How they have been a gift to this hospital and how they have been a gift to you.”

It just so happened that Sheila, the exec who had confessed to Laura that she was going to resign on the Monday was seated at the CEO’s table.

To Laura’s surprise he got up from the table and knelt down before Sheila.

He said “Sheila, you are God’s gift to this hospital because you are ready to take on any task that comes and do it with excellence and thoroughness. You have never shirked a responsibility and you are an example to all of us of someone who truly cares for the patients.

He paused and swallowed hard and then said ‘ And Sheila, you have been a gift to me because, no matter what was going on, or how upset I got with everyone, you always maintained a sense of calm and joy. As soon as you walked into any setting, I knew that light and fairness had come into the situation. I don’t suppose that I have ever told you this, but I considered you from the start as one of my champions, and I do to this day.’”

By this time Sheila was reaching for the Kleenex box as was everyone at the table.

He then did this with each leader there and they were speechless. The day ended with hugs all around.

Laura was at the door waiting for a taxi for her plane when Sheila came up to Laura and said, “I’m staying!”

And Laura turned back and said, “I know!”

In this very troubled world, a world troubled on so many levels we need to remember the words of the historical Jesus.

They are the only ones that can lead us to world peace.

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.”

Let’s join their number and believe that though the way forward may indeed be difficult, the words of Jesus lead us onto the only road there is to peace. Straight and narrow though it may be, I pray that there will be many that find it! The world needs children of God...

Bells of peace 5 pm today

Tintagel at sunset/ Change ringing sequence 8 bell peal

St. Paul’s On a Sunday morning

Perestroika/ Bells silent since Lenin/ Moscow St Basils /Babushka/ Tears

Change ringing on the organ of NSJ Westminster chime leads into the two minutes of silence