

# Religions, Families and War

May 27, 2012

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

## Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here

*on the Memorial Day weekend*

to worship, to be honest about reality, but also

*to knock at the door of hope and healing*

that we might bless our future

*with the vision and practice of peace.*

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and everyone with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Naming Ceremony for Violet Elaine Carey

Unison Affirmation:

Though free to think and act, we are held together, like the stars in the firmament, with ties inseparable. These ties cannot be seen, but we can feel them. I cut myself in the finger, and it pains me: this finger is a part of me. I see a friend hurt, and it hurts me, too: my friend and I are one. And now I see stricken down an enemy I care least for, and it still grieves me. Does this not prove that each of us is only part of a whole?

*Nikola Tesla, June 1900*

## Sequence

The day is hot. The sun bright.

Our gardens are thirsty.

At night they are lit by fireflies.

The summer is near.

Yet it is not so everywhere.

Some places it rains and clouds thicken.

Some streets in Tasmania

know the cool wind of coming winter.

In some homes, young children learn to toddle.

In other rooms across our own nation,

especially on this weekend,

you will see tears wet on cheeks,

tears signing memories for those

who died either in Asian wars 30 years ago,

or family members weeping for family members who perished in the recent massacre

in Syria 30 hours ago.  
A Unitarian Universalist chaplain  
holds a soldier's shaking head on her shoulder  
in Kabul Afghanistan right now, where it is night,  
where there are no fireflies,  
where it is only 54 degrees.  
Come Monday, some people will visit graves,  
and leave flowers that will wilt soon  
in the relentless sun of late May.  
And yet after this weekend,  
more days,  
more months,  
more years.  
And children born on this very day will grow up and learn to toddle, and read and run.  
They too will watch the generations around them rise and fall, but they will know even more  
than we do that the world is not now what once it was,  
for the numbers do not lie...there is less war now than in any other era of human history. There  
is  
less violence, even less cruelty.  
But their days are to come. This is our moment now, our singular moment in the flow of  
moments from more violence to less. Let us receive the gift of this moment in peace, and in  
silence.

*silence*

The day is hot. The sun bright.  
And like any other day, our lives are tied  
to other lives, lives which we bring with us  
into this room with memory, and love, and grief.  
Let us remember them now, naming them  
in our hearts as part of this day, this moment,  
as a part of our living equal to our heartbeat,  
or our breathing in blessing.

*naming*

The day is hot. The sun bright.  
The song is classic. The circle it sings  
the very circle of our lives.

*(This song you're about to hear was written by Pete Seeger, who is a Unitarian Universalist, a long time member of the Community Church of NY, UU, on the island of Manhattan. The text for this song was Seeger's riff on a Ukrainian folksong lyric found in the novel by Mikhail Sholokhov's Nobel winning novel, *Quiet Flows the Don*...the melody is entirely his own.)*

**The First Reading** is taken from the Banquet Speech when Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov

*received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1965, for his great novel Тихий Дон --Quiet Flows the Don.*

Humankind is not divided into a flock of individuals, people floating about in a vacuum, like cosmonauts beyond the pull of Earth's gravity. We live on Earth, we are subject to its laws and, as the Gospel puts it, "every day has troubles and trials enough of its own, and its hopes for a "better tomorrow." Vast sections of the world's population are inspired by the same desires. They live for common interests that bind them together far more than they separate them.

The era we live in is full of uncertainty. Yet there is not one nation on Earth that desires a war. There are, however, forces that hurl whole nations into war. Is it not inevitable that the ashes of the Second World War should move the writer's heart? Is not an honest writer bound to stand up against those who wish to condemn humankind to self-destruction?

What, then, is the vocation and what are the tasks of an artist like me who sees himself, not as an indifferent god above the battlefield, but as one small particle of humanity?

To be honest with the reader, to tell people the truth - which may sometimes be unpleasant but is always fearless. To strengthen human hearts in their belief in the future, in the belief in their own ability to build this future. To be a champion of peace throughout the world.

**The Second Reading** *is a poem by the great Polish poet Anna Swirszczynska (pronounced Sphere-sh-chin-ska or just say Anna Swir) who, after a long period of silence and literary paralysis, decided to write about her experiences of the Second World War, which, of course, happened all around her, not in some faraway land.*

#### A Conversation Through the Door

At five in the morning  
I knock on his door.  
I say through the door:  
In the hospital on Sliska Street  
your son, a soldier, is dying.

He half-opens the door,  
does not remove the chain.  
Behind him his wife  
shakes.

I say: your son asks his mother  
to come.  
He says: the mother won't come.  
Behind him the wife  
shakes.

I say: The doctor allowed us

to give him some wine.  
He says: please wait.

He hands me a bottle through the door  
locks the door,  
locks it with a second key.

Behind the door his wife  
begins to scream as if she were in labor.

### **The Sermon:** *War, Religion and Families*

How do I begin a sermon with the words **war**, and **religion** and **families** in its declared title? Three such spacious and evocative words with many divergent meanings and nuances! You begin to wonder if communication is even possible with such a hefty vocabulary.

War is an especially complicated word. For example, conservative political pundits use it faithfully at Christmas time. They decry the use of the greeting “Happy Holidays!” since the only proper greeting is “Merry Christmas.” Not say “Happy Holidays” instead of Merry Christmas is to declare **war** on Christmas, or even, *on all Christians*. No guns or bombs are used in this war, as far as I know, and no one is killed, but they insist on that word. It seems a bit much to me, but I suspect the word is used there to deliberately dramatize.

President Johnson declared a **War** on Poverty, which didn't involve gunfire or bombs but rather, massive legislation. The aim of this **War** was to *prevent* death, actually: the death of body, culture, families... death due to the effects of poverty; the purpose of this **war** was not to kill people but to bring life.

The Civil **War** in our nation, however, *did* involve guns. Many young soldiers died, many families were ripped apart, and together we faced the near destruction of a nation. So let me be clear this morning that when *I* am talking about **war**, I am talking about this last meaning instead of the others.

But when I use the word **family**, however, where the definitions clearly spread out just as widely, I guess I'll have to say, for the purposes of my sermon this morning, that I mean **all families**. However shaped or defined. **Families** with parents and children, whether born into a particular family or adopted into it. **Families** without children. Single moms, single dads, same-gender couples, with or without children. Even metaphorical **families**... church **family**, choir **family**, the multi-cultural **family** group in the church, chosen **families**. Clusters of people where there are particular connections of love, or culture, or tradition or shared effort or even memory. Mere blood connection is not sufficient.

Then there is the word **Religion**, and the word **Religion** may be the most difficult of all, and here's where I may have the most push-back. When some folks use the word “**religion**” they mean only “conservative, mostly Christian religion” with clear doctrines, and a worshipful attitude toward received scripture, always perceived as completely authoritative, at least as

interpreted through a conservative lens. They especially like to offer as examples, say on television or YouTube, the *louder* preachers shouting, screaming and knocking people over with "the spirit." Or they're referring to the people building Creationist theme parks in Kentucky, or the righteous fast-talkers like Kirk Cameron finding easy marks on the street and fooling them with his relentless questions into thinking they must be **religious** like him after all.

Or they list certain popes, right-wing rabbis, or opinionated imams who have said silly, or controversial or disturbing things; or still infamous preachers like the late Rev. Falwell who stepped into politics with a muddy religious splash. **Religion** for such folks is defined as always frightful, downright stupid, the territory of the gullible and uneducated, and the source of a great deal of evil in history and in the present day world.

People whose opinions I tend to enjoy most of the time, like comic Bill Maher, will even tell you with great passion that "**religion**" is the source of most of the war in human history. But in my experience, this is usually tossed-off at me as an "of *course* its true" proclamation. It's simply stated with a knowing smirk, and if you ask for evidence, they'll come up with three words "the crusades, the inquisition, and the witch-burnings," which are large historical categories, not evidence.

Other folks are less panicked about the word **religion**, and are willing to suggest that *fanatics* are best named just that...*fanatics*, or simply "rigid reactionaries." They can find no compelling reasons to let them claim the title as the pure, emblematic or even sole representations of the word **religion**. A Zen practitioner sitting quietly; a Catholic nun running a soup kitchen in a pretty troubled neighborhood; rabbi Rami translating the Hebrew book of Qoheleth to reveal its authentic humanism; the lesbian Bishop of Los Angeles preaching a sermon on the gospel that is pure universalism; the Muslim author, Evoo Patel, writing an interfaith best-seller, the Unitarian Universalist minister conducting her 200<sup>th</sup> same-gender ceremony, this time legally, because she's in Iowa...these folks represent the word "**religion**" too.

I'm more in the last category, not just for the sake of this sermon, but most of the time. And OK, yes, I'll admit it's hard for me to embrace both the liberal and the conservative elements in wide embrace when I use the word **religion**, but it seems dishonest about the complex reality of the world around me not to do at least that. But even as I do that, I admit I will keep the corrective offered by the great Vivekenanda in my pocket as a touchstone to finger as I offer my words this morning: "*To devote your life to the good of all and to the happiness of all is **religion**. Whatever you do for your own sake is not religion.*"

Now that the initial wrestling-match with verbal meanings is at least partially out of the way, let me get down to the main themes of the sermon, despite the burdensome trinity of words in my title.

On Memorial Day, we remember all who suffered and died in wars. Soldiers yes, and civilians. Men and women and children. People speaking any language, people brought up in a thousand distinct cultures, poor or well-to-do. We remember them all. But we remember them *in the context of war*.

Wars are fought for what appears to be a variety of reasons. Territory. Outrage. Resources. Anger. Finding cultural differences to be completely horrifying. Tribalism. Greed. And yes, sometimes in part for religious reasons, understood in all of its forms, as I said.

Now certainly, some who fight wars claim to be religious. For example, there can be no doubt that both conservative Southern Baptist chaplains, and liberal Unitarian Universalist chaplains serve in the military of our nation. And there are those who carry their bibles into battle. But I really cannot find, as I read history, any evidence to support that religion *per se*, either conservative or liberal, is *the principal source or origin of war throughout human history*. Sure the crusades had some bishops offering theological reasoning, but the rank and file who fought the war, as far as I can determine from the records... did it for themselves...they were largely mercenaries who wanted money and wealth at the expense of others' lives. Yes, the men who fought the Crusades were filled with the ordinary ignorant and stupid prejudices of the time... against Jews, against Muslims, or as they called them then, Musselmen, believing they were some sort of Christian heretics. But, as historian Karen Armstrong brilliantly put it, for the Muslims, the Crusades were just a "remote border incident" at the edge of their territory. Certainly the anti-Islamic prejudice of certain bishops had religious associations, but such prejudices also had to do with grabbing up the very real wealth of the well-governed Muslim territories. The mercenaries who murdered the Jews and Muslims along the way to Jerusalem always confiscated every bit of wealth and every possession left by those they murdered. Yes, there were the so-called "Wars of Religion" in France, the Lebanese Civil War with its religious factions, and the wars between the various princes after Martin Luther's late-life nervous breakdown in Europe. But again, you can find nationalistic, economic, racial, tribal, and political reasons dominant in each of these histories. Northern Ireland is divided between Catholics and Protestants historically, yes, and the historic conflict there is significant to both religions. But more significant is the economic differences between the two religious groups, which until recently was quite severe. To ignore such a distorting economic realities by pointing only to the spittle-mouth rhetoric of Protestant divine Ian Paisley or the bombings placed by the Irish Republican Army is simply irresponsible. Religion in the Vietnam War, the two World Wars, or the Korean War? Not an easy sell there. And frankly, even though a lot of pretty ignorant fundamentalist preachers express their idea that the recent wars – in Iraq, and in Afghanistan for example – have been wars of Christianity vs. Islam, the idea is simply without foundation. Again, fanatics are just that, fanatics. They are not agents of truth and light, nor the true representatives of the rather abstract word "religion."

The most recent book by the famed biologist E. O. Wilson suggests that group loyalty has been the principle evolutionary engine of human civilization, and that war has been part and parcel of this engine. Not the family. Not friendships, or the love of children. But groups larger than families or friendship circles...i.e., nations, ethnicities, clans, the cultures of religion, and now, God help us, the fool international corporations who claim for themselves the dignity of personhood.

But this morning I would like to join the cultured questioners of Dr. Wilson, and ask two things, namely, "Why can't *the family* – the way I defined it earlier, which includes friendship circles – be a greater metaphor for evolutionary good than either *nation*, *ethnicity*, *tribe*, *race* or *religious creed*? And two, why can't the truest expression of good religion -- or good secularity for that

matter -- be to lift up the universal family of all humankind as our primary concern. Not faction, not race, not language, or culture, but the *family of **all** humanity*, to which we might devote ourselves. I finger the touchstone of Vivekenanda I kept for this moment: "*To devote your life to the good of **all** and to the happiness of **all** is religion. Whatever you do for your own sake is not religion.*"

In my years of ministry, I have attended to the pastoral issues in many kinds of families. Illness. Loss. Depression. Addiction. Etc. But only three times have I experienced the most difficult pastoral event of all: the death of children in the war, and the impact of that death on their families. In all three cases, the poem of Anna Swirczszynska you heard earlier expresses with painful clarity exactly what I experienced. The heart-rending cry – from both mothers and fathers and other family members – a cry that will never leave my soul as long as I live.

Those who make wars might tell me that such wails are the cost of war, and that everyone needs to accept that and do their duty. The needs of the clan, the tribe, the nation, the group, the creed or the identity are greater than the cries of fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, children and grandparents. Toughen up.

I really have a hard time believing that I need to toughen up. I'd rather believe that others might better soften a bit. I really have a hard time believing that children – in any nation, race, clan, or creed – are worth so much less than some pure identity, some plot of land, some stated belief, some corporate profit, some resource, *or any claim for self, and self alone*. As Sholokhov put it in his moving address when he accepted his Nobel Prize: "Humankind is not divided into a flock of individuals, people floating about in a vacuum, like cosmonauts beyond the pull of Earth's gravity. We live on Earth, we are subject to its laws and, as the Gospel puts it, 'every day has troubles and trials enough of its own, and its own hopes for a *better tomorrow*.' Vast sections of the world's population are inspired by the same desires. They live for common interests that bind them together far more than they separate them."

And I find myself remembering the moving words of our affirmation this morning too. "*And now I see stricken down an enemy I care least for, and it still grieves me,*" writes the great Serbian electrical engineer Nikola Tesla. Indeed. Why must grief itself be only tribal, racial or dogmatic? Why wouldn't grief for the loss of another member of the human family be universal? Why would anyone think peace is even the remotest possibility unless that WERE so?

I don't get it otherwise.

Both of these great thinkers, Tesla and Sholokhov, join our Polish poet, Anna Swirczszynska, in recognizing that feelings, the human heart, rooted in the love of all of our families, has the power to be greater than identity politics or identity religion for that matter, the false religion that is entirely self-serving...*my* salvation, *my* personal relationship with God.

Do I think all wars can be avoided? No. I recognize, sadly, that psychopaths like Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, or this brutal wildman in Uganda right now, Joseph Kony, who thinks of himself as a spirit medium, with both fundamentalist Protestant and reactionary Muslim elements thrown in for good measure, will always pop up. Sometimes sociopathic personalities with leadership

charisma simply have to be stopped, and that is a tragic, but realistic state of affairs.

Still, there are less wars now, less violence on earth than there ever was before. The fact that we can see everything on our computers when it happens may seduce us into thinking this is not true, but I assure you, every indicator says that it is, and I, at least, take some comfort in that.

How do I end a sermon on *war*, and *religion*, and *families*? By quoting Sholokhov again. In my preaching, I want to do what he did with his writing, namely, in his words: To strengthen human hearts in their belief in the future, and to comfort them "in the belief in their own ability to help build this future." Let your hearts be lifted!

### **Offering**

In this late May in late spring, I remember the saying: the fragrance always remains in the hand that gives the rose. So may it be for this time of offering, even if we give at other times, that what we give remains with us as a glow within our heart. The morning offering is now given and received.

### **Memorial Day Prayer for Peace**

Not peace on paper alone with fancy signatures,  
Not formal surrenders and ashes where houses were.  
Not flowers on graves, or ribbons on chests.  
But I pray in the presence of Love  
for real peace. Children who look totally different from each other playing with each other.  
People of different religions but the same gender  
dating each other to the joy of their families and friends; health care for those who can't afford it,  
food for those who are hungry; peace that is not absence but presence, not truce but trust,  
not something that's left after everything has been destroyed,  
but something that transcends greed,  
like the stubborn, spacious, singular Love I hold most dear, symbolized for some at least by the  
word holy, or even G-d. For that peace I pray...not that it descend, or rise up by power, but that  
we ourselves might slowly and steadily play it forward. Amen