**09-12-2007 Violence**

**Opening Words**
We are here
*after a week of cold sun and first snow,*
to worship, to consider with our heart
*the flame of the mind,*
and to consider with our mind
*the bright lights kindled in the human heart.*

And so, before song, silence, and story, we say

**Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.**

**The Sequence**

The cold comes now for us, sealing the sidewalks in slippery and even dangerous ice. But where the Bantu language is spoken, the sun is hot right now, the air dry. The branches of most trees outside these windows are bare now, even icicles melting.

But where the Chilean accent is heard, the vineyards are green, and the first roses are budding in the climbing sunlight. Santa Claus, white as snow, hohoho's in a thousand vast malls across the land.

But where Dutch is spoken, Sinterklaas is soon to arrive in his sail ship, and where Italian is spoken, the children expect the Witch Befana to come with a sack of presents.

And where Russian Sign is interpreted, the children will have to wait four whole weeks before Father Frost comes with gifts at the end of the first week in January.

In both hot Pretoria and in cold Columbus, Hanukkah candles are kindled these days, potato pancakes scenting the air here, and the creamy sweetness of milk-tarts over there.

O Love, the world is wide and round and full of people imagining joy in differing ways. Be with them all. And warm this, our silence, with a moment's breath in this busy season.

silence

No matter where we are on the globe, no matter which language is spoken there, love and grief accompany us, worry and hope. Each of these shines in the face of someone known to us. These let us imagine, in our most tender hearts for a moment, naming them aloud if we wish. For those of us who worship here come with all of our lives and loves within us, first and last.

naming

No matter the language or place, the festive seasons which cluster around the solstice set forth in ships of song, and carry us along with joy.

**The First Reading** *comes from an interview film director Julie Taymor gave at Columbia University on Feb 25, 2000 before a class of film Students. It took a while, but I took her spoken words off the DVD of special commentaries which comes with an actual film, which she directed, and which premiered here in Columbus. Her film, "Titus," is brilliant, but it is not for all tastes. So see it, but be cautioned. To my mind, it's the best production of one of Shakespeare's plays ever done, either on stage or screen. But it is also the most violent play Shakespeare ever wrote, so be warned. All of these words are the words of Julie Taymor. They will sound choppy, because I lifted sentences from several different parts of a half hour interview, with the questions asked by the students.*

For me, Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus is the greatest dissertation on violence ever written. Ever.

At the beginning, Titus is a rigid man, all dressed up in armor. He thinks he is invulnerable. He cannot see past order, ritual, government. His rigidity is both his vulnerability and his strength. He is not a bad man, mind you. He is doing his job.

The characters Titus and Aaron in the play are mirror images of each other. Titus commits violent acts without any malice, obedient to order. On the other hand, Aaron's violence is his art. Still, Aaron becomes human as soon as he has a child. Aaron gives up his life for his child.

But then Titus does a very Aaron type of violence at the end of the play. Very violent. Vengeful. But you find yourself rooting for him.

In Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare explores human violence. He touches clearly on every single kind. Starting with war, which we condone. We don't say that war movies are violent movies; we call them war films. Now I am not saying war must never happen. But it *is* terrible. Parents lose their children after all.

Then Titus goes into ritual violence. Religious violence. He sacrifices Tamora's children to the Roman gods. It's not much different now, with some Christians, Muslims and Jews in our age, killing and hurting each other.

Next Shakespeare brings up father and son. The son disobeys the father. The father kills the son. This is the stuff of all domestic arguments. "How dare you not do what I tell you?" The gun comes out in a fit of passion. Boom.

Then you have the lust of the boys, Tamora's sons. Their violence against young Lavinia is constantly around us in the modern world. I think of the Menendez Brothers, or that recent violence in Central Park. It's always with us.

"Give me what I want or…"

Finally there's the violence of Nihilism. Aaron is a very contemporary character. You can completely understand this man in the present. All around us we hear of young guys so disaffected and disconnected they don't give a damn about their future. Because for them there is

no future. Violent nihilistic Aaron is shocking to us when he says that last line: "My only regret is that I didn't do more."

**The Second Reading** *this morning is a well known poem by e. e. cummings, the maverick, but beloved, American poet who grew up in a Unitarian parsonage, his father being a minister. The "el" in the poem refers to elevated trains once found in New York (and still found in Chicago, of course). Before the Second World War, many of these were torn down, the scrap sold to other nations, including Japan. Japan does not call itself Japan, of course, which is not a Japanese word, but rather Nippon. So, some of these scrap metals were famously sold to Nippon, and supposedly forged into bullets used in the war. Lao Tze in this poem is the name associated with the Daodejing, the famous Chinese collection of pacifist poems. His statue stands at the center of our Asian Garden.*

plato told

him: he couldn't
believe it (jesus

told him; he
wouldn't believe
it) lao

tze
certainly told
him, and general
(yes

ma'am)
sherman;
and even
(believe it
or

not) you
told him: i told
him; we told him
(he didn't believe it, no

sir) it took
a nipponized bit of
the old sixth

avenue
el; in the top of his head: to tell

him

**Sermon**

Over in Franklin Park, off Broad, on the east side of Columbus, not far from downtown, there used to be a little lake. Next to that lake, on the 25th of February, in 1880, city officials put up a very large tent. In that tent, thousands of Civil War veterans gathered to hear the famous Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman, hold forth. He gave a great speech, I hear. But only three words from that speech have survived into our time, and even now, they are all but forgotten. Those words, as a few of you might know, are these: ***"War is hell."***

e. e. cummings refers to those famous words in his poem "plato told." What did Plato tell him? That war is hell. What did Jesus tell him? That war is hell. What did Lao tze tell him? What did you tell him? What am I telling him right now? That war is hell. Just like, "yes sir, yes ma'am," General Sherman proclaimed with such clarity right here in Columbus, Ohio. And not just with clarity. He was a general, after all, so he spoke with the experience of war in his bones.

But the young man "didn't believe it," echoes the poet over and over. So then the violence that is war, the hell that is war, the death that is war, overtakes the disbelieving young man. And a bullet forged from old scrap metal from a demolished New York City elevated train finally "told him"…by striking him and ending his life.

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Now we really don't know if the Japanese forged bullets from the old IRT railway in NYC. But it *was* commonly believed back in the 1940s by many.

And frankly, I think the interconnection idea expressed by this wartime belief is well reflected in our clever children's story this morning. This story outlines how our smallest actions are often connected to larger consequences, and that everything is interconnected in ways we often don't see. As our principles put it plainly: everything is "interdependent." We may think of this in vast ecological images, so that we imagine the death of a butterfly in Costa Rica eventually affects the price of coffee in North America. It probably does, if you connect the dots. But the idea in the story is that the concept of interdependence has an underbelly too.

In other words, a little episode of violence in our own life, small as a drop of honey, might be fairly seen as inexorably leading to larger episodes of violence in our lives. An obvious example: the computer game industry, which tops 7 billion dollars this year, only two billion short of the film industry. Over half of all United States homes have at least one video game station inside their walls. And by far most of the games played in this nation have to do with killing someone, or blowing up something. Look, I am not saying that videogames are responsible for the wars this nation fights or plans to fight. But I am saying that watching a rather realistic portrayal of a human person being blown up by you so that you might understandably *win* a game, will so serve to numb any sensitivity to violence that the plight of ten-year-old children in Baghdad might not seem very urgent to you. And please believe it. Whatever else war is about… economics, greed, entitlement, religious certainty, sacred land, competition, whatever… on the real playing field it's all about killing people, many of whom are children. Please remember also what I have said before…over half of the population of Iraq is under the age of 15.

No one makes a video game about Gandhi or Martin Luther King, sensitizing people to non-violent or reasonable approaches. No, our culture specializes in visual clues that involve bloodshed and vengeance fantasies. And those fantasies are rife in 150 million homes.

But I am talking about more than videogames. I am talking about every idea in the treatise on violence which Shakespeare wrote. As Julie Taymor asserts, it's perhaps the greatest essay on

human violence ever written. Human violence. Not lions eating impalas, or moray eels chomping at monkfish. Not tidal waves wiping out villages, or earthquakes shaking down streets. But human violence. Violence to humans by humans. Of which there are, says Shake-speare through Taymor, many kinds.

The play starts off with war. The history of war, and the history of humanity are pretty much the same history. Guerilla wars. Revolutionary wars. Civil wars. Wars of conquest, like Alexander's wars. Wars born of insane visions, like Hitler's war or Pol Pot's war. Even the Jewish half-holiday of Hanukkah is rooted in a war. During this holiday, Jews the world over celebrate the wonder of light surviving for many days even though there was not enough oil in the lamps for even one day. But, it *was* a war which decimated the lamp oil in the first place. A just war, most would call it. A war of a colonized people against their oppressors. A guerilla war of people saying, "I can be who I am, and you have no right to say otherwise." A true statement, that, certainly. Yet it remains true that even the most just of wars is still violent.

Yet, I wonder why anyone in this country, or this city, or this room, imagines that bloodshed is necessary before we call an action violent. If we use biting sarcasm against someone, because we believe we are right and they are wrong, does it benefit any of us to pretend that little drop of bitter honey is not violence too? Sarcasm, name calling, innuendo… all of these can be forms of violence. Jesus said as much 1950 years ago. He preached: "You have heard that our forebears said: *You shall not murder each other*. Right. But if you go around calling each other *damn fool*, or ridiculing each other as *soft-headed idiots*, might you not also be a worthy case for the Supreme Court?" In other words, the harsh verbal wars of our era are not so far off from more bloody kinds of war.

Next, there is religious violence. Or as the Goth queen Tamora more properly calls it in the play "irreligious piety." Her own son is offered by General Titus to the Roman gods as a sacrifice, using exactly the same form of execution as the Hebrew martyrs, whom we call the Maccabees, suffered under their Greek oppressors, according to the Second Book of Maccabees in the western scriptures. And to be sure, rigid religious certainty has helped fuel the fires of millions of other horrific deaths in human history. You and I both know how many books have been written in the last three years lifting up just that assertion.

But, if *we,* in this country, or this city, or this room, are absolutely sure of what we believe or disbelieve; if *we* have no doubts at all that we are correct, and that those who disagree with us are simply and utterly wrong, or just plain stupid or ignorant through and through; or if we disbelieve simply because we are angry at the people who raised us, how are we *any* different from those who claim to be absolutely right about their religion? How often I am aware of my own inner capacity for violence when I react to hearing people of religious certainty holding forth, like the famous picketing minister Fred Phelps! How often I wish he would just "go away." It doesn't sound terribly violent, does it? But I assure you, it's the soft, almost guilt-free form of wishing that a large meteorite would just land on him and leave a crater ten feet wide. Think of it as my inner videogame, if you would like, a form of virtual violence. But according to Gandhi expert Joan Bondurant, for the earth to become civilized, it's not just necessary to admit one's violent tendencies, virtual or otherwise. No, we are each called to walk a spiritual path, she says. We are each called to be constantly aware of such things, that by awareness we might begin to actually conquer our violent tendencies.

Next, Titus kills his son for disobedience. Titus again is rigid, having a clear idea of what families are supposed to be like. Father in charge, children obedient. Or like so many modern

families that end up in court, father in charge, wife obedient. And children too. Kept in line by anger, threats and abuse which are all forms of violence. Kept in line by innuendo, which is a form of violence. Kept in line by ridicule, which, as Jesus insisted correctly, is a form of violence.

So I have to say that the small drop of honey which is wanting-things-to-go-our-way-no matter-what leads inexorably to greater violence. Oh, I suppose we all want things to go our way, sure; but no one is *entitled* to that. That's what I am saying. No one in the whole world. Every person in every family is just that, a person. Focusing on that reality is a kind of spiritual practice, a form of prayer if you will, that might be a first step in beginning to vanquish the power of violence.

Next there is lust, or more broadly, greed and desire. The two sons of Tamora in the play do not like it when their amorous attentions are spurned, so they punish the young woman who refuses them… with monstrous torture. Again, entitlement is the issue, the rigid belief that certain people just deserve physical attention, and that those who don't agree are merely fit objects for violence. Every war from Biblical times on has formed a theatre for such forms of violence, from King David murdering Uriah the Hittite so he could have sex with Uriah's wife Bathsheva, to a thousand modern reports from round the world, war by war, of that exact same story enacted over and over again to the last detail. The beginning of violence is to claim that one *deserves* something or someone. I hear this kind of speech all the time. It's a drop of honey, not a drop of blood, sure, I'll admit that. But no one has yet made a successful case to me why anyone deserves anything more than anyone else. So I'll stick to my story. A good spiritual practice that might respond to this greed and desire is the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, where one notes, that is, is mindful of, all desires, expectations, wants and wishes, letting them flow through our hearts as if for a while we were just stream beds. They flow through, and move on…we simply note them and let them go.

Finally, Shakespeare paints the character Aaron as utterly nihilistic. His social status, as both a racial minority and a person without sufficient wealth, weaves for him such a net of despair that he utterly loses his soul. Violence for him becomes his only way of achievement and self-esteem.

Last week, at our interfaith BREAD meeting down at First Congregational, 50 Columbus congregations voted rather overwhelmingly to research issues of crime and drugs, a world of nihilism where the ordinary categories no longer apply, because the source of the violence is so systemic, and socially interwoven, with race and class central and all of it, themselves deeply rooted in rage and despair. It's going to be a difficult issue to face, all the violence out there. But because violence is so upsetting in our lives, so common a report in our ears, I knew in my heart that it would probably be the one we voted for.

But we, in this nation, in this city, in this room, can only face and conquer violence "out there" if we begin to face the potential for violence inside each of us, the little drops of honey that lead to greater transgression.

Being aware of how we speak to each other is the beginning. Sarcasm or plain speech? Innuendo or direct words?

Being aware of our own needs for certainty is the next step. Is everyone in this room the sum total of human greatness? Are we the elites? Or are others of different beliefs also struggling beside us? Is it more important to be right or not to harm each other?

Control issues are next. How much control do we think we have of those around us, in our blood families or families of choice? How angry are we when things are beyond our control? Why? What is the purpose of that anger? Is it a cry of thwarted entitlement?

Next, why is wanting what we desire so tied up with violence? Is there a problem with desire, or is it our sense of entitlement that we deserve to achieve our desire? Is there anything in us which feels entitled to anything? How did that get there?

And lastly, what mindfulness do we need, day by day, to keep ourselves hopeful enough, strong enough to dismantle nihilistic systems of oppression, of which many of us ourselves may be unwittingly apart. How can our life choices help to establish a world where the nihilism of despair is more rare?

Hanukkah begins with a war, just as Titus Andronicus does. But whereas Titus ends with nihilism and faint hope, Hanukkah does not lift up that war, but rather, kindles a whole range of bright hopeful lights, and proclaims that there really is fuel enough, spiritual oil enough, inside of us. Enough to keep the light burning through the night.

Violence has been part of human history throughout, and it hurts, it really hurts, to read the newspaper sometimes, or watch the news. But it's that capacity to be hurt, that sensitivity, which kindles hope in me, personally. And many are the other candles lit by that hope.

And by that hope, we Universalists in this room, who do not ever proclaim hell after death, can begin to decry the hell *before* death that is war. For as Plato said, and Jesus, and Lao Tze, and so many others, war *is* hell. So may our lives be lived in such a way as to abolish hell before death, as thoroughly as we have abolished it afterward.

**Offering**

**Hanukkah Peace Prayer**

In ancient days, it is written,
those who were colonized resisted the tyrants
and demanded the right to be who they were.
In our days, let those of us who have been
colonized by violence, in all of its disguises,
resist those disguises, that we might be who we might be.
In ancient days, it is written, a false god of power and culture was placed in the holy place, which never held images before.
In our days, let those of us whose holy hearts have been profaned by images of violence
rededicate (ha-nukkah) ourselves to living without such images, that peace might begin with us.
May we cease to wait for peace from above,
but practice peace ourselves in our own lives.
That one day it might be said of this our era:
Nes gadol Hayah Sham "A Great Sign Was Accomplished in Their Age."