

Compassion and War:

Love Your Enemies?

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones
Personal Testimony by Celia Buckley

Memorial Day Sunday, May 27, 2018
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #1030, Siyahamba; #120, Turn Back;
#159, This Is My Song.

Choral Music: Peace in this House, by Mac Huff.

Readings: from War Talk by Arundhati Roy, 2003;
Isaiah 2:4, translation from International Children's
Bible; poem "Without Benefit of Declaration," by
Langston Hughes.

From War Talk: "Nationalism of one kind or
another was the cause of most of the genocide of the
twentieth century. Flags are bits of colored cloth
that governments use first to shrink-wrap people's
minds and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the
dead."

This is a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures gives
a vision of the Prophet Isaiah for a world of peace.
This translation is from the International Children's
Bible.

Then the Lord will settle arguments among many
nations.

He will make decisions for strong nations that are
far away.

Then the nations will make their swords into plows.

They will make their spears into hooks for
trimming trees.

Nations will no longer fight other nations.

They will not even train for war anymore.

Personal Reflection by Celia Buckley
[text appears after sermon]

Sermon

Karen Armstrong is a scholar of the
religions of the world. According to her,
compassion is at the heart of every faith tradition.
All traditions have their own versions of the Golden

Rule. Treat others the way you would want them to
treat you. Don't do to others anything that would
be harmful if done to you. Compassion is the
connecting principle among all the traditions. It is
their common insight. However, she says, looking
at the world around us and the ways we treat one
another, "you'd never know that [showing
compassion] was central to the religious life."

In ordinary ways and in horrible ways, many
of us are hard on people in other faiths, hard on
people in own faiths, hard on our loved ones, hard
on ourselves. To idealize any religion as liberated
from contradictions, flaws or failures is a mistake.
The reason? All religions have *people* in them. We
human beings are not free of contradictions, flaws
or failures. Indeed, Armstrong says, it is because of
our flaws and failures that most religions emerged--
that is, for the *teaching* of compassion. Because of
human aggression, greed, egotism, tribalism, fear
and selfishness, we need the guidance of the Golden
Rule. We need to be around people who can
remind us of compassion and empathy. The
practice of compassion is a lifelong struggle, and
we need support. Armstrong explores compassion
in her book *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life*.

On this Memorial Day weekend, it is an act
of compassion to remember the price paid, the pain
endured, and the many people taken from loved
ones by the violence of war. War is the result of
human aggression, greed, tribalism, fear, and
selfishness. It is the result of a lack of compassion
and the lust for domination of others. Humanity has
not shied away from war, in spite of religious
commandments for mercy, peace, and human
kinship. As we heard in the reading from the
Hebrew Scriptures, the ancient social justice
prophet known as Isaiah envisions a divine reversal
of international violence, promising so/ much/
peace/ that nations will melt their swords into
plows; they will bend their spears into pruning
hooks. "They will not even train for war anymore,"
Isaiah proclaims. It remains a vision.

In the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth
makes this blunt instruction: You shall love your
enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those
who hate you.

There it is, in the Gospel of Luke and the
Gospel of Matthew. Love your enemies? Come
on!

It's hard enough in our day-to-day interactions to pray for those who hate you. Yet in a military mission, how can there be any quarter for the love of enemies? Showing compassion seems contrary to fighting. If you are going to repel an enemy; if you are going to take enemy territory, destroy an encampment or a missile silo or a city where that enemy has power, it will take intelligence, but also energy, focus, anger, and hostility. Loving your comrades and risking your safety for your buddies doesn't *allow* for loving an enemy. Sticking together in the terror of conflict means focusing on your enemy *as* an enemy. Maybe survival calls for dehumanizing your enemy.

Yet after the war, our humanity returns. Maybe slowly. If we don't remember and restore the humanity of our enemy, the lingering humiliation and resentment can bring more violence in reaction. One hundred years ago, the punishing terms of the treaty ending the First World War deepened economic hardship in the nation of Germany, which had lost the war. Germany's humiliation helped sow the seeds for the fascist rise of Adolph Hitler, leading to a Second World War barely 12 years after the first one ended. Nazi Germany's invasions of several countries, and Imperial Japan's attack on the U.S. base at Pearl Harbor, brought the United States into another brutal war. Among the resources brought to bear on that war effort was a deep sense of hatred between us and our enemies. Tragically, that hostility and fear spilled over into persecuting our own citizens and residents of Japanese, Italian and German backgrounds.

Today, however, Germany, Japan and the United States can mark seven decades of peace. For this we can thank in part the generous monetary aid and technical support given after the war by the United States to Germany and Japan for economic development and the establishment of democratic systems. By these deeds of generosity and mercy, the U.S. turned enemies into allies.

You know, withholding compassion or mercy may feel justified. It may give us a thrilling sense of righteousness. But our lack of generosity, compassion or mercy will do nothing to bring more peace into our own lives or into the world at large.

Looking through the lens of compassion, it seems that veterans, especially those who have survived combat experiences, have more in

common with their military comrades than they do with the rest of us—including those of us at home far from the front. "Nobody else can understand," I've heard them say. In the town where I grew up in the 1960s and 70s, the American Legion club and Veterans of Foreign Wars post were social hubs for so many men who had served in wartime and their spouses. Nobody else could feel the bonds formed by a common purpose and by shared experiences of duty, bravery, fear and loss. Combat veterans would have more in common with one another than they would with government leaders whose orders determined the missions those veterans had to make. By the same token, such veterans would have more experiences in common with the enemy who fought against them. Both they and their enemy would know the fear and grief, the adrenaline, the confusion, the homesickness, the revulsion of war. They would know the sense of duty, or the reality of having no other choice but to fight.

A colleague of mine spoke about American vets returning to Vietnam, visiting villages and meeting people who had been/ the enemy. She told me of a man in her church who had sat and had tea with man who had been fighting on the other side. The man told her it had been a time of healing.

Whatever side they may have served on, all the veterans pained by their physical wounds or vexed by their spiritual injuries likely have more in common with their former enemies than they would with us who haven't had to go through what they did.

Two afflictions in particular are worth describing today—PTSD and moral injury. PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, arises from a past experience of intense fear, abuse, or other violence, including war. While PTSD is a disorder of the nervous system, moral injury afflicts people spiritually and emotionally. It emerges from an awareness of actions we have taken that go against our moral instincts, or from a violent and immoral action we had to witness or could not stop from happening. Moral injury leads to deep grief, dishonor, and shame. Not only does this make it hard for a veteran to feel pride in their service, it can isolate a vet even more because others don't know or don't want to know the nature of the pain a vet is going through. It can rob a veteran of their sense of life's meaning, purpose, and hope.ⁱ

Moral injury and PTSD are suspected causes of many veteran suicides. Treatment and healing for these afflictions call for compassion. That is, compassion from those who care about them, and the ultimate goal: self-understanding and compassion for themselves.

I know a therapist who has worked with combat veterans. Many of them struggle to come to terms with what they did in the line of duty, and the traumatic stress or moral injury they feel. He told me: “Invariably there was a turn in their counseling process when they recognized their enemy--often someone they had killed--as a fellow human being, [someone] who like them was put in a terrible situation in which there were no/ good/ choices.” Only terrible choices-- and even worse ones. He said: “They often [could] imagine the person they killed was someone who under other circumstances might have been their friend. That recognition of shared humanity and compassion allowed these veterans to grieve.” Their grieving, he said, allowed them to see that the enemy, “the ones who had been ‘other’ were in fact much like themselves, and [this allowed them] finally to see *themselves* as persons worthy of love.”ⁱⁱ

The great Langston Hughes conveys the common humanity of those who die in battle in a brief poem entitled “Peace.”

Peace

We passed their graves:
The dead men there,
Winners or losers,
Did not care.
In the dark
They could not see
Who had gained
The victory.



It is arguable that provoking a temporary form of hostility and anger is necessary in a military conflict. I can imagine that. Yet hostility is not courage. Hatred may be learned, but it’s not a skill. It’s dangerous if recruits already have anger or hatred and *bring that into* their term of service. A friend of mine is a military chaplain at an education and training base-- in another state, in the middle of nowhere. At his base, new U.S. recruits are training

alongside service members from allied nations, including some from countries in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Some U.S. trainees confide in this chaplain, revealing their prejudice and their/ hostility. They see the international soldiers in class/ not as allies but as enemies. “I can’t believe they are on our base!” recruits will say. Some young recruits bring into the service with them an angry fear of Muslims--Islamophobia. Some bring prejudice against foreigners and people of color. They have learned it from parents, friends, or social media. They have heard it reinforced by too many elected officials in this country. Of course, with the U.S. military’s insistence on rules of conduct, all branches of service officially prohibit acting out this kind of hostility. Surely, though, international students can feel it from their U.S. classmates.

True compassion includes noticing even what is ugly and wrong, and having the patience to stay present with it and understand it, and having the courage to question it. An approachable military chaplain can enable trainees to vent privately the prejudice they brought in from home. They begin to question their attitudes. Recruits can even begin to relax their hostility. A bright example: My friend and other chaplains on his base run an activity center with sports and board games, snacks, movies, musical instruments, and other offerings. He said, slowly you can see people socializing and mixing; you can see barriers opening, mistrust easing.

Here is one thing about “love your enemies” that anybody can do—civilians included. We can consider and explore having a practice of compassion for those we regard as our *personal* enemies. We can try praying for those who act like enemies. Or we can try sending wishes of wellbeing and peace to those who treat us like their enemies. At least we can consider it. And first we can try to understand ourselves, to question our own attitudes, and explore the reactions that can lead us to think of others as enemies.

Love your enemies, Jesus said. A stretch to imagine that. Maybe we can start, simply, with understanding.

Love may be too strong a word for those who treat us like enemies, or whom we have named as such. But understanding is a good start. And it is important. The stakes are very high. We need to relieve the burden of so much hostility among us. I need to relieve my own. I am trying to remember

the common human experience of suffering—the suffering from selfishness, greed, fear, and resentment—including my own.

I am trying to hold with compassion those who would reject me, and those I feel the urge to reject. Even if I don't like them, even if I'm angry or fearful, it's worth trying to understand them. Karen Armstrong says that the "imaginative act of empathy... is the essence of all morality." Empathy is trying to put yourself in the place of another. Empathy takes a lot of discipline. But, she says, it is the essence of morality. Empathy or understanding is not spiritual softheartedness, she says, it is spiritual strength.

It has been traditional to remember the fallen on Memorial Day, to give thanks, and to grieve lives cut short, to remember those who "could not see/ Who had gained/ The victory." Now with greater awareness we take note of those who die after their time of service, from addiction or suicide, from depression or isolation, from the aftershocks of trauma or the affliction of moral injury. Let us also take note of those gripped by a fear of the other, those whose hostility is poison for them, and a danger to safety, peace and justice in our world.

Let us extend compassion to all those put in harm's way by war and conflict, all those victimized by hostility, fear and prejudice, and those who are *driven* by hostility, fear and prejudice.

Let us commit ourselves to the practice of compassion and the practice of understanding, one day at a time. Let us commit ourselves to the practice of peace, one person at a time. The effort is hard, but the stakes are very high. Compassion, understanding, and peace. The stakes are very high. So may it be. Amen.

Personal Reflection by Celia Buckley

We were so excited that our new house was closing on my birthday in 1988. The odd detail about a property easement on the deed didn't seem like a big deal. We were getting a small little house on a big lot!

The easement that ran between our house and the western neighbor was 10 foot wide and 150 foot deep. The oddest thing was there was a telephone

power pole right in the middle of the easement entrance!

In 1990 the owner's son moved in. Dave seemed to be a nice, gay young man. He started reporting to us his mother's complaints about our use of the easement. She felt that by parking on the street on our side of the pole that we were blocking access to the easement. *Wasn't the telephone pole blocking access to the easement?*

Things got weird. One evening a friend found black grease under her car door handle when she parked in front of Dave's house. Rotting food and chicken bones were repeatedly found on the easement driveway between our houses. Mud was thrown on our new Prius while parked in our driveway. We installed surveillance cameras & were able to see eggs flying directly from our neighbor's yard towards our car. One night, we realized rocks were being thrown against our bedroom window from his back yard. We called the police who came, but told us there was nothing they could do. We were frightened.

We weren't innocent in this. One day in 2011 I took bright orange marking paint and painted a property line down the center of the easement. We immediately got an angry letter from the owner, so we hired a lawyer to see if we could get the easement removed from the deed. Numerous letters went back and forth. It was a mess. Ultimately we realized the easement was a permanent part of our deed and it could only be removed if both parties agreed. Marion and I barely tolerated him and planned to bring a civil suit for harassment.

And then I did something that changed everything. Many years ago I entered 12 step recovery programs. The consistent message was to find a power greater than yourself. As an atheist with no belief in a deity, this was challenging. But I persevered, supported by the spirituality of Unitarian Universalism which I found in 1991. Tomorrow I celebrate 27 years of being clean and sober in Alcoholics Anonymous.

AA helped with the neighbor dispute. I discussed it with my AA sponsor who reminded of the AA anger prayer. She also suggested I pray that he gets everything he wants in life. Grudgingly, I agreed to pray daily for him. Of course, I prayed that he got everything he *deserved* in his life. I was gently

reminded that the purpose of my prayer was to pray for him to receive all the love, kindness, acceptance and serenity I wanted for myself. I complied.

One day, after about a year of praying for him, he rounded the corner and met me face to face. Seeing fear on his face, I simply said “Dave, what can we do to get along?” He said, well, don’t block the easement with your vehicle. I said, Ok, what else? He made some accusations to which I didn’t respond other than again asking what could we do to get along. He said we used to be friends. I said I would like that again. He ended up saying he was going to have to find a new hobby if he could no longer harass us and laughed about it. I laughed too.

Ever since that day he has become my new “best friend”. He runs over when I come home to tell me about his dog or cat or new car. He lets me know

ⁱ Read about moral injury of the public at large following the 2016 presidential election at this link: https://www.psychologytoday.com/sites/default/files/considering_collective_moral_injury_following_the_2016_election.

when he is going out of town and I do the same. We laugh when we are both gardening in our bathrobes.

I really can’t explain what happened. I know that by praying for him every day I slowly felt my anger and resentment melt away. I felt my heart soften and open. I truly wanted only the best for him. I still don’t believe in a god or a supernatural force that rules the universe, but I was changed. I was changed by praying to the Spirit of Love and Life. I learned to love my neighbor as myself.

[pdf](#) also read “Moral Injury from Civilian Life,” in this blog: <https://socialhealth.blog/2013/09/21/moral-injury-from-civilian-life/>

ⁱⁱ Personal correspondence with me, February 7, 2018.