

Resentment

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here

as threadbare autumn at last coasts into winter

to celebrate our lives in this, our common house

with all the gifts and arts of worship:

honesty and vulnerability in heart and mind,

word and wonder and silence and song

and kindled candles for the spirit. So we pray

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude,

moved by the beauty of the world

and claiming justice for all who live upon it,

we open our hearts to greater loving,

healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and

hope of peace...

Sequence

The sky above, filled with stars and sun and moon, does not belong to me. I belong to the sky.

The earth, dark and deep beneath my feet, does

not belong to me.

I belong to the earth.

My breath does not belong to me,

just because I breathe it in.

I release it, for I belong to my breath,

and it is only thus that I live.

The stories of the season, tales of rising sun,

revolutionary protest, and infant hope,

do not belong to me...I belong to

them, and respond to their summons.

I kindle my light from their lights.

And the silence too does not belong to me,

I do not make it, own it, or shape it.

It existed before the earth,

before the first whisper

before my first cry as a baby.

It shall outlast me by

a billion, billion years, and then some

So clearly, I belong to the silence....

silence

The world does not belong to me.

I belong to the world.

I belong to the great network of loved ones

and friends and family of which I am but

a part, a great network of mystery and love.

Those who call out to me, because, especially this morning, my heart opens toward them in welcome or sorrow or love or longing, I make present by naming them aloud or lifting them silently up inside me.

naming

In a world that is one, where the sharp lines between cultures blur in the embrace of the liberal heart, the music belongs to all of us, and all of us belong to the music.

Readings

The First Reading is an excerpt from Hanukkah and the Thing With Feathers, a sermon preached last year by John Millspaugh, minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of South County, Mission Viejo, California. John was one of the two ministers who spoke here earlier this year when the Marriage Bus that was going across the country came to our fair area. They were leading rallies in favor of same-gender marriage.

Hanukkah is a story of the physical conquest of the Jewish people, yes, but perhaps even more sinister, it is the story of the seduction of their minds and hearts. Through their public institutions and events, the ancient Greeks systematically promoted their own ends in Judea. Their methods were quite successful- they hooked many Jews, like fish on a line. So the holiday of Hanukkah in our modern age becomes a time to consider – “How have *I* been hooked?” It’s a time to become reflective, to ask, “who or what has gotten hooks into me, and is cheerfully stringing me along? Who has taken over some part of my mind and heart for their own purposes, and done me harm in the process.

Maybe it is an industry that has convinced you that you can find happiness only through its products or services, or that it really is okay to overlook its cruel methods for the sake of its bottom line. Maybe it’s a politician who has persuaded you that thinking for yourself is unpatriotic. Maybe it is someone in your personal life who has convinced you that *your* behavior determines *their* happiness or fulfillment. Hanukkah is a time to consider how our minds and hearts and spirits have been the object of another’s conquest; it’s a time to recognize subtle invasions and full-scale occupations. Time to begin noticing if our most holy temple has been ransacked and waters poured on our holy fires, and time to begin doing something about it.

The Second Reading consists of three

excerpts from a very long poem written by

Daphne Gottlieb, during the poem from the San Francisco Resistance, March 23, 2003, when hundreds of thousands took to the streets in protest against the present war in Iraq.

No Poetry After Auschwitz
said Adorno, but still, here are poems,
as a mark of arrogance or hope, maybe both.

This is not a poem it is a rock through a window
it is a smash and run—

I am trying to find reasons not
to smash things. Last night an American
soldier threw three grenades into commanders’
tents. They say he acted out of “resentment”
I understand resentment. I believe in nonviolence
I stick my hands in my pockets to make sure
I don’t pick up a rock
Lighting candles, signing petitions
blocking intersections, chanting,
walking until my feet are blistered
shouting until my throat is raw
I’m trying so hard to change things
but I can’t even get the blood off my hands.

Sermon

I suppose if some major in religious studies at Ohio State were to be visiting this morning, she or he might be a bit surprised...and maybe confused.

Right off, the student would see a visible menorah, or candelabra, from the Jewish Hanukkah tradition. And then the student heard a children's story about two hens giving each other the silent treatment while hatching a shared egg. Then the student sang a hymn-text from the Buddhist tradition, the Sutta Nipata, and we read together the greatest single passage from the Dhammapada, one of the pearls of the Buddhist scriptural canon. Myra has been playing from Handel's Messiah, decidedly a Christian composition. Then there was a reading about Hanukkah, and a poem written during an anti-war protest in San Francisco a year ago. And now this...

On Saturday morning, I was woken up at 3 AM by the brusque noise of a helicopter bringing some emergency patient to Grant Hospital. As usual, when that happens, I tried to ease myself back to sleep by reading. I picked up a book been written by a great liberal Christian theologian where I read the following words:

"We live in a remarkable time, when entire nations have been liberated by non-violent struggle; when miracles are openly declared, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall... and the transformation of South Africa; when for the first time people are beginning to resist domination in all of its forms. Yet these are also times of endemic violence, ethnic hatred, genocide and economic privation around the world as the super-rich hoard increasing shares of the world's wealth, and the poor drown in poverty. It is a time of hope. It is a time of despair. (Yet) I have seen enough to (nonetheless) stake my life on the side of hope."

I lay there in my bed after being hit by the impact of these words. I was moved by their grand panoramic view of the world set against this local season of glittering lights and small candles. Great events: Berlin, South Africa. To which I can add the peaceful revolution in the nation of Georgia, the election ferment in post-Soviet Ukraine, the twenty year long non-violent overthrow of Pinochet's distorting power in Chile, and most recently the multi-cultural transformations in Canada. So much has happened in the world which has not involved violence, but which has responded to violence in a non-violent way.

The words against violence in the Dhammapada, although attributed to Buddha himself, were written centuries after Buddha died as a condensed nugget of his teachings. As far as I can tell, they were put down on paper sometime around the very years that the first Hanukkah fires were being kindled. Those words didn't make it to the West however until the last couple hundred years. Hanukkah, on the other hand, has been around straight through. But 2,100 years after the first celebration of its message, Hanukkah is still not really considered to be a major Jewish festival by any rabbi I know. It offers no stunning religious demand, like the call to forgiveness at Yom Kippur, or the call to liberation at Passover. The detail of the oil that lasted eight days was added much later, in order to give the event the sheen of childlike delight that no violent revolution can *ever* have. And, in all honesty, it has only grown into a significant holiday, in America, through understandable competition with a Christian Christmas gone bonkers on seasonal consumerism and steam-roller advertising.

Hanukkah tells the story of the Greeks imposing their civilization on the people who lived in Jerusalem and in the province thereabouts, called Yehudah, or Judah/Judea. It's from the name of that province that the modern words "Jew" and "Jewish" come. They themselves did not call themselves Jews, or the Jewish people, back in those days....they referred to themselves as the Hebrew people, or the children of Yaakov/Jacob (who later went by the name Yisrael/Israel). Nevertheless, the laws of their constitution, which they called the Torah, called for certain kinds of policies and behaviors. When the Greeks came in with a mighty army under Alexander the Great, Alexander himself didn't complain about their constitution, nor forbid religious practices. But those generals who governed after Alexander's death were not so cosmopolitan...they gleefully and simply nullified its authority by fiat. They said, "You will act like Greeks, think like Greeks, talk like Greeks and dress like Greeks. You shall imagine your lives the way we imagine them. You shall not meet to study your books, for they are forbidden you. You shall not worship in your way, but in our way, for are not all ways of worship equal in the eyes of God? Anyway, it doesn't make any difference how you feel about it, because we have all the tanks and bazookas and you don't. You wouldn't want to risk your lives, or the lives of your children now, would you?"

Then, says the Hanukkah story, almost everyone in Jerusalem gave in and became just like the Greeks. Resisting such power was foolish. "Even 'common sense' makes that clear," they affirmed.

But one Hebrew family, the Maccabee clan, was not clear about this turn of events. They resented this encroachment on their way of life. So at first they simply did not cooperate. They did not cease to read their books. They did not eat pork chops cooked in the Greek style. Eventually they found some caves up in the hills beyond the city. And then...and then...they sat around in those caves and complained. They pouted. Acted like they were mad, but insisted they really were not. They spoke in a derisive, sarcastic and demeaning way about the Greeks. They fumed at the mention of their name. They grit their teeth. They kept on saying, "But we don't deserve this." They kept on thinking, "Damned if we do, damned if we don't." They shrugged their shoulders saying, "Oh what's the use anyway?" They got depressed, despondent, and often found themselves walking in circles, muttering, "Damn them anyway!". They kept saying to themselves, "Oh, they have all the money, the media, the fine clothes and solid gold Rolex watches. We have nothing, and we're damn envious of what they have. But, hey, nothing ever goes my way anyway...it's who you know and who you bow down to who determines your success, not what you do." They would philosophize "Oh, those Greeks are all alike...why try to win them over and find any good in them?" Or "Everything always leads to disappointment anyway, so why bother? We know we are better than those damn Greeks, yes, we do; but they have all the power on their side, so what can we do? We tried marching in protest once, lit candles and everything, lots of us, but they didn't listen, they just kept on being those damn Greeks." Then they rolled their eyes, sat down, and did nothing. They never examined their own attitudes. They never got past their negative thinking, or their sarcastic sense of superiority blended with their fearful knowledge that the other side thought of them as just a bunch of losers. They lived in their guerilla caves out in the hills outside Jerusalem.

They remained resentful for the rest of their lives, bitter and always sighing and rolling their eyes. And then, as time itself declares, they eventually got old and died. Their children, tired of living under a cloud of resentment, and tired of living with such negative and depressed parents, left their caves, went into Jerusalem, cut their hair short, and ate pork chops with cream and crayfish, just like the Greeks did.

None of them ever got past their resentment, ever. No oil lamps were ever lit representing that fiery resistance. The Greeks simply continued to rule until the Romans came and whupped them good. Then the Byzantines came. Then the Ottomans. There never was any Hanukkah ...no dedication to what is right and true, namely, that no one has a right to impose their way of life on anyone else. Ever.

Wait, that's not the story is it? There actually *was* a rebellion against the Greeks. It *was* an uprising, and a violent one, too. The families in the caves said, "No! We will be who we are, we will not be what you want us to be. We will not be resentful. We will actually act clearly, cleanly and with power."

And so the Greeks were defeated, and the statues of God in the Temple were torn down and the oil lamps were lit and people rededicated themselves to the ideals they had espoused before the Greeks had come to town with their armored jeeps, nifty howitzwers and well-disciplined platoons.

Now I am not a big fan of violence, as you well know. Personally, I am convinced of the logic of the Dhammapada. I am not convinced that killing others, even terrible others, has ever done any final good, at least that I can see. In the Christian book I am reading, strangely enough, in this Hanukkah season, I also found this passage: "*War almost never ends with a true peace: it always leaves behind a remnant of hatred and a thirst for revenge, which will explode as soon as opportunity offers itself. That is why the human story has been a series of unending wars.*

War initiates a spiral of hatred and violence which is extremely difficult to stop. War aggravates problems and makes them insoluble."

*Jesus Against Christianity, Jack Nelson Pallmeyer, Trinity Press 2001

I would certainly claim that such a passage is sober fact when written, say, about the city of Jerusalem /Al Quds, which has not known very many years of peace in a row since *long before* the first Hannukah.

Now even if you think that some wars may be necessary or even just, please hear me out. I am not calling to account anyone's military service to their country. I am not calling for an end to armies. I am not going to try and convince you that I am absolutely right about this, or God help us, that I am the new Mahatma Gandhi or something. Hardly. I am just trying to let you in on how I am feeling and thinking these days.

Now "I understand resentment" our poet wrote in the second reading. But "I believe in nonviolence," she affirms. Still, she concludes: "I stick my hands in my pockets to make sure I don't pick up a rock."

I am a lot like that poet, I'm afraid. I am no more naturally non-violent than any of us are. I have to talk myself into it, read about it, philosophize. I have to stick my hands in my pockets and keep them there. The poet, like many of my friends, marched with 400,000 other people in San Francisco back in 2003, along with millions in Paris, New York and other cities around the world. They were protesting against the war in Iraq and the thousands of losses there, especially the civilians. "Lighting candles," she writes, "signing petitions, blocking intersections, chanting, walking until my feet are blistered shouting until my throat is raw, I'm trying so hard to change things but I can't even get the blood off my hands."

Our poet compared her resentment to a soldier who went berserk one day and tossed explosives into the tent of his three commanders. It's a true story, a sad one, to be sure. They say he did it because of his great resentment about how he had been treated by these men. But she tells us that her resentment seethes just like *that* resentment, i.e. it's murderous. And she says something even more incredible, even with all her actions, her candles and blisters, she still cannot get the blood off her hands. She too, she feels, is, despite her excellent pedigree of resistance, part and parcel of a vast system of violence that situates a small group of people in a circle of power, prestige and abundance, and slings the rest of humankind into poverty, disease, infighting and eternal resentment. I have to confess that I feel like her most days.

So, please, do not confuse me with Gandhi just because I make a plea for non-violence. I am just asking deeper questions. I am just raising questions about the pervasiveness of resentment in war torn lands.

Including our own. We are, after all, a nation, which, if not *torn* by war, has *been* at war much of the last hundred years. Big wars, small wars. Distant wars mostly in deserts and jungles, although we certainly felt it coming closer at hand with both Pearl Harbor and 9/11. But, as John Milspaugh says so eloquently in the first reading, while we occupy, *we are also being occupied*...not by the armies of distant nations, but by our own sisters and brothers here in our own land. Like fish in a lake, we have been hooked. "How have we been hooked?" asks the preacher. "Who is stringing us along?" Who has taken over some part of our minds and hearts for their own purposes, and done us harm in the process?

Maybe, he says, it is an industry that has convinced you that you can find happiness through its products or services. Or that their bottom line should be our bottom line. Maybe it's a politician who has persuaded you that thinking for yourself is unpatriotic. Maybe it is someone in your personal life who has convinced you that your behavior determines their happiness or fulfillment. "Hanukkah," he says, wisely, "is a time to consider how our minds and hearts and spirits have been the object of another's conquest; it's a time to recognize subtle invasions and full-scale occupations, and time to begin doing something about it."

All of these things are good examples of resentment, of things that get inside us like fish hooks, seduce us to give up our self-determination, convince us that we are powerless and need actual magic to be beautiful or loveable, tell us that our patriotism is the wrong sort of patriotism, or that we have no right to be angry or to do anything but stew without making a sound. Oh yes, resentment overlaps sometimes with envy, sometimes with hurt, sometimes with rage, sometimes with grief. But it does not do anything but stay inside its own cave and fume, numbering grudges and coming up with bitter explanations. In the words of a Jewish proverb which Michael Greenman found for me, "Resentment is when you take a dose of poison and then wait around for your enemy to die from it." What can be done about the hooks that get in us,

stringing us along? What can be done about our resentments?

The Hanukkah story gives us a rather clear answer. It invites us to rededicate ourselves to the Highest, the greatest principles we have ever had faith in. To unhook the barbs of resentment, we have to unwrap the gift of our reason and focus less on our hurts and disappointments and more on our appreciation for what is right and good in this world. We have to be bold in asking ourselves questions, like "What really

is most important to us...what the television says should be important, or what we think is important? What the headline or FOX news thinks is important and valuable and wise, or what we think is important, and valuable and wise? What the press, the press agent, the spin doctor, the televangelist, or so-called common sense tells us, or what the wisdom

of the great teachers of the world like Buddha, Mirabai, Kwan Yin or Jesus reminds us?

To do something, anything, is to begin to say goodbye to the power of resentment, its self-pity and creeping envy. Violence is not the best answer, I have tried to make clear. It has this terrible tendency to make things worse, to

create whole new generations of resentful people. But even Gandhi said, and quite clearly, that even violence was better than doing nothing at all and stewing in bitterness.

The world of our human future belongs to everyone:

Greek and Jew, Arab and European, Asian and African, Islander and Native, the urban and the rural. As the children's story made clear this morning, all children to come are our children. There can be no sectarian or political ownership of the children to come if there is to be justice of any kind, or an end to the power of resentment. Everyone of us must claim for ourselves first a sense of world citizenship. Unless we do that, the very thought of peace will sound absurd and stupid, and non-violent solutions, hands in pockets and no rocks, merely the fantasy of fools.

With the author of that Christian book I have been reading, I have to remember that there have been almost as many non-violent revolutions in our world in the last hundred years as there have been violent wars. And so, as this sermon ends, I too, with the Dhammapada, the children's story, the readings and the holiday candles, have to stake my life on the side of hope. On the side of long-suffering and patience. On the side of stubborn, lofty, messy, wonderful peace.

Offering

To support a congregation like this is one way to protest against the encroachments of a violent world. To make pledges and keep them in a dishonest world is an act of courage and peace. To be generous in a stingy world is a revolution and a foundation. Let the morning offering for the support of this congregations and its programs and various ministries be now given and received.

Blessing of the Hannukiah Lights

The miracle is, not that *oil* lasts, but that our *hope* lasts, despite disappointment. Barukh atah, tiqvah! Blest are you, hope!

The miracle is, not that *fire* illumines,
but that *we* grow brighter.
Barukh atah, zohar. Blest are you, brightness!

The miracle is, not that people tell ancient stories,
but that people dare to live their *own* stories.
Barukh atah, midrashim! Blest are you, stories!

The miracle is, not that tyranny is resisted, but that resistance recreates *us* into new beings. Barukh atah, khadash. Blest are you, new being.

The miracle is, not that courage exists,
but that courage does *not*, every time,
have to ball itself into a fist...
Barukh atah, khayil. Blest are you, courage.