

“All We Are Saying”

A sermon by Intern Minister Elizabeth Marsh

Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville

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The title of my sermon is “All We Are Saying.” If you didn't catch it, that's a reference to the John Lennon song “Give Peace a Chance.” I can't take credit for the sermon title; Lynn came up with it. She's got a knack for that sort of thing.... And every time I looked at my sermon title, I would get that line of the song in my head. Which isn't an all together bad song to have stuck in one's head, I'd say.

Peace can be a difficult topic to preach on, because peace is difficult to define. It's nearly impossible to grasp an all-encompassing idea of peace in one's own lifetime, let alone in the 20 minutes of a sermon. It's especially hard to comprehend peace when something happens as all-together tragic as the shooting at Fort Hood. Our world is complicated, and then suddenly rears itself up as even more complicated and tragic than we imagined. This is when reflections on peace become unfortunately timely. So today, let us consider examples of when peace was happening, while we hold grief in our hearts for the families and communities affected by this violence, so that we may understand what peace might be made of.

There's a significant anniversary of peace tomorrow, November 9th. Tomorrow, people around the world will celebrate the 20th anniversary of fall of the Berlin Wall. Twenty years ago, that boundary was opened—that boundary of cement and iron, marking a jagged, winding line down the middle of a formerly free a city. For the first time in decades, people could cross this boundary freely, without need for visas, paperwork, or threat of death.

It's interesting to go back and read the history of it; I was old enough to know how significant this moment in history was, but young enough not to care about the details. It's quite moving to go back and look at photos of that night, of East Berliners walking through Checkpoint Charlie, hands in their jacket pockets against the chill autumn air, like they were strolling down any old street... except for the telling looks on their faces of joy mixed with bewilderment that remind us they weren't walking down any old street. There are stories of West Berliners greeting the Easterners at the Wall's openings, hugging strangers, dancing spontaneously with the delight, relief, and I'm sure a fair amount of astonishment at the freedom of their newly united city.

The re-unification of the West and East of Berlin, followed by the re-unification of the West and East of Germany, was a moment of clarity, a time when so many of us breathed a collective sigh of relief. We felt that yes, some kind of peace is possible.

A piece of graffiti scrawled on the Berlin Wall read, “Many small people, who in many small places do many small things, can alter the face of the world.” These many small people doing many small things aren't just doing random things that happen to work together to achieve monumental moments of peace. Quite the contrary. One of the world's experts on peace building and reconciliation, Notre Dame international peace studies professor, John Paul Lederach, writes that effective social change is very strategic and, more than anything else acts like the process of cultivating yeast in the baking of bread. If you've baked bread before, you have an idea of the kind of attention that goes into getting the yeast from the jar to the oven. You need the right ingredients—water, sugar, and yeast—at the right temperature, or else the yeast doesn't come alive. But if everything has been put into place, with the right conditions, after a few moments the yeast will suddenly blossom in life. Likewise, in the process of making peace, “a few strategically connected people have great potential for creating social growth of an idea.”

Then, there's the rest of the process of baking the bread, which involves keeping an eye on a number of things at the same time: preheating the oven, mixing the flour and salt with the yeast mixture in a particular manner, letting the dough rise but not for too long, and then kneading it over and over again ... in other words, “while one set of things is in motion in one place, attention is always given to the horizon of what is coming and [what] will be needed in another [place].” Like bread baking, peacemaking is effective when particular ingredients or people are brought together in an intentional manner and given the right environment to create exponential growth. Peacemaking, like bread baking, is strategic.

In his quest for Indian independence, Gandhi was a man of many plans, especially of strategic civil disobedience. In his strategies, he had to pay attention to the larger mission of independence from Britain, as well as the nonviolent details that would make the vision happen. During one particular campaign, he decided that the issue to unify all Indians was their rights to salt. For a hundred years, the British government had made it illegal for Indians to harvest or sell their own salt. Think of how unjust that is, with India being surrounded on three sides by the sea. To make matters worse, they also highly taxed the salt that Indians could only buy from the British.

To launch his salt campaign, Gandhi unrolled his strategy. First, he publicly informed the

viceroy that unless the salt tax was repealed, civil disobedience would begin on a certain date. Next, on that date, Gandhi and his followers embarked on a 12-day march in which he recruited thousands more villagers to his cause to take back their salt; and then, with the march ending at the ocean, tens of thousands of Gandhi's followers proceeded to enter the gates of the saltworks and nonviolently resist the brutal push-back by the police. This action—of not fighting back against the violent physical blows of the British police—was strategic; it was what Gandhi knew would gain international attention to his cause.

Gandhi knew that newspaper reports would be sent to Britain and all over the world, telling of the Indians' civil disobedience. One reporter wrote, “There was no fight, no struggle; the marchers simply walked forward until struck down.”¹ Later, English pacifist and social critic, Bertrand Russell, wrote, “This sort of thing filled every decent English person with a sense of intolerable shame, far greater than would have been felt if the Indian resistance had been of a military character.”²

Gandhi had the idea that the way to gain international attention for the cause of Indian independence was to “sway international opinion in favor of the Indian cause.” He believed he could do this by appealing to “the noblest part of the British soul—if and only if Indians held firm to the moral high ground.”³ He was a master strategizer; he envisioned a plan that would empower his fellow countrymen into action in a way that would take the most advantage of the particular situation. The salt movement also sparked other nonviolent protests around the country. While independence was still a number of years away, Gandhi and countless numbers of staunchly nonviolent Indians were part of a larger strategy-- for gaining autonomy and agency in their lives as Indians.

Gandhi's prophetic strategy was to act peacefully as a way to bring about peace—and to act peacefully in a very public way. Recently, Michael Durall called Unitarian Universalists to become stronger in our public witness and action. His *UU World* article called “Reach out to become a 'public' church” has caught the attention of many people in this congregation. I've heard it brought up in committee meetings, in casual conversation, in educational settings. The conversation of being a public church or a private church is one that has people here concerned—people are wondering, which are we? How will this idea change our congregation? And how do we incorporate this idea into the life of our community?

Being a public church can be an act of peacemaking and thus, is like baking bread: it involves

1 Minal Hajratwala, *Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents*, Houghton (2009), 96.

2 Hajratwala, 98.

3 Hajratwala, 92.

an intentional process, a strategy, to make it happen.

The evolution into becoming more of a public church will require that the congregation involve itself even more deeply with the community outside our doors. Before this congregation jumps into action, there's an important theological question for us, as Unitarian Universalists, to consider. UU theologian, Paul Rasor, gets at this question in his Spring 2008 *UU World* article entitled "Prophetic Nonviolence: Toward a UU theology of war and peace." In the article, Rasor articulates a point about just war theory and pacifism, that "both just war and pacifism are concerned with the limits of loyalty to the state. This is more obvious in religious pacifism, which often speaks of a higher loyalty to God."

When I read those sentences, that our stances on peace are related to where our loyalty lies, I begin to wonder how this works for us, especially as liberal religious people. Does our loyalty, our commitment, belong to the state? Or to God? Or to the interdependent web of all existence? Maybe to our family... To whom or to what does our loyalty belong? And even deeper yet, to whom do we belong? Whose are we?

This is a question that the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish answers in his poem, "I Belong There," which was our reading today. His answer is that he belongs to his home, the place where his memories come from, the place where he has "a panorama of [his] own," yet a place in which his heart is broken again and again. To ask, "whose are we?" and "whose am I?" is not easy but can render a sense of meaning and connection that no other question can.

When I first heard that question posed, "Whose are we?" I immediately felt reluctance to answer. When I did answer, I admit I was a bit incredulous. "Whose am I? What kind of question is that? I am my own!" Yet that answer rang too selfishly in my mind. "Okay, then--we are each other's! Of course, interdependent web... yes, we are each others." But again, that answer felt too easy. Too rote, too obvious. I wasn't doing the hard work to answer the question for myself.

The question of belonging is an ancient question. If we distill all the world's sacred scriptures to their essence, the question of "whose are we" would be among the most basic impulses for religion. The world has been an uncertain place for every person and every community that has ever lived. "Whose are we?" they wondered. Who do we belong to? Who or what protects us in this uncertain world, in which we are so truly vulnerable? Who or what guides us through life, so we may have knowledge of right and wrong? Who shows us the right way to live? In answer to these questions, people told stories--stories that continued from one generation to the next in the oral tradition, and then were recorded in the written traditions we can still read today. So the question of belonging, of whose

are we, is a very ancient one.

It's also a question that UUs have been quiet about. We've been quiet about it because we've done away with creeds, and most often, a religious community will define itself with a creed clearly stating to whom or to what their loyalty belongs. However, UUs hold a covenantal commitment to our religious community. We affirm, promote, and promise to be in right relationship with each other and to trust each other to answer the deeper theological questions for ourselves.

There's also a power dynamic inherent to the question “whose are we?” that can hold us back from answering the question. To belong to someone implies that I am not my own; I am dependent on someone or something for my needs. The question, “Whose am I?” implies that I, or we, belong to someone else. It is a question of possession—to whom do I belong? To whom do we belong? To think of belonging to someone else could very well bring up personal, historical, religious, and political tensions. These tensions ought to be there, and they are not to be ignored but to be a part of the conversation.

Many people who have come into Unitarian Universalism later in our lives are refugees from other religious communities in which we felt cornered by the creed. This was certainly true for me; this power dynamic is why I encountered difficulty in answering the question of “whose are we?” or “whose am I?” I didn't want to acknowledge that I was dependent on anyone or anything; I balked at the question because I still had some religious growing and healing to do. Again, if there is a tension in answering that question, the tension can teach us an important part of the conversation.

The question of “Whose are we?” urges us to think more deeply than we already do about our seventh UU principle, which recognizes the interdependent web of life of which we are a part. Rather than simply acknowledging that yes, we are interdependent with everything, to ask “whose are we?” really asks us to think about the word “dependent” that's hidden neatly within the word “interdependent.” To live dependently upon others is, among other things, to seek protection from them; to be provided for; and to seek guidance from them whenever we might stray down the wrong path in our lives. Since ancient times, this is what people have sought to know.

The question, “whose are we?” can also be a question we ask to deepen our strategy of becoming a public church. This congregation's charge is to ask the question, “To whom and to what does the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville belong?” This question could focus the congregation's discernment in a couple of ways: first, the question will call to mind all the people and things, and on many levels, to which the congregation very clearly already has obligations and

connections. To articulate these clear affinities is important in the overall peacemaking strategy—know where your people and your resources are, to whom all of them are connected, and where those connections already lead.

A second, deeper discernment of the question will reveal the people and things to which the congregation has obligations and connections that are not as obvious. In this second go-round of discernment, the question becomes, “Whose are we, but where are the connections broken... or missing... to the people and things who we rely on?” On the very local level, UUCR exists in dependence with this physical neighborhood of Rockville. The congregation shares these trees with people who live in the surrounding houses and with the children who go to school just behind this sanctuary. The water table, the sewer system, the sidewalks and roads, the oxygen is shared among the neighborhood. Many of you may not have heard that last week, one of the houses that butts up against our exit driveway had a devastating electrical fire. No one was hurt, but the house is boarded up and looks like it will take a lot of time to repair. It can be difficult to disseminate midweek information like this to the congregation; and we can still do things to be there for that family.

On a local and regional level, UUCR also exists as an inherently pluralistic religious community, one of the few in the area. As a religious community, this congregation has a theological liberty that other churches do not have. Where could this particular theological freedom allow us to be allies to marginalized religious groups? For example, if there were some kind of misguided retaliation against local Islamic Centers in the wake of the Fort Hood shooting, UUCR could show up *en masse* to demonstrate our support for Muslims in the community. If peace contains elements of unity, agency, and empowerment, what kind of peace actions can Unitarian Universalists do especially well, that this congregation could carry to the larger community?

We might even be able to take a page from John Lennon and Yoko Ono. As I said earlier, my sermon title comes from their song “Give Peace a Chance.” I went online to look at the lyrics and found a video of Lennon and a room-full of people singing the song. The video was recorded during his and Yoko Ono's 1969 honeymoon “Bed-In for Peace.” Some of you probably remember the bed-in; it was all over the news. It was such big news because Lennon and Ono made it into big news. They knew their wedding was going to have the press all over it in the first place and they took advantage of this reality. The couple invited the press into their Montreal hotel room during specific hours of the day and they talked to the press about peace. This bed-in was, of course, among their many performances where the two artists used their fame to promote peace during the Vietnam War.

During the bed-in, Lennon and Ono wrote the song, “Give Peace a Chance,” and then invited some of their famous friends to record the song with them. The video I watched online of this recording is sort of grainy, late 60's black and white footage of John and Yoko sitting on their hotel room bed, surrounded by lots of other people, with flower arrangements and hand-painted banners behind them. All the people are singing and chanting the refrain of the song over and over: “All we are saying is give peace a chance.” Over and over they sang that refrain.

What I noticed when I watched this video was how joyful everyone in that room was. John Lennon was front and center on guitar and singing, Yoko Ono next to him and singing, with Tommy Smothers playing the other guitar, and all the other people—even the camera men there to record the performance for the news—everyone shared in the sense of delight that was happening in that room at the moment. Can you imagine how much fun that must have been to be there? Taking part in a crazy, controversial, song-filled, joy-filled moment, promoting one of your most deeply-held convictions? Everyone was having so much fun.

This, too, is what peacemaking can be—a delight and joy to our souls. The Reverend Doctor Howard Thurman once said, “Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” The process of becoming a more public church and being peacemakers in the community is a process that can bring more life for everyone, all around. Peacemaking is not a light endeavor that happens quickly, but like baking bread, takes intention, attention, and care. May this congregation continue, in covenant with each other, to discern how it can best be peacemakers in the world. Blessed be, and amen.