

**First Parish UU, Bridgewater**  
**Worship Service – Peace Sunday**  
**Sunday, September 24, 2017 10:30am**

**Thought for Contemplation:** When Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 she was asked what people should do to promote peace and she answered, "Go home and love your family."

**Sermon** “Finding Peace in a Warring World”, Rev. Paul Sprecher

My parents did not believe in having guns in the house. My grandfather had a shotgun for varmints; I’m not aware that my father ever shot a gun. My brother and I were not given guns as toys.

Naturally, my brother and I were fascinated by one of our schoolmate’s 22 guage rifle – we were enthralled by shooting cans and bottles in his back yard. I have a vague memory that I eventually got a bee bee gun, but I don’t think I used it much. My Dad never understood hunting though he eventually permitted it on our farm. So I was raised in circumstances in which guns had very little sway and in which the violence of guns and of war were a distant and muted realities.

Of course, the great challenge of violence in my generation was the Vietnam War. Like so many in college, I protested. I’m proud of having marched against Vietnam and then, years later, against the Iraq wars. I was arrested – albeit briefly – for helping to lead a march against the war in front of the Federal Building in Boston in 1972.

My number in the 1969 draft lottery was 83; at that time, about taking about one-third of those in the lottery could expect to be called, so I was pretty sure I would be called up. I was scared of being drafted – but I didn’t have a plan to get

out of the draft once I graduated from college. My immediate family did not boast any veterans, my grandfather having been exempted from service in WW I as a farmer and my father having been given a medical exemption from WW II because of his asthma.

I was very anxious the day I went for my draft physical and indeed for months before. In the event, I got out of the draft in a somewhat creative way: I fell off a roof and broke my arms. It was a somewhat silly way to get out of the draft. But I was preoccupied enough with that number 83 in the draft lottery that even in the summer before I would be called, one of the four thoughts I had as I was falling was that at least it would get me out of the draft.” The other three thoughts were about staying alive; although, arguably, getting out of the draft was equally about staying alive.

I’ve been lucky when it comes to violence. I live in a safe place. I don’t fear for my safety. I don’t feel the need to have a gun to defend myself. But I can’t say what I might do if I lived in a dangerous neighborhood. I have fallen short in recognizing the burdens of violence that fall on those who are not so privileged. You may have similar privileges and fallen short in similar ways.

I’ve been privileged on the whole to be able to ignore the reality of violence. AND I have failed to respond to effects of violence on those in my generation who had to fight that evil and senseless war. War does violence to those who fight them. In 2007, for example, more Vietnam vets were homeless than had died in that war.<sup>1</sup>

At that time 43% of the homeless males over 25 were vets. 45% of these homeless vets suffer from mental illness, and 50% from substance abuse.

War exacts a terrible toll on those who fight them, and protestors in my generation were wrong to hold soldiers in contempt.

It would be right to say that those of us who were privileged with college deferments too often lacked compassion for those who lacked privilege. We were able to ignore the damage that war was doing to others in our generation.

I have not had to bear the burdens of fighting a war. I don't know how different I might be as a person, how different my life might have been if I had not fallen off that roof. I have fallen short in recognizing the burdens of war that fall on those who are not so privileged. You may have had similar privileges and fallen short in similar ways.

I have also had the privilege of learning from some of the great prophets of peace, from Jesus and the Unitarian and Universalist preacher Adin Ballou, from Leo Tolstoy and from Gandhi and from Martin Luther King, Jr. Our own Adin Ballou was a strident abolitionist.

Ballou's antislavery sentiments are exemplified in his 1843 Fourth of July address entitled "The Voice of Duty," in which he called on Americans to honor the foundations of the country by not being selective or hypocritical in their judgment of who should be free: "We honor liberty only when we make her impartial--the same for and to all men."<sup>2</sup>

The problem of slavery was in Ballou's opinion not a political one but a moral one. He wrote, "Slavery is the baleful offspring of sin. It originates in contempt of God, and hatred of brother man." The only way slavery would be ended was if people obeyed "the law Eternal" which required "fraternal love in every soul." Rather than focus on political reform in the hopes that it would eventually end slavery, Ballou choose instead to engage in moral reform.<sup>3</sup>

Ballou abhorred violent means for ending slavery and he opposed the Civil War despite the fact that it became the instrument for abolishing slavery. He was converted to Christian Pacifism in 1838 and went on to develop the doctrine of Christian Non-Resistance in a book of the same name in 1846. There he taught that, as he put it:

Jesus forbids me to resist evil-doers by taking eye for eye, tooth for tooth, blood for blood, and life for life.

Non-resistance alone makes it possible to tear the evil out by the root. To offend another, because he offended us... means to repeat an evil deed ... to encourage the very demon whom we claim we wish to expel. Satan cannot be driven out by Satan, untruth cannot be cleansed by untruth, and evil cannot be vanquished by evil.

True non-resistance is the one true resistance to evil. It kills and finally destroys the evil sentiment.<sup>4</sup>

But of course Ballou's teaching came straight from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus teaches:

Matt. 5:38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

This teaching has rarely been taken as seriously as it was by Adin Ballou. In the long history of warfare by Christian nations, these words spoken by Jesus have been dismissed as hopelessly impractical, impossible of attainment. But there is more to them than meets the eye. When Jesus says

"Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. (Matt. 5:39)," it's important to remember that the only way for a right-handed person to slap the right cheek of the person facing them is with the back of the hand.

A backhanded slap is an insult.

A slap with the palm, which is what happens when you turn the other cheek, is a conflict between equals, a claim of equal humanity by the one being oppressed.

When Jesus said, 5:40 “if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well,” we need to bear in mind that indebtedness was a plague in first-century Palestine.

"Giving your cloak" would mean stripping off all your clothing and marching out of court stark naked!

Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, but shame fell less on the naked party than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness (Gen. 9:20-27).

By stripping, the debtor has brought shame on the creditor.

Imagine the guffaws this saying must have evoked. There stands the creditor, covered with shame, the poor debtor's outer garment in the one hand, his undergarment in the other.<sup>5</sup>

When Jesus said, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile (Matt. 5:41),” he was referring to the law where a Roman soldier could compel any Jew to carry his backpack for one mile. The pack was called a *sarcina* and weighed about 50 pounds. If you refused to carry it, you would be flogged. But you could only be forced to carry the pack for *one* mile. Forcing someone to carry the pack for two miles was a serious military infraction and could bring punishment down on the soldier. It was an assertion – again – of equal dignity by the victim. We can imagine the poor soldier – the tables turned so that now *he* is the victim – begging the one he has meant to victimize to please put down the pack so that he will not be punished. The teachings of Jesus here point to a way beyond violence and evil and

toward the kind of beloved community he called the Kingdom of Heaven, a kind of community that he said was already manifesting itself among his disciples, even oppressed by violence and debt and military oppression as they were.

These teachings were dismissed as wildly impractical by those who believed that violence was the only way to overthrow violence. They argued that throwing off the yoke of Rome by any means necessary was the only path to freedom. In the event, their own violent revolt forty years after Jesus was crucified failed spectacularly. The Jewish War with Rome lasted for four years, from 66 to 70, and resulted in the utter destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and in the slaughter of tens of thousands. The hills all around Jerusalem were denuded of trees, which were turned into crosses on which thousands upon thousands were crucified. Perhaps the non-violence Jesus taught was not so foolish after all; or in any case violence certainly didn't work in that case either.

The Christian Non-Resistance that Adin Ballou taught was not the way of the coward who shrinks from engagement, it was an active response to violence and it required courage. As he put it, "If I am a true Christian non-resistant, I am no coward. I am calm, kind, firm and brave."<sup>6</sup>

Adin Ballou did not live to see his teachings succeed. He was disappointed and depressed by the violence of the Civil War and its toll of 620,000 soldiers dead. But the prophet scorned not infrequently has the last word. John Dear, a

contemporary Christian Pacifist, notes that it was Ballou's writings that led Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist, to develop his own beliefs on Non-Violence:

Tolstoy begins his mammoth anti-war masterpiece, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, by describing his discovery of Ballou's writings on Christian nonviolence, and how it affected him. Tolstoy spent the remaining years of his life expounding on Ballou's teachings. Tolstoy even wrote to Ballou and corresponded with him during Ballou's last year. Tolstoy would never have developed his thoughts on peace and nonviolence without Ballou, and Gandhi would certainly never have espoused his visionary nonviolence without Tolstoy.<sup>7</sup>

While Gandhi was studying in London to become a lawyer, his friends thrust many books about Christianity into his hands, trying to convert him from Hinduism. The only one that impressed Gandhi was Tolstoy's book, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, and it was one of the important sources of his doctrine of *ahimsa*, non-violent resistance. Martin Luther King, Jr., in turn applied Gandhi's teachings on non-violence to our American context during his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement and his outspoken opposition to the War in Vietnam.

I have been privileged to learn from the prophets of non-violence that have been preserved through many teachings and traditions for the past two millennia. But if I were H. Rap Brown, I'm not sure that I, too, might not have rejected the slow course of non-violence that King chose and opted for liberation from the oppression



of Jim Crow “by any means necessary.” “By any means necessary” has not resulted in the abolition of racism, alas, and may even have exacerbated it in some quarters. I have been privileged not to have been forced to make that choice.

So I have come from a place where it is possible for me to believe that non-violence can overcome violence, that love can overcome hate, that enemies should, whenever possible, be befriended. I was raised in a peaceful home and not taught to use guns. I avoided service in the war my generation fought. I have learned from prophets of non-violence during my whole life. I have been privileged. I cannot claim that I would make the same choices if I were oppressed, or forced to serve in war, or if I had lived, for example, in Nazi Germany. I can only do my best to stand on the side of Love rather than hate, of peace rather than war, of forgiveness rather than vengeance. And I can only express my regret at not having done more to show compassion toward those who have had to make more bitter choices and who have been wounded by the violence they were forced to carry out and to endure, many of whom continue to suffer from the effects of violence to this day.

And once again we find ourselves in a time of war and belligerent provocations that exalt war. The war in Afghanistan is now the longest war our nation has ever fought and there is no end in sight. The war in Syria, which our own foolish invasion of Iraq in 2003 helped to ignite, continues to draw our nation into the violence of that region. Once again today, bitter words are spoken between the

leaders of North Korea and of the United States. Once again the ways of war and of violence and of armed militias are abroad in the land. Once again the voices of love and of peace are needed, now more than ever. Once again it is a time to heed the prophets who have proclaimed that hatred provokes hatred, that violence breeds violence, and that love can conquer. As Martin Luther King said in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964,

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together

and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid."

I still believe that We Shall overcome!<sup>8</sup>

Our own Wayne Arnason gives these words of encouragement:

Take courage, friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,

And the stakes are very high.

Take courage, for deep down there is another truth.

You are not alone.

May it be so, and Amen

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<sup>1</sup> <https://oldtimer.wordpress.com/2007/04/27/homeless-vietnam-veterans-outnumber-vietnam-deaths/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adin\\_Ballou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adin_Ballou)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/resistance/workshop3/182235.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/adin-ballous-vision-nonviolence>

<sup>5</sup> This is a formulation suggested by Walter Wink in *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lokashakti.org/encyclopedia/quotes?filter=Adin%20Ballou>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/adin-ballous-vision-nonviolence>

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King, Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, Dec. 10, 1964, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance.html)