

No Justice, No Peace



No Justice, No Peace--a sermon given by
Tara Stephenson at the UUCLV on
September 29, 2013

In 1992, 5 members of the Los Angeles police department were videotaped beating Rodney King, who was on parole for robbery. The beating followed his apprehension after a high speed car chase. He never contested either the parole status or the fact that he had had a couple of beers, although, in fact, his blood alcohol level was below the legal limit for drunk driving. There is no reason to suspect that he was either pursued or stopped unjustly.

However, the officers who beat him were accused of using **excessive force** and were put on trial for charges of police brutality. Those officers were found not guilty. The mayor of Los Angeles at the time, Tom Bradley said, "The jury's verdict will not blind us to what we saw on that videotape. The men who beat Rodney King do not deserve to wear the uniform of the LAPD."

The verdict was widely considered to be unjust and to be evidence of racism in the Los Angeles police department. It was followed by rioting in parts of LA that resulted in 53 deaths, 2,383 injuries, more than 7,000 fires, damage to 3,100 businesses, and nearly \$1 billion in financial losses.

The phrase "no justice, no peace" was used by congresswoman Maxine Waters of California in response to that rioting.¹ She didn't coin the term—it had been used as much as a decade before and it has been invoked subsequently, usually together with an incident that looms in the public mind as a manifestation of injustice. The phrase was used frequently in the Trayvon Martin case.

If you read on-line articles that include the expression "no justice, no peace", and also read the comments that sometimes follow such articles, responses to the expression fall into one of two categories or ways of understanding it. Some people understand it as a threat. They hear "we won't let you have peace until you give us justice". That's the conditional understanding. The other way of understanding the phrase "no justice, no peace" is what is referred to as the conjunctive sense. That way understands justice as a natural and necessary condition that precedes the condition of peace. It's the sentiment behind a saying associated with many social justice movements, "if you want peace, work for justice".

The expression "no justice, no peace" causes me to stop and wonder about the relationship of the two states. When I first started preparing for this sermon, I felt that I needed to clarify my ideas of the two concepts. I am speaking of peace as the opposite of any kind of violence, whether that violence be physical, economic,

¹ <http://www.cmsdollars.com/meaning%20of%20no%20justice%20no%20peace.htm> downloaded on September 17, 2013.

spiritual or emotional. Certainly that includes the absence of warfare, but it is a much larger concept. And I understand the word “justice” to be the opposite of “unfairness”, which I think is linked with ideas of oppression, inequity and privilege. I am not specifically referring to what we may call the “justice system”, or our formal police forces and courts of law. Again, what I say may have bearing there, but I understand “justice” to be a larger concept than those applications.

The Hebrew word “shalom” is usually translated to mean peace, but the word is much richer and more comprehensive than that. Author Cornelius Plantinga says shalom is a “webbing together of ... creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight... We call it peace but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Hebrew Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.”²

Maybe that’s what President Dwight Eisenhower was talking about when he said that peace and justice were two sides of the same coin. His image suggests that neither state can truly exist without the other. There can be no real peace without justice, but as surely, there can be no real justice without peace.

In a course on process theology that I took about 8 years ago, I encountered the writings of Douglas Sturm, professor emeritus of religion and political science at Bucknell University. In his book, “Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality”, he states that he understands a commitment to justice as the understanding of ourselves as in relationship with all others. He writes “We cannot be what we are, we cannot do what we do, we cannot accomplish what we accomplish apart from one another...We are members of each other. We belong together.” He believes that justice springs from a communal or relational worldview which generates visions of a new social order in which the prospect of human flourishing is greatly enhanced.³

Justice is not “do-gooding”. Do-gooding is what happens when we understand others to be fundamentally different from ourselves. We donate old clothes to the needy, we write a check to some charitable organization, we collect food for a food bank, we attend rallies for a pressing social issue—any of these things may be done from an understanding of ourselves as separate, perhaps even alienated from members of the human community and any of these things can be done from an understanding of ourselves as in solidarity

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shalom> downloaded on September 17, 2013.

³ Sturm, D. Solidarity and Suffering: Toward A Politics of Relationality. (1998).

with the Other, belonging with the Other. This is a fundamental distinction in how we perceive people who are different from ourselves and that distinction shapes how we approach justice work. It shapes how that work promotes either peace or violence.

When Self and Other are viewed as members of each other, then any violence inflicted on the Other is also violence inflicted on the Self. Protesting violence done to someone else, whether that violence is physical, economic, spiritual, or emotional, is protesting violence done to the Self. Working to relieve violence done to the Other is working to relieve violence done to the Self.

My friend Jo, a professor at the University of Maryland, writes a blog that she calls “Nice White Lady”. She tells me that she stole the name from a series of comedy sketches on Mad TV a few years ago. Many of them are on YouTube. The comedy sketches and Jo are calling up an image of the do-gooder that I spoke of earlier, someone who performs good deeds with the intent of helping, but who does not understand herself to be in solidarity with those she helps. The term Nice White Lady is a little mocking; it tells us that the “nice white lady” is clueless about the true conditions she seeks to alleviate. The “nice white lady”, in spite of her good intentions, actually inflicts a kind of social and emotional violence on those she seeks to help.

Part of why our efforts to effect justice can do damage instead of helping stems from our understanding of responsible action. Sharon Welch, in her book “A Feminist Ethic of Risk” tells of 2 separate ways of understanding responsible action. In an ethic of control, the paradigm shared by most mainstream Americans, responsible action is that which will produce a desired result. If you make a plan and work that plan, you’ll get what you worked for. But there are people for whom that formula isn’t useful.

Contrary to what you might hear on certain media outlets, poor people typically work very hard. Most of them have jobs and most of them have families. In my political and community organizing volunteer work, I have met many people who struggle to get by financially. And they still have the volunteer will. And most of them are NOT accruing wealth. According to the ethic of control, with its emphasis on outcomes, their work should be paying off. Their lives should be getting easier; instead, generally their lives are getting harder, indeed, have BEEN getting harder for a long time. Welch would assert that part of the reason the culture tends to blame poor people for their predicament, to write it off to their own irresponsible behavior, is that we don’t want to admit that doing the right thing isn’t a guarantee of a good outcome. Poor people, like racial minorities and

other marginalized groups, CAN'T be sure that the aim of their actions will be carried out. So, what basis for responsible decision-making makes sense for the realities of **their** lives?

Welch also puts forth what she calls an ethic of risk, where responsible action is defined not by immediate utility or specific ends, but by “the fundamental risk to care and to act although there are no guarantees of success.”⁴ People who live under this ethic of risk see themselves as part of a larger community, and the welfare of that community is what guides them in their decision-making. They understand that their work is partial and that the results they see are also partial. They understand that they may know defeat and pain, but that as persons embedded in community, they **MUST** act in ways that support that community. That embeddedness is what sustains them, rather than immediate, individual rewards. Seeing themselves as members of a community before they see themselves as autonomous individuals means that they define responsible action as those actions most likely to preserve the fabric of that community, whether or not they as individuals get what they want.

They do not have the privilege of assuming that they can have what they want if they're willing to work for it. Quoting Welch again, “the aim of total security, the ideal of invulnerability seems irrational to these Americans.”⁵

One of the consequences of an ethic of control is that people used to working for an end and then not getting that end are too easily paralyzed by despair. They could learn a lot from communities who are used to not getting what they want. By and large, the civil rights movement learned those lessons. Civil rights work could have ended with any one of its many defeats. Those communities that are outside the norm, communities of women, of poor people, of racial and ethnic minorities, of the disabled, of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people, of religious minorities—we have something to contribute that the majority needs to hear. We have learned something about peace and about how to be happy and fulfilled and about how to persist in the face of adversity that not everyone knows.

But, the peace movement, well, as Welch says-- “the demoralization of the peace movement reflects our expectation of final victory and guaranteed success.”⁶

⁴ Welch, Sharon D., A Feminist Ethic of Risk, (1990), p. 68.

⁵ Welch, p. 29.

⁶ Welch, p. 46.

So, what have we learned about creating peace? Authors Salomon and Nevo, in their 2002 article on peace education compare the level of development of THAT discipline with the state of modern medicine—

“Imagine that medical practitioners would not distinguish between invasive surgery to remove malignant tumors and surgery to correct one's vision. Imagine also that while surgeries are practiced, no research and no evaluation of their differential effectiveness accompany them. The field would be considered neither very serious nor very trustworthy. Luckily enough, such a state of affairs does not describe the field of medicine, but it comes pretty close to describing the field of peace education.”⁷

Psychiatrist and founder/president of the International Education for Peace Institute, H.B. Danesh suggests that part of the problem behind most peace education efforts, whether they be conflict resolution and management, education in the practices of democracy, or human rights based training, is they all stem from faulty world views. Much of the work of peace education until fairly recently has come from developmental stages that reflect either a survival based world view or an identity based one. Both of these stages are normal in the lives of individuals and in society, but both make assumptions that Danesh and his partners in this approach to peace education find to be incompatible with genuine peace. The approaches to peace education that I mentioned focus narrowly on conflict, assuming it to be normal and even inevitable. That focus is a negative one and does not study the actual practices of peace building. Danesh proposes to study peace from the perspective of creating unity. This perspective also stems from a particular world view. The transformation in world view from survival to identity-based to unity gives rise to entirely different approaches to peace education, approaches that have been developed and actually tested in places such as post civil war Bosnia-Herzegovina. In a unity-based world view, unity, rather than conflict is considered to be the central governing law of life and that projects that once unity is established, conflicts are often prevented or are easily resolved.⁸ Unity is defined as a “conscious and purposeful condition of convergence of two or more unique entities in a state of harmony, integration, and cooperation...the animating force of unity is love”.⁹

⁷ Salomon, G. (2002). “The Nature of Peace Education: Not All Programs Are Created Equal” in G. Salomon and B. Nevo (eds.) Peace education: The concept, principles and practices in the world. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Quoted in Nelson, Linden L. (2000). “Peace Education from a Psychological Perspective: Contributions of the Peace and Education Working Group of the American Psychological Association Div. 48.”

⁸ Danesh, H.B. (2008). *Unity-Based Peace Education*. Journal of Peace Education, 3(1), 55-78.

⁹ Danesh and Danesh. (2002). *Has conflict resolution grown up?: Toward a new model of decision-making and conflict resolution*. International Journal of Peace Studies, 7(1), 59-76.

Conscious and purposeful—that sounds to me like peace isn't something we might just stumble onto. We have to choose peace—we have to choose behaviors that are peaceful. We have to examine the assumptions we make—are our assumptions the ones associated with survival, such as competition and the willingness to use force—are our assumptions those we associate with an identity-based world view, such as ingroups and outgroups and power struggles—or are our assumptions based on a world view of unity, which assumes the oneness of humanity, which is characterized by a consultative, cooperative power structure, which has as its ultimate objective the creation of an equal, just and peaceful civilization.

Differences between people are not conflicts to be managed. They are normal variations to be accepted and even celebrated. If love rather than competition or suspicion is truly our foundation, this is the most logical conclusion we could reach. Each of our 7 principles point to this truth in one way or another. We say that we affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The principles that resonate most strongly with me on this issue are the “bookends”, the 1st and 7th principles—the most individualistic one and the most relational one.

In our deep desire for peace and justice, may we never give up and may we never forget the love that binds us.