

NEEDING PROPHETIC PEACEMAKING

A Sermon Delivered for
The First Parish in Needham
The First in a Series on
“The Signs of the Times”
Sunday, November 11, 2007
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Ancient Reading

Matt. 16:1-4 NRSV

[They] came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be give to it except the sign of Jonah.” Then he left them and went away.

Modern Reading

James Luther Adams

The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which the members share in the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional) with the intention of making history in place of being merely pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we foresee doom and mend our common ways.”

— from *The Prophethood of All Believers*.

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Today I’m beginning a series of sermons on the theme, “The Signs of the Times.” Emerson once used that title for a lecture series. It’s a good one, but it always reminds me of an amusing story told by the late Clinton Lee Scott, a great Universalist minister.

During the height of the Great Depression, Clint was serving a downtown church in Philadelphia. The neighborhood was changing, full of immigrants and poor people. The middle-class members of the church had mostly moved to the suburbs. So the big old building was largely empty during the week. Clint soon fixed that. He began bringing in and setting up programs to teach English to immigrants, to provide after-school activities, and much more. Soon the church was a beehive of activity. The elders weren’t sure what they thought of letting all this riff-raff into their fine church, so when Clint kept talking about getting one of those new, neon signs to let everyone know all the events going on, the board kept putting him off. Finally, they said that they would take up the matter at a meeting, when they knew Clint had to be away. But he’d have an answer on his return. On his desk when he got back he found a note from chair of the deacons. It read simply, “Dear Pastor, See Matthew 16: 4.” Wherein Clint read, “an evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, but the same shall be not be given unto it. . .” (KJV)

One of the false interpretations of the signs of our times, I’m convinced, is that religion, and simple human difference, is the cause of violence and war. The solution: make everyone the same, and without religion. Excuse me: but I think Marxists tried that! Although what they offered was really a new pseudo-religion.

It's like the fellow who had fallen down a steep cliff. Luckily, he was able to grab a tiny little sapling growing out of the rocks. But as it pulled loose, he looked up and prayed, "God, save me!" And then heard a Voice from on high, saying, "Trust me! Just let go!" To which he responded, "Is there anyone else up there?"

Like everything else in culture, religion can be manipulated – by unscrupulous leaders of national and religious groups within which religion is a part of the collective identity. But if the Voice of God can be invoked in name of violence, it can also be invoked in the name of peace. And has been. Just consider the names Gandhi, or Martin Luther King. And never more have their living equivalents been more needed than just now.

It's not just the stock market that has been in free fall lately. So has America's reputation in the world community, confidence in the global future, and all sense of stability in our relations with the Muslim world -- what with martial law now in Pakistan, Turkey about to invade northern Iraq, and ominous talk of bombing Iran and starting "World War III."

Later this month there will be a conference in Annapolis, Maryland, ostensibly aimed at reaching a comprehensive settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict. I say "ostensible" because few knowledgeable observers hold out much hope for a Palestinian leader with no real authority whatsoever and an Israeli prime minister who has lower popularity than President Bush to reach an agreement that can be implemented. Experts in foreign affairs have been warning that a conference that fails will be worse than no conference at all. Some think that its real purpose is to build an anti-Iran coalition with Sunni Arab states, the US, and Israel.

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem," it says in Psalm 122. And I do. Every time I go the gym at the Jewish Community Center to work out I go up Yitzhak Rabin Drive, named for the courageous Prime Minister of Israel who was assassinated twelve years ago last week by a right-wing opponent of his efforts. I shook hands with Rabin just ten days before that, at a celebration at the US Capitol for the third millennium of Jerusalem – introduced by the late Senator Paul Wellstone. The prospect of peace then seemed real.

Some say that if Yassir Arafat had only agreed to what he was offered at Camp David, the international community would have made peace happen. Arafat probably correctly calculated that he would have been killed, by one of his own people, as was Anwar Sadat. But that just makes it clearer, I'm afraid, that a chief sign of our times is our desperate need for prophetic, courageous efforts at peacemaking.

Not that I think that this is simple, or easy. For years now I have been doing what one author calls "fighting with Gandhi." Because as much as I respect the kind of mass non-violent movements for justice that the Mahatma led, and that Dr. King adapted, I've never been convinced that one means can be adapted to all situations or political cultures. Part of reading the signs of the times, it seems to me, involves discerning when the witness of people willing to put their own lives on the line for peace is what's needed, and when it's something else -- including armed intervention to prevent mass bloodshed, as in Darfur -- that may be called for instead.

The prophet Jeremiah, after all, famously scorned the false prophets who cried, "Peace! Peace!" when there was no peace. And James Luther Adams used to warn all of us who seek to be prophetic in our actions and witness that the ratio of false prophets to true probably remains about what it was in the time of Elijah: about 450 to 1.

So when it comes to the perpetual debate between pacifists, pure and simple, and those who adhere to the tradition of 'just war' -- waged only, mind you, for just cause, to protect the vulnerable, and by just and proportional means -- well, I increasingly think that we need a two-armed approach to effective peacemaking. We need respect for all those on the Left who take the risk of being open-handed and disarming in saying "Stop! Stop the violence!" For those who decide that they are conscientious objectors to all war, like the young man from our congregation, who, on reaching 18 this year, had me write a letter in support of his CO registration. We desperately need the example of Gandhi, and King, and those who give their own lives by taking risks for a vision of peace and justice.

Often I wish that people on the Christian Right, who are often the first to wrap themselves in the flag, and to support America going off to war, would remember that there are at least two things that we surely know about Jesus: that he was an anti-imperialist, and that he opposed violence.

But in a complex world, I cannot be an absolutist. We also need the right arm of armed intervention at times. I once called former Secretary of Defense William Perry, a one-time Unitarian, at his office in the Pentagon. It was not long after genocide in Rwanda. And it was clear to me that he was grief-stricken that the US and France and the United Nations had been unable to muster the will to send just two brigades to cease the airport and the radio station, and save the lives of perhaps half a million people.

Lately I have been discussing all this with colleagues like Dr. Paul Rasor, a former law professor who is now a leading Unitarian Universalist theologian and ethicist. He's recently sent me his paper called "Prophetic Peacemaking." He and I are both attempting to deepen conversation among UUs over a proposed "UUA Statement of Conscience" now in its final year of study by the congregations before being voted on next June by the UUA General Assembly.

The topic is peace-making: Are we a 'peace church' in the sense that Quakers, and Mennonites, and the Brethren all are? Making a collective witness on behalf of non-violence? Or is it more accurate to say that Unitarian Universalists are pragmatists when it comes to peace-making, and adhere more closely to 'just war' theory? - however much we worry about it being misused and misapplied, as it was by some in justifying an invasion of Iraq. Where I hope we come out is both/and, not either/or.

Last Sunday evening our Parents of Younger Children met with some trainers from the Baha'i community to learn about a curriculum devoted to raising peacemakers – children who are not so conflict averse that they are unafraid to step to stop bullying, for example. And I know that we already have young people in our midst who do that. Who know how

to read the social signs around them and to bear witness, without self-righteousness, against the need to feel superior to the helpless, or to pick on those who are vulnerable. May they grow up to be the kind of citizens who will, like many of us, not hesitate to speak out when we see the power and might of our country being used in arrogant and short-sighted ways, with its more selfish and defensive motives masked to most people. Prophetic citizens who aren't naïve about the fact that all nations, including our own, have selfish interests, but we also trust that in the long-run, we do better leading by example than we can ever do by bullying.

Next week, at the Needham Interfaith Thanksgiving service at Carter United Methodist Church, the service toward the end will include three unison prayers for peace drawn from our hymnal: one from a Christian source, one Jewish, and the third, Muslim. Today is the anniversary of the Armistice that ended World War I, and that led to a peace treaty. Some at the time, like John Maynard Keynes, saw that peace as punitive, and as sowing the seeds for a second world war, which came all too soon. Today, with no less a person than the President of the United States using the phrase "World War III" in demanding a strategy, not of deterrence, but of pre-emption against any possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran, perhaps we should pray those prayers ourselves today. So let us pray together:

“Grant us the ability to find joy and strength, not in the strident call to arms,
but in stretching out our arms to grasp our fellow creatures
in the striving for justice and truth.” (Jewish)

“Save us from weak resignation to violence, teach us that restraint is the highest
expression of power, that thoughtfulness and tenderness are the marks of the strong;
Help us to love our enemies, not by countenancing their sins, but remembering our own.
(Christian)

“Save us, our compassionate Lord, from our folly, by your wisdom, from our arrogance,
by your forgiving love, from our greed by your infinite bounty, and from our insecurity
by your healing power.” (Muslim)

And let all the people say: AMEN.