

## **Mercy Without End**

A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

Sunday, May 26, 2024

Unity Church Unitarian

The year was 1917. The location was Montreal, Canada. The meeting was the General Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches. The United States had entered World War I in April of that year. It should not be surprising to us that the Unitarians gathered from all over the continent had different opinions about this war and about war in general -- four different opinions to be precise. The first group agreed with President Woodrow Wilson, that the Allies were battling to make the world safe for democracy, and they laid the blame squarely on German and its allies as the aggressors. The second group supported the war effort but were not certain about who was at fault. A third group said the war must be ended immediately, even if that meant peace without victory. But a fourth group, likely the smallest group of the four, was represented by the Rev. John Haynes Holmes, minister of the Church of the Messiah in New York City. Holmes was a devout pacifist – opposed to not just the current war, but all war. In a written statement, Holmes wrote “I am a pacifist, a non-resistant, I hate war and I hate this war and so long as I live I will have nothing to do with this or any war.”

The Moderator of the Conference was a recent President of the United States William Howard Taft. Taft was outraged. He had expected Unitarians to line up solidly behind the war effort. In an effort to make the position of the Unitarian denomination clear, he made a motion stating “Resolved, that in the sense of this Unitarian Conference that this war must be carried to a successful issue to stamp out militarism in the world, that we, as the Unitarian body, approve of the measure of President Wilson and congress to carry on this war, restrictive as they may be.” Thus, one of the most important debates in the history of our denomination ensued, between Taft and Holmes; Taft, arguing that it was imperative that Unitarians show up unanimously behind the war effort, for doing otherwise would not respond adequately to the “great issue that is being fought for, for which the blood of our dearest is being shed.” As such time as when our house is afire, Taft continued, it is not proper to consider “whether the firemen are using the best kind of water.” Taft prevailed, and John Haynes Holmes led his church outside the American Unitarian Association for decades afterwards.

Why bring up something that happened over a century ago, about a war that has long been over, and about people who have long been dead? History has much to teach us about not only about the complexities of war, but the foundations of it – the reasons for conflict – and provides us with an opportunity to reflect on where we find ourselves on the Memorial Day weekend as this nation watches the unfolding horrors of war day after day. According to the Geneva academy, there

are 110 violent conflicts around the globe right now. Occasionally we hear news about the conflicts in Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan. There is shockingly little said about the violence in Haiti, where the government has collapsed and gangs rule in the capital of Port-au-Prince. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has become the same news now after more than two years. The war which has captured the center stage of our attention today is the on-going war between the state of Israel and the leadership of Hamas, after the brutal attack on Israeli civilians on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

Before I continue, I want to make a few things clear. I am a pastor, not a politician; I am a minister of liberal theology and not an expert on Middle East relations. I have no Jewish, Israeli, Palestinian or Muslim heritage. But I do have a small amount of personal experience in Israel and Palestine. During 2011, my husband and I participated in a program then called Witness for Peace, whereby we spent a month in Israel meeting with both Palestinian and Jewish activists who were engaged in the daily struggles of peace-making. We lived in the West Bank and met families who were displaced in 1948 and longed to return to their land. We toured Jewish settlements that felt like California suburbs and witnessed violence against Palestinians by settlers from makeshift settler encampments. We heard stories from Israelis, who lived in fear through the Second Intifada, or Palestinian uprising. We visited the town of Sverrot next to Gaza which has been subject to rocket attacks many times over the decades and since October 7<sup>th</sup>. When

we embarked upon this journey into the Holy Land, I thought I knew what was right and what was wrong. Like John Haynes Holmes, I was clear that pacifism was the only answer. Like the protestors on college campuses today, my position was to always side with the oppressed. I thought I knew how to solve the conflict in the Middle East with one word. Peace. Just make peace.

It's embarrassing to admit how hopelessly naïve I was then. It's also easy to be an armchair pacifist; to watch the stories unfold on the news and to say "one side is evil; the other side righteous." One of the teachings of this church is to expand our ability to hold ever more layered levels of complexity. And if there is a situation where complexity is writ large – it is our current conflict in the Middle East.

Notice I said "our" . All of us have a stake in what happens in Israel and Palestine. Despite one presumed presidential candidate who has espoused an America First isolationist policy towards the global politics – we know that we are truly interdependent. What happens in Gaza affects what happens throughout the Middle East. It affects our country and our election because we are a country of Palestinian Americans and Jewish Americans among all the other identities that comprise our national experiment in democracy. And of course, the conflict affects our economy, not just our global financial economy but also our moral economy. By that I mean the ways in which we – as human beings – can enlarge our collective capacity to hold the values that are central to most of the world's faith

traditions. That is - our capacity for mercy – for forgiveness – for reconciliation – our capacity --for constructing a lasting peace. In other words, do our hearts and hopes shrink with what seems to be instead humanity’s ever- expanding capacity for war and retaliation; or can they expand to embrace the more difficult challenge of peace?

This is an ancient question. I’m struck by a story in the Gospel of Luke, as Jesus approaches the city of Jerusalem. He came near the city and wept, saying “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now, they are hidden from your eyes.” And so we weep with him, not only for Jerusalem, but for a country and a people who have consistently been told “to get out of this country,” or be killed. We weep for the Jewish people, for whom the Holocaust is not a historical event, but an epigenetic trauma that lives in the bodies of Jewish people. At its best, the state of Israel, represents what we all want – a place to call home; a place to raise children; to create art and music and community; a place to practice one’s faith without persecution; and a place to live in peace.

And we weep for the Palestinians, who remember the Nakba, which means the catastrophe, a collective trauma of displacement for Palestinians. In 1948, approximately half of the Palestinian Arab population, around 750,000 people, were expelled from their homes, first by Zionist paramilitaries and then by the Israel Defense forces. Palestinians still have in their collective memories the

displacement from their homes. I have met some Palestinians who still had the keys to the home they once lived in, homes long occupied by Jewish settlers. It is no exaggeration to say that Palestinians are living in apartheid; and that the current right-wing Israeli government is the most hostile to the ambitions and hopes of the Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestine that has ever existed.

What then, are the things that make for peace? If I had “the” answer I would likely not be here, preaching from the safety of a pulpit in Saint Paul, Minnesota. While the answer to that question remains elusive, what we can explore are the things that make for conflict. I have come to understand that there are six things that are at stake in conflict -- whether it is conflict with your spouse, your partner, your family, your kids, your job, your country. I first heard this summary from the podcast called “Where Shall We Begin” by Esther Perel. This podcast is about the breakdown in human relationships. Over her many years, she’s found that most fights are about these six things: Power and Control; Respect and Recognition, and Care and Concern.

When you think about your own lives, perhaps you can see how these have figured into your own struggles. Power and control when raising children, especially toddlers and teens, is obvious. You as the parent have both the power and control; but how you wield that power and control is what matters. When I consider the politics of Israel and Palestine, power and control are deeply embedded in this conflict. Do Jews, have power over our own lives – to create a

homeland where from which they can never expelled again? That's why campus protest chants of "from the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free" are so deeply offensive to Jews, because it is understood as a desire to eradicate the State of Israel – completely, and not as a call for freedom for all Palestinians in the West Bank, in Gaza, and in Israel. You can argue that the phrase is not antisemitic, that it does not call for the destruction of the Jewish people, but it triggers an ancient trauma of displacement and destruction.

Palestinian people are longing for power and control as well – power over their daily lives, without having to live under the thumb of Israel and its military that governs where and how they can travel or build their homes, and that ignores the violence directed at them from Jewish settlers. With no functioning Palestinian state, where is there hope for the Palestinian people's ability to control the direction of their own lives? This routine everyday desperation will sustain many more generations of resistance that tragically boils over into terrorism.

The terrorism that Israel experienced on October 7<sup>th</sup> cannot be ignored. 1,200 people were murdered, and some 250 hostages were taken into Gaza. Stories of sexual violence perpetrated against Israeli women are emerging in horrific detail. More than 35,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 2.3 million people have been forced to leave their homes. There is no safe place for Palestinians to go, as it would appear that the current Israeli commitment to destroying Hamas could include destruction of Gaza as a Palestinian homeland.

Each one of the death statistics in this conflict was a person – had a story – a family who loves them. Both sides – Israelis and Palestinians are suffering enormous harm – the consequences of which will now last for generations.

Two more of the sources of conflict are the lack of respect and recognition. In wartime, these two seem to be the lesser of the six. When you are at war, you do not respect your enemy. You do not recognize their humanity. You want to destroy them. That's what war is about – destroying the enemy so that they don't exist. Yet we know, that winning a war does not win a cause; it's like the poem by Langston Hughes, who asks: what happens to a dream deferred, does it dry up, like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore – then run? Does it stink like rotten meat – or crust and sugar over – like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?"



Hughes identified this impulse correctly – it explodes into hatred, violence, recrimination, retaliation, on and on and on, war without end.

When Wayne and I were in Palestine, we witnessed a meeting between Israeli parents whose children were killed by Palestinians; and Palestinian parents whose children were murdered by Israeli's. We witnessed these families coming together, first, breaking bread together for a shared meal. Then, we heard their stories – of the son who was throwing stones at Israeli police – shot and killed, his only weapon, a small rock; and the eighteen-year-old Israeli soldier, conscripted into the service, who wanted to be a poet and instead, shot dead by a Palestinian sniper. Although these deaths were not recent, the pain was palpable – as was their anger. The anger, however, was not at each other. Both families recognized that their anger was born out of the pain of the politics of their respective countries. The Israelis spoke about how the then current leadership of Israel did not represent their wishes or their interests. They felt hopeless against the ever encroaching right-wing, oppressive policies against the Palestinians. And the Palestinian families spoke about the corruption that was evident in that was called at that time the Palestinian Liberation Organization; their abject failure to create a government that worked for them; that listened to them and could protected them from the hatred of zealots. And now, their children were dead.

What they had now was this slow, agonizing process of recognizing one another's pain, and in that recognition, finding respect for the other as a hurting human being. It was moving to witness, while at the same time, the cost of peace should not be our children's lives.

This leads me to the third set of Perel's source of conflict: Lack of Care and Concern. When weighed against the enormous complexity of the Israel – Palestine conflict, this one would appear to be the most anemic. Sure, I can care that Israelis feel traumatized by the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>, but does that care extend to the treatment of Palestinians? Of course I am concerned about Palestinian apartheid, but does that justify the slaughter of civilians? It's a no-win argument. The problem with protests is that there is very little room for nuance or for complexity. To extend care to another person is perceived as weak and yes, the epitome of bleeding heart liberalism. That's what makes conflict so complicated; and sometimes, so intractable. How can I hold these two seemingly opposite viewpoints in one mind and one heart? On a micro-scale: how can I be furious with you and still love you and want to be in a relationship with you? How can I be concerned about your well being even when you are driving me crazy?

On the macro scale - How can I be utterly devastated by the October 7<sup>th</sup> attacks and understand the desperation, anger and fear of the Palestinians? How can I care about both equally? It would be like asking me to tell you which one of my grandchildren I love more. The question is unfathomable. There is no answer to that question, because my heart has the capacity to see the uniqueness in both and to love them both fiercely, passionately and completely.

As I said, I don't have an answer to these questions, but there is one answer I'm sure about – and that is, that war is NOT the answer. It may seem like the only response to one short-term political problem, but it only creates hundreds-thousands more down the road. War teaches us to suppress feelings of compassion and kindness because there is no room for that when you are trying to exterminate your enemy. War suppresses our instincts for one of the most important religious and spiritual qualities we possess – the capacity for mercy.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word “mercy” is used 296 times. In the Christian scriptures, it's used another 43 times. Why is this important? Because if you return to its root meaning, mercy is “compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.” The Hebrew translation of mercy is Ra-cha-min, derived from the most motherly organ in the human body – the womb.

It refers to the bond between the person who carries a child in their womb and the child. It is the deepest level of compassion that any word can suggest. It suggests compassion at a cellular level; in the ability to create life to sustain life. When you create life, whether from your own body or from the practice of peacemaking, you are also willfully choosing to limit your own power to harm.

To put it more simply, when you care about someone – or something – you may know exactly where they are most vulnerable, yet you refrain from the impulse to harm them. As I wrote this, I recalled a moment in my own childhood, when I had pushed my brother’s patience with me to the limit. I knew where he was most vulnerable and went for the emotional jugular vein. I knew I struck a nerve when I saw his face crumble; his heart flayed open and he raised his hand as if to strike me. But he stopped and ran away. The power to hurt him was momentarily intoxicating; but the knowledge that I had done so - was devastating. Shameful. It was a feeling I never wanted to experience again. Somewhere in that brief moment, there emerged mercy. Mercy from him, that he refrained from hitting me; mercy as my teacher, to know I could cause great harm. – Mercy as “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.”

We speak so often about war without end, and I am not so naïve as to believe that war can be abolished solely on mercy alone. But, war will not cease without it. If we cannot hold the complexity of this history; if we cannot feel the pain of both sides in this conflict; if we cannot see ourselves in the micro-conflicts, then we are no better than the parlor generals and armchair pacifists. I think back on the opening story I told of the heated conflict between Taft and Holmes. Taft not only insisted that all Unitarians in that meeting must support the war effort. In fact, the American Unitarian Association voted to deny aid to congregations with ministers that did not support the war. As a result there were Unitarian ministers who had taken pacifist positions in opposition to the war lost their pulpits.

I know that in and among this room, and those watching online will likely have a lot more than four different opinions about what I've said today – and like me, multiple, perhaps conflicting feelings about the war, the state of Israel, and the fate of the Palestinian people.

We may not be able to agree on the politics or even the process. But what we can agree on – what we will be doing in a few minutes – is to mourn the lives lost to war; and the lives lost due to suicide or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that many returning veterans must live with.

What we can pray for this day – this weekend – is not just the faint hope that all wars around the world will end – but something more real, something we can bring about ourselves in our own way, in our own lives – the possibility of cultivating mercy – mercy without end – streams of mercy, as the hymn suggests, never ceasing, calling for songs of loudest praise. Come, thou fount of inspiration, turn our lives to higher ways, lift our gloom and desperation, and show the promise of this day. Amen and may it be so.