



November 13, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

## "Studying Peace"

Readings: Psalm 1: 1-3; Luke 6: 27-31

Last year I had the opportunity to hear Dr. David Kuhl speak at a gathering of ministry personnel. David works with people who are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. One of the groups he frequently works with are physicians and soldiers returning from tours of duty in Afghanistan. Because we were a gathering of Christians he reminded us at the beginning of his talk of the story of Jesus baptism and how after Jesus comes out of the river Jordan he hears the voice of God say "you are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased." Then he shared with us how those words are among the most important words returning soldiers need to hear. You are my beloved. That's because the wounds inflicted on their souls from being surrounded by and involved with so much fear and violence for so long are so deep, it's often only deep love that can heal them.

But after he shared this with us, I found myself wondering what it would be like to plant those words "you and my beloved" deep within the souls of young soldiers before they head off to war.

A couple of weeks ago in my sermon on the Jesus that didn't die for my sins, I mentioned that the primary reason Jesus was executed by the Roman authorities was not to save us from our sins or because God was trying to prove a theological point. Jesus was executed because he preached non-violence as the way to attain peace in the world whereas the Roman Empire preached conquering one's enemies as the way to attain peace.

Somehow what's been lost in the Christian tradition, except by the Mennonites and a few others like them, is that in the early church Christians were actually banned from the military because they couldn't be trusted. They couldn't be trusted because they were known to have outside allegiances, specifically allegiances to God and to humanity rather than to the empire. Early Christians actually took Jesus at face value when he said love your enemies and turn the other cheek. That's how one lived the Christian life right up until the time of Constantine when suddenly you had to be a Christian to be in the army because under Constantine's rule the church and state became one. Contemporary theologian Dominic Crossan says when we discover this we realize what an accommodated people Christians have become.

On Friday morning when we were observing a moment of silence in our home with our children watching the Remembrance Day ceremonies from Ottawa we talked with the kids about the emotions portrayed on the faces of the vets. The sadness of painful memories they will take to their graves.

We all know that war is wrong. We know that violence begets violence in our homes, in our communities and between nations, but for some reason we cannot seem to make the leap as human family from what we know in our heads to how we act with lives. For some time now I've been wondering, what are the spiritual practices we need to engage in or to participate in and create here on earth the kind of peace we long for.

How do we become students of peace rather than students of war?

This morning I want to suggest three practices we can all engage in that lead to peace. The practice of welcoming the stranger; the practice of loving our enemies and the practice of knowing who we are. To illustrate these practices I want to share with you three remarkable stories.

First, welcoming strangers. Most of us have heard the stories of how during the time of the Holocaust thousands of Jews were saved by those who hid them in their homes in countries like Poland, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Germany itself, but until last year I had never heard about the way Albanians also participated in sheltering Jews. The thing that's so remarkable about the way the Albanians did that is that it wasn't just individuals who risked their lives to harbour Jews from the Nazis, it's the way the entire nation did that.

In Albania there is something called the Besa Code. It's a moral pledge so engrained in the DNA of Albanians that the Albanian word for stranger also means guest. The code requires all Albanians to live morally and honestly and also requires them to be willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others who come to them in need. And so during the war when the Jews began to seek refuge from the Nazis and they knocked on doors of Albanian Muslims and Christians they were compelled to let them in, they had to. You see if someone seeks Besa from you, you are literally responsible for their life. If that person loses their life because you have not "kept the Besa" you become accountable to the entire community.

So during the Holocaust not only did Jews find refuge in the homes of Albanians willing to risk their lives by welcoming them, the government gave issued them all Albanian passports so that when the Nazis asked about the Jews they could say "we have no Jews here, only Albanians." This is why there is no record of a single Jew being killed in Albania during the war. The community took them in, they dressed them in Hijabs, and they found work for them.

There is even the story of one man who was harbouring a Jew and when the Nazis arrived at his door asking to see his son the man replied "I have two sons." "We know you have only one" said the Nazi soldiers which one is not yours?" So the man turned to his "sons" and said "now is our time to show who we are." His own son stepped forward and they shot him.

The Besa Code is a way of life for Albanian, the practice of welcoming strangers as one would want to be welcomed oneself. It is the kind of spiritual practice that leads to peace.

The second practice is that practice of loving our enemies.

On January 16, 2009 a pair of Israeli tank shells ripped through the bedroom of a home in Gaza. The home belonged to Dr. Izzeldin Abuellaish, a Palestinian gynecologist. The attack left three of his daughters Bessan, Aya and Mijar and his niece Noor dead, killed instantly. Two other daughters were critically wounded. Dr. Abuellaish, who had spent his career delivering both Israeli and Palestinian babies somehow managed to successfully plead for safe passage to the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv where his daughters' injuries were treated by some of Israel's finest doctors and some of Dr. Abuellaish's closest friends.

Last year Dr. Abuelaish published a book entitled "I Shall Not Hate" in which he pleads with Israeli and Palestinian leaders to adopt the practice of medical personnel who treat their patients with respect, equality, dignity and justice and who seek partnerships with others for the sake of saving lives. Clearly fighting one another is not bringing peace he says.

I cannot help but think Dr. Abuelaish's conviction not to become the enemy but rather to love those who hate him must come from years of sustaining a deep reverence for life through his work as a gynecologist saving lives, bringing life into the world.

The spiritual practice of loving our enemies, revering life, all life, even the life of those who hate us, treating one another with grace, is the kind of practice that leads to peace. Finally a story about knowing who we are.

Fayette is the name of a woman I first heard about from Janet Wolf who used to be the minister at Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Hobson is an inner city church that went from having 30 white, middle class, aging members to over 200 members when as Janet says she told them to start actually taking the bible seriously, which they did by opening their doors to their neighbours. So now they are a diverse group of people of every colour with PhD's and 2 cars in the garage and grade three educations and living on the streets.

Fayette came to Hobson years ago. She was struggling with mental illness and lupus and living on the street. But she wanted to become a member of the church so she started attending a membership class in which she learned about baptism. Janet, the minister said that baptism is "a holy moment when we are named by God's grace with such power it won't come undone." Fayette loved this idea and she would ask about it over and over again until when she would ask the question "And when I'm baptised I am...?" the class would respond "you are a beloved, precious, child of God and beautiful to behold."

The day of Fayette's baptism came and after the water was touched to her head she cried out and now I am.... And the whole congregation said "you are a beloved, precious, child of God and beautiful to behold."

A couple months later Janet got a phone call to say that Fayette had been beaten and raped and was in the county hospital. So she went to see her. When Janet walked into the room Fayette turned to her and said "I am a beloved, precious, child of God.. and" then she turned and saw her bruised and bloodied image in the mirror and continued "and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away!"

The practice of knowing who we are, beloved, precious, children of God, beautiful to behold, is a practice that leads to peace.

No wonder that day Dr. David Kuhl talked to us about post-traumatic stress syndrome in soldiers I found myself wondering what would happen if we taught our soldiers how beloved they are before they went to war.

Few of us have to practice peace in the dramatic ways these three stories have illustrated for us. But in our own way committing to the practice of welcoming strangers, loving our enemies and knowing who we are can root in us the kind of behaviour that makes for peace in our world; the kind of behaviour that over time becomes the habit of our hearts. The kind of behaviour that opens us to the source of peace and grace and power that is beyond our greatest failures and capable of bringing us what we cannot seem to bring to on world on our own.

The landscape of our human existence is a landscape of imperfection, but by grace we can make it a more peaceful countryside.