

PRACTICING PEACE
Rev. Sylvia L. Howe
© December 4, 2005

First Parish Church
Unitarian Universalist
225 Cabot Street
Beverly, MA 01938

READINGS

Rob Cotta

Pax by D. H. Lawrence

All that matters is to be at one with the living God
To be a creature in the house of the God of Life.

Like a cat asleep on a chair
At peace, in peace
And at one with the master of the house, with the mistress,
At home, at home in the house of the living,
Sleeping on the hearth, and yawning before the fire.

Sleeping on the hearth of the living world
Yawning at home before the fire of life
Feeling the presence of the living God
Like a great reassurance
A deep calm in the heart
A presence
As of the master sitting at the board
In his own and greater being,
In the house of life.

A Network of Mutuality by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love. Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. We shall hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

Oh Lovely Peace from Judas Maccabeus

*Oh lovely peace,
With plenty crown'd
Oh lovely, lovely peace!
Come spread thy blessings,
They blessings all around;
Oh lovely, lovely peace!*

SERMON

Writing this sermon has been a bit of a challenge. My dilemma? How do I talk about peace when a major thread of the Biblical Hannukah passages is about war, smiting one's enemies, conquering heroes, and gloating victorious. Handel's glorious music does not help. It's as if he was hell bent on glorifying the aggressor, the victor, the winner. Actually it's not "as if," he was.

Handel composed Judas Maccabaeus in 1746 at the suggestion of the Prince of Wales, to commemorate the victory of his brother, William, Duke of Cumberland, over Charles Edward, the Pretender, at the battle of Culloden. The story was taken from the first book of Maccabees, and the twelfth book of Josephus' "Antiquities of the Jews." The author of the libretto was the Rev. Thomas Morell, D.D., a scholar of the day.

Robert suggested that the choir perform this piece more than a year ago. I knew nothing about it. Two weeks ago during our weekly meeting, he showed me the sections of the score that he planned to use. It was then that I had my first niggling concern that perhaps I should not have titled my sermon Practicing Peace. Conquering victors hardly seemed to desire peace.

But then, it all changed. As many of you know, the church is currently between sextons. It has fallen on volunteers and staff to perform the duties that we've come to expect the sexton to do. Everyone has risen to the occasion and the custodial tasks are being done.

Changing the sermon board in front of the church has become Robert's and my responsibility. I am able to get the board out of the frame and change the wording, but, being height impaired, I can't quite manage to get it back in. Robert does not have this problem. On Wednesday, when he put the board back into place, he noticed my sermon title, Practicing Peace. Why he didn't notice it when I gave him the draft is beyond me, but he didn't.

When I came to church on Thursday, he excitedly waved the music in my face. Sylvia, I want to add this duet. I think you'll like it. I thought of it when I read your sermon title. We can add the words to the order of worship.

I read the words. He was right, they were wonderful. And I groaned. Robert, the order of worship is already printed. We would have to reprint the whole thing.

You know how the story ended. Donna and Janet sang the duet. And Rob Cotta included the words in his readings. It reminds us that the goal of the conquering hero is peace. Peace is his vision. Peace is what he sought. Peace is his objective.

However, you and I know that peace, on any level is a pretty lofty goal and seemingly impossible to achieve. And I also believe that it is possible. It is possible because I believe that individual people can take personal responsibility to change themselves and by doing so change the world.

One of the things we learn when we begin therapy or join an AA group is that we cannot change another person's behavior. The only person we can change is our self. We can only change how we act, how we behave, and how we react to what is going on around us. Something amazing happens when we do this. When we change, change happens all around us. Think about this.

Think about what happened when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus.

Think about what happened when Nelson Mandela refused to bear grudges and invited his jailors to his inauguration as President of South Africa.

Think about what is happening because Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided to let go of the West Bank.

Think about what could happen if President Bush admitted that the war in Iraq was a mistake.

Think about how we might change the world if you, each of us, practiced peace every day of our lives.

As the familiar song says, peace begins with you and me. We know the truth of this because, as Unitarian Universalists, we believe that we are part of the interconnected web of all existence. And so, in the manner of Buddhist priest and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, starting with our self, we can begin to practice peace.

I invite you to begin practicing peace by becoming aware of your breathing.

Breathing in, I calm my mind.
Breathing out, I am at peace.

Breathing in, I open my heart.
Breathing out, I am at peace.

Breathing in, I relax my body.
Breathing out, I am at peace.

Breathing in, I give thanks for life's blessings.
Breathing out, I am at peace.

Breathing in, I vow to embody serenity.
Breathing out, I am at peace.

Breathing in, I bless the world.
Breathing out, I am at peace. -slh

If there is to be peace in the world,
There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
There must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
There must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
There must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
There must be peace in the heart. - Lao-Tse
*If there is to be peace in the heart,
There will be peace in all we do and say. -slh*

Amen, Blessed Be, So Be It