

Remembering Sacrifice, Remembering Peace

Preached by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Memorial Day Sunday, May 29, 2022

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Readings: “How to Survive the Apocalypse” by Sean Parker Dennison, excerpts from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the Prophet Micah and from the Prophet Joel. *Printed at the end.*
Hymns: #126 Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing; #159 This Is My Song; I Am Willing.

Sermon:

On Memorial Day, it is fitting to honor the service members who died in all of this country’s wars. This includes those lost in wars that in the hindsight of history still appear to have been justified conflicts, or at least unavoidable ones. This includes those lost in wars that many of us now look upon as unjustifiable conflicts and which we lament as tragic examples of national denial and human folly. And as we honor and grieve all who died, let us remember also those who died but who didn’t want to serve, but had to, by conscription (the draft) or by economic necessity. And let us grieve and remember the service members who died in training accidents or in transit, or by friendly fire, or by suicide. We must remember every sacrifice.

Furthermore, as we remember those lost to the violence of war, let us also remember the possibility of peace. Peace is more than what happens in the small wedges of history this country has enjoyed between its military engagements. Peace is more than the quiet space which lacks the sounds of wailing survivors mourning their dead. Peace is a promise. It is a vision for how a society or a group of people can live together--living by the practice of dignity, mutual accountability, and shared abundance. This vision was called the Beloved Community by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, among others. As Dr. King said, peace requires not only the absence of violence but also the presence of justice.

In his leadership of movements for Black civil rights, for economic justice, and against militarism in this country, he demonstrated the promise of peace, even amid the harsh atmosphere of the absence of peace. Even though Dr. King has been gone almost 55 years, the lessons he promoted and embodied continue to be embraced by new generations of teachers and activists and ordinary people. Recently I learned about one of them. His name is Kazu Haga, and he lives in Oakland. He is 41 years old.

He was born in Japan, but a family setback led them to immigrate here to the US when he was seven. His father died of cancer within just a few months of diagnosis, when Kazu was 10. He then abused alcohol and drugs, and later dropped out of high school. He stopped his drinking at age 15, but he still felt vulnerable and alone. He writes that he was so starved for a sense of “community, purpose and adventure” that if a military recruiter had talked to him, he would have gone into the military. If a religious cult had approached him, he would have joined a cult. If a street gang had groomed him, he would have joined the gang. Fortunately, a group of Buddhist monks and nuns reached out, and he joined them... on a walking pilgrimage, several months in duration, to retrace the American slavery industry and witness the legacy of white racial domination in this country. He was 17, and it changed his life. Eventually he was trained in Nonviolent philosophy. He’s an activist in Oakland and around the country, and he leads training in Nonviolence as a way of life.

Kazu Haga has written a book about his journey, entitled *Healing Resistance*. He recounts lessons learned from a variety of mentors about methods of resistance to bring about equity and justice, and about the philosophy of Nonviolence. As he explains it, nonviolent resistance is an approach for challenging unjust conditions and other forms of systemic violence. It is a tool for drawing support for your cause, and for pressuring your opponents to change the system they are in charge of. To use the tool of resistance effectively you don't need to live with Nonviolence as your philosophy. As a way of life, he says, Nonviolence is a "long-term commitment to building Beloved Community" among all people *and* a commitment to live by those values in your own life. Living by Nonviolence is harder than using it as a strategy. As taught by Dr. King and others, Nonviolence means not allowing yourself to dehumanize any person, including those who are causing injustice or profiting from it. It means refusing to resent those who cause pain, refusing to hate even those who hate you. To me, this feels like a high spiritual hurdle. I don't know if I can train my mind to avoid resenting those who cause harm. Can I really recognize their human dignity, no matter what?

As I read Kazu Haga's book, I had a growing ambivalence about the way I saw the Russian war in Ukraine, and the way I felt about it. Vladimir Putin sent his troops to invade the independent country of Ukraine just over three months ago. The cruelty and waste of this invasion continues to cause agony in Ukraine, a social disaster in Russia, fear in its bordering nations, and outrage around the world. At the same time, the war has generated a spirit of unity among the Ukrainians—and international support for them. The world has been impressed by the competence and creativity of Ukraine's military and by the courageous resistance of its people, which is embodied so well by President Zelensky. Russia's failures and military setbacks have come as big surprises. As I followed the war, I found myself *enjoying* these developments. I realized I was watching it like a competition, or perhaps like a war movie where you know which side is supposed to be the good guys and which side is the bad guys. I was embarrassed to ask myself: "What am I doing?"

How can I be genuine in my prayers for peace, while praying for a country on one side of a conflict? How can I be faithful to my vision for human community, while I'm getting excited about military victories, even victories by the underdog against a vicious attacker? As with much of life, so much depends on context. This tension is as old as the words of the Hebrew scriptures. As we heard earlier, the Prophet Micah envisions a safe and peaceful future. Micah says: *They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks*—in other words, the metal of weapons will be hammered into agricultural implements. Yet in another reading today we heard the same images used for the exact opposite purpose. That is, the Prophet Joel says: "Let all the men of war draw near, let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears!"

Which is it that God wants, anyway? Weapons of war, or tools of peaceful existence and shared abundance? Scholars point out that it all comes down to context, in this case to different eras of history for each book of the Bible. It comes down to each prophet's audience and his purpose in that context. I won't explain it now because I have trouble keeping all those ancient Hebrew prophets straight. Yet I want us to see, in this ancient example, the co-existence of the human impulses to pursue peace – and to fight.

Kazu Haga writes that he does not want to pass judgment on those who feel they have no other choice than to fight back. To him, while Nonviolence is a "long-term commitment to building Beloved Community, it is not a false sense of purity... at the expense of realism."

He writes: “Violence is used ... by [some] people as a matter of survival. This is the case in interpersonal relationships, and it may be the case for entire communities of people who are facing annihilation. Violence can be very effective in keeping you alive or protecting those in danger, and there is great value in that.”

This seems to apply to the people of Ukraine right now. If they were not to engage in the violence of military resistance, the result would surely be occupation by the forces of the Russian tyrant. Such an occupation would bring endless oppression. Ukraine’s people believe they are doing the right thing by fighting.

Violence may be a necessary choice to stop a greater source of harm, Haga says, but it “is limited in one very important way. Violence can never create relationships. [It can’t] restore or strengthen relationships. Violence can never bring us closer to reconciliation.” To be sure, he says, “It’s hard to reconcile with someone as they are beating you.” Or, if they are bombing your country, if they are stoking hatred about you with a campaign of disinformation. Survival is primary. If they are taking your land or killing your neighbors or hauling away your family to forced-labor camps, violence is an understandable choice.

Haga writes: “If we find we need to use violence to protect others or protect ourselves, then we need to double our efforts at reconciliation afterwards.”

Remembering the promise of peace sometimes calls for sacrifice and risk as much as military service does. I am thinking of all those Russians who protest in Russia against the war, those who make a public rejection of their dictator’s deadly cruelty and lies. In the first month of the war approximately 15,000 Russians were arrested for protesting Putin’s war. Many were attacked and assaulted. A number of cultural figures have protested the war with letters and speeches and petitions to the government. Many are in prison. Two hundred thousand Russians fled the country—some left simply because they opposed the invasion; some expected only further damage to human rights under Putin’s crackdown and further economic ruin under international sanctions, and some feared the drafting of their young men into the military. I pray for all of them who find themselves in such agonizing situations.

There seems to be little we can do to help them or change their predicament at this time. Yet many of us do retain the ability to remember the promise of peace and renew it. Renewing the promise of peace is not a passive position. It calls for effort and creativity. We can start with where we are—in our country, in our local area, our own lives.

For example, elections are coming up around this country in the next few months, especially in early November. Voters will elect leaders to crucial state and federal office all over the country. The outcome may determine if the human rights of women, transgender kids, families in poverty and voters of color are protected, or if those rights are damaged and endangered further. Here is an opportunity to be involved. Through our denomination’s campaign called [UU the Vote](#), and this campaign’s partner group, called Reclaim Our Vote, we are writing postcards to new voters in other states, to encourage them to cast a ballot. This will counter the disinformation which tells people (especially voters of color) they are not eligible to vote. If you are available to help out with sending postcards, contact our member Susan or the church office, or look in the Weekly Message.

Here is another opportunity to be involved. Two weeks from this Tuesday, many of us from UUSS will show up at the meeting of the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors. You

are welcome to show up. or to call in, as we encourage the County to dedicate federal American Rescue Plan funding to generate lasting change to support our unhoused neighbors. Between now and June 14 we'll be calling and sending emails to the County Board. Check the Bluesheet, the website, or the Weekly Message, or talk with Rev. Lucy.

Can you think of opportunities to remember the promise of peace in your world, and in your life? What are some ways that occur to you? I hope you will share them with one another—share your thoughts with people you know already, and with somebody whom you are just getting to know, maybe somebody you just met. A first step, a foundational way, to remember the promise of peace is just to reach out. In times of trouble and fear, isolation brings despair and helplessness. Simply showing up can renew our sense of connection, of belonging, of possibility.

Earlier we heard the poem “How to Survive the Apocalypse.” I take it as advice for the days when your world seems to be falling apart, which right now can feel like every day. Sean Parker Dennison writes:

“In order to survive the apocalypse—/ any apocalypse at all—
we have to give up the counterfeit currency of self-sufficiency.”

When things appear the most out of control, we naturally have an urge to close up, separate from others, put up a hard shell. Yet these are the times when we must refuse to separate ourselves from one another. We can reach out. We can lower our guard. We can open ourselves to those who reach out to us. We can look toward those who are willing to reflect our humanity back to us. We can look toward those who need to see their humanity reflected back to them.

On this Memorial Day weekend, as we honor the sacrifices of this country's military service members, as we remember them, we can honor their service and their dedication by reaching out. We can remember their acts of loyalty to needs larger than their own by devoting time to needs larger than our own. We can share our strength with one another. We honor and remember their lives by remembering the promise of peace. Amen.

Readings (given in the service before the sermon)

How to Survive the Apocalypse by Sean Parker Dennison

First, learn to listen.
Not only for enemies around
corners in hidden places,
but for the faint footsteps
of hope and the whisper of resistance.
Hone your skills, aim your
heart toward kindness, and
stockpile second chances.
Under the weight of destruction,
we will need the strong shelter of
forgiveness and the deeper wells
that give the sweet water of welcome:
“We have a place for you.”
When the world ends, we must not
add destruction to destruction,
not accept a beggar’s bargain
to fight death with more death.
In order to survive the apocalypse—
any apocalypse at all—
we have to give up the counterfeit currency of self-
sufficiency, the mistaken addiction
to competition, the lie
that the last to die has somehow survived.

Excerpt from ch.4, Prophet Micah, Hebrew Scriptures

For out of Zion/ shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate/ between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plough shares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid.

Excerpt from ch.3, Prophet Joel, Hebrew Scriptures

Proclaim this among the nations:

“Prepare for war!

Wake up the mighty men,

Let all the men of war draw near,

Let them come up.

Beat your plowshares into swords

And your pruning hooks into spears;

Let the weak say, ‘I *am* strong.’ ”

Assemble and come, all you nations,

And gather together all around.

O Lord, cause Your mighty ones to go down there.

Music:

“In Flanders Fields,” First World War, poem by Lt. Col. John McRae, MD, tune by J. Jacobson & R. Emerson; voice, piano, trumpet, French horn.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow

Between the crosses, row on row,

That mark our place; and in the sky

The larks, still bravely singing, fly

Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

Loved and were loved, and now we lie

In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:

To you from failing hands we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high.

If ye break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.