

More than History
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
November 11, 2018

For reflection: *"This war, like the next war, is a war to end war."* David Lloyd George

Introduction to the Sermon

For reasons not entirely clear to me, I received a considerable number of requests to address the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, which came on November 11, 1918, with the signing of an Armistice Agreement by the major combatants. I suppose there is the appeal of having a big "round number" anniversary fall exactly on the day of worship, but I suspect the requests would have come even if the anniversary were to fall sometime during the week.

While most of my parents' generation served in various branches of the military, my family's generations had the good fortune to fall between eligibility for service during the major wars of the last century; therefore, I don't think I ever knew a veteran of WWI, but I suspect some here did. I read history and biography extensively but for some reason, have largely ignored the first three decades of the 20th century. I did read the novel focused entirely on WWI which the Gifford Library established as an all-read for Syracuse two years ago. It was a book I entirely hated. While I was struck by some of the horrors related, I didn't like the literary style and didn't care about any of the characters. The result is that I didn't have a clear sense of the emotional and spiritual impact of that war.

I am not opposed to acknowledging secular calendar events in worship and generally do so, but the requestors seemed to be hoping for something more than mention in a prayer. To be addressed more fully in worship, according to my training, there needs to be something more than history involved with an anniversary, and there needs to be some way to identify a theological perspective. For that to happen, I needed to discern that spiritual impact and a theological perspective on that war and its ending. So I had to hit the books, in more ways than one.

Introduction to Hebrew Scripture

To identify texts for today, first, I searched the Scriptures for the word "justice." It appears 139 times in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. One hundred thirty eight- of those occurrences either define or refer back to justice as tending to the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien, not taking advantage of the powerless and not taking bribes when testifying. They are references to the use of property and wealth and not taking advantage of power which accrues to us. The one hundred-thirty-ninth prohibits the shedding of innocent blood.

Our first reading, which is very familiar to us, perhaps too familiar, is often interpreted to mean that in order to be faithful, we have to do nothing –literally nothing – i.e. stay out of trouble. It is read as establishing no obligations for worshipping the Lord or engaging our neighbor. At the most trivial of interpretations it means to some that there is no need to share the wealth God has bestowed on us with anyone other than family members. Were either of those interpretations to be accurate, it would be a stand-alone text in all of Scripture. Our reading is from the prophet Micah, which we will be reading responsively. I have made two changes. I have updated images of religious events and contemporary treasure for offerings. The other change is one of translation. We are accustomed to the text closing with the phrase "and to walk humbly with our God." Translated more accurately for our time, "Humbly" is an ancient concept, not of modesty or humility, but of caution. In other words, in our relationship with God, let's remember who is God and who is not.

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Micah 6:6-8

With what shall we come before the Lord,
 and bow ourselves before God on high?
 Shall we come before him with pageants and parades,
 with toddlers in velvet and silk?
 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of stocks and bonds,
 with ten thousands of barrels of oil?
 Shall we give our child's education for our transgressions,
 our retirement and the inheritance of our children for the sin of our souls?"
*All: God has told us, O mortals, what is good;
 and what does the Lord require of us but
 to do justice,
 and to love kindness,
 and to walk carefully with our God?*

Introduction to Epistle Reading

Our epistle lesson resulted from a search for the word "peace" which appears 250 times in our Scriptures. The great majority of those occurrences either pledge no harm, bless or grant safe passage to travelers, or are simply words of greeting, just as we pass the peace in worship. The next largest group refers to instructions for peace within and among the various groups and sects in the Jewish and nascent Christian communities—in other words, living with and among those with whom we disagree. Most contrasts between war and peace refer to a nation's safety if they are in right relationship with God (righteousness), which can only be achieved by being in right relationship with our neighbor (see justice, above:-) There is the eschatological vision of the peaceable kingdom—but that is our word for Isaiah's vision, not Isaiah's. There is also Christ's uncomfortable warning that if we think he brought peace as we understand it, we're bound for disappointment. Once again, we have our work cut out for us. Let's listen for God's word of peace as it came from St. Paul to the church at Philippi.

Epistle Reading: Philippians 4:4-14

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Sermon: More Than History

Armistice Day—as a matter of theology, today we will focus on the image of Armistice Day rather than Veteran's Day—a change made to the name in 1954 to include all the combatants of subsequent wars. There is a movement today, even among veterans in this nation, to change the name back to Armistice Day, not out of a lack of respect for honorable service, but to refocus us on the need and call for peace. As part of our reflections today, at the close of our service, we will join churches around the world in ringing our bell 11 times followed by the singing of *Dona Nobis Pacem*, our sung prayer for peace.

"Armistice" is an out of fashion word for most of us. It is "an agreement made by opposing sides in a war to stop fighting for a certain time; a truce." Please note that an armistice is not a peace treaty; it makes no argument that anything has been resolved—only that the killing has stopped.

In 1918, that would have been enough: WWI marked a sea change in war technology with the advent of the tank, the submarine, the first automatic weapons, chemical warfare and air warfare. Yet war tactics operated

as though none of those things existed. Men were sent into battle across fields to be mowed down by the thousands. In some battles in France, 60,000 casualties in a day were not unknown—it is nearly as many names as are on the Vietnam Memorial in our capital.

WWI mobilized 70,000,000 troops, 60,000,000 of whom were European; an estimated nine million combatants (including 13% of European men between the ages of 19–45) and seven million civilians died as a direct result of the war. Little wonder just stopping seemed a reason for world-wide celebration.

But even when it was over, it wasn't over. It is considered a factor in the 1918 influenza epidemic which led to tens of millions more deaths worldwide. It exacerbated rather than eased ethnic tensions that endure into our own day. The war set the stage for the 1917 Russian Revolution and the rise of Adolf Hitler twenty years later. From that war came public knowledge of a condition called "shell shock" which would become known as "battle fatigue," and we now know as "post-traumatic stress syndrome." WWI was a slaughterhouse of epic proportions.

Until I began my studies for today, I thought the quote for reflection and the abbreviated quote attributed to Woodrow Wilson, that WWI was "a war to end all wars" was the expression of a naïve hope or cynical observation that the war would have permanently resolved all the geopolitical conflicts of that or any age. We know now that WWI changed all people's understandings of safety, faith, justice, security, war and peace—forever.

I came to understand that people were speaking neither naively or cynically, as the quote is often used today. Rather, they were uttering what they believed to be an appalling truth—that having seen, death, destruction, and devastation that left no household unscathed—surely the world would never go to war again.

If we have learned anything about human nature between then and now it's that our tolerance for horror is far greater than we might like to think, far greater than is good for us or for our life together in civil society. We learn it in little and great ways every day. Certainly from what we absorb from the news media about genocide, ethnic cleansing, trafficking, starvation, disease and war that leave villages, towns and cities devastated, the earth rendered useless for decades and human spirits crushed. Surely the world's leaders ought to care enough, be strong enough, other-serving enough to bring these things to an end. How can people possibly get used to these things? How can they turn their eyes away? Why don't they stop it?

Yet, at some cellular level we know how it happens and why it doesn't stop. In our most neutral self-evasions, from advertisements we learn that we can save the world in \$20 per month pieces at a time. Most of us run an errand, or mute the ads, and we certainly don't look at them because the pain exposed because it is too overwhelming.

Perhaps, even we understand even more when we would like to acknowledge:

Sandy Hook Elementary School

Pulse Night Club in Orlando

Sutherland Springs Baptist Church

Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas

Parkland Florida

Tree of Life Synagogue

Thousand Oaks CA

We are confronted again and again with the bodies of the dead, the grieving of parents, the traumatically scarred lives of survivors and responders and witnesses—and yet as people, states and as nations we have not said, "This is the shooting to end all shootings. We will get the automatic weapons. We will have gun control. This is the end. "

Until we enter into the promised peace of God which passes all understanding wouldn't it be enough if the killing stopped? If there was an armistice that ended the reign of death wrenching our nation apart?

As we seek solutions, as we seek to bring an end to the destruction at home and abroad, as we seek to work in Christ toward peace, it is a time to walk very carefully with our God and with our neighbors. Scripture makes clear, again and again, that however we define peace, whatever the peace is that Christ will bring, is not obtained without justice.

One way that we move toward that justice and peace is by painting pictures of the world we hope to live

in with God's help. The sages of proverbs wrote, **"A people without vision will perish."** Vision is not born of criticism, nit-picking, deciding in the leisurely risk-free aftermath how we could have done it better, or how other Christians or other political parties are the problem.

Critical thinking has great value. At its best, it is creative; it educates minds, solves problems and learns from history. Critical thinking is not relentless criticism. Even at its best, critical thinking never changes hearts or elevates spirits. Vision does that. And hopeful vision is the church's business and calling. So, if we want vision, if we want **to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk carefully with our God**, then we need to work inside and outside the church with people with whom we disagree, whose beliefs we do not share, be they Christian, Sikh, Jewish, Muslim, Republican, Democrat, Independent... We're called to righteousness, not self-righteousness. We are called to join hands and hearts with our neighbors. It is easy to assume that we personally or in our homes or even in our church, have the answers, know the right way, the right thoughts everyone should think. It is a time to walk very carefully with our God – not presuming to know the mind of God; nor presuming that we are better, smarter, more loving and more faithful than anyone and everyone who disagrees with us. That is the kind of relationship building necessary for the doing of justice and moving toward peace which the world so desperately needs.

It begins with St. Paul's instructions. **Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen, and the God of peace will be with us"** and for God's sake, let us get the guns.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Most holy God: In prayer, we find our place- you the creator, we your creatures. as we open our whole selves to you, please gift us with your healing inspiring spirit equipping us for your son's service in the world.

We pray with thanksgiving for the gift of faith, for the invitation to walk carefully with you, for this congregation, its caring and commitment, not only for us but for your world.

In silence, we pray for all those who have died in war-time --combatants and non-combatants alike, people we know and people we don't, here and around the world.

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Dear God, we pray for peace.... Dear God, we pray for the healing of nations. Dear God. We pray for peace. Dear God. Make us instruments of your justice and your peace.

The Lord's Prayer