

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Recognizing the Way of Peace

As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!' – Luke 19:41-48

In 1945 Father George Zabelka was a Roman Catholic priest who worked with the American Air Force. He was, in fact, the chaplain for the bombing squadrons that were assigned to drop nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He administered mass to the pilot who was about to fly the mission that would drop an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, killing as many as 40,000 people immediately and that number again over the next few months.

Shortly after the war he was able to walk through the ruins of that devastated city. Up until August 9 of 1945, Nagasaki had the largest Catholic population of any city in Japan. It was home to a Catholic cathedral and three orders of nuns. In the rubble of the cathedral, Father Zabelka found a piece of a censer, which is used in a Catholic mass to burn incense. He was suddenly struck with the realization of what a monstrous thing had been done, to obliterate this city. He realized that at the moment of the greatest moral challenge of his life, he had just gone through the motions, done what was expected of him, without realizing that he was failing this moral challenge.

One would have thought [he wrote later,] that I, as a Catholic priest, would have spoken out against the atomic bombing of nuns... One would have thought that I would have suggested that as a minimal standard of Catholic morality, Catholics shouldn't bomb Catholic children. I didn't. I, like the Catholic pilot of the Nagasaki plane... was heir to a Christianity that had for seventeen hundred years engaged in revenge, murder, torture, the pursuit of power, and prerogative violence, all in the name of our Lord.... When I look at [the piece of censer] today I pray God forgives us for how we have distorted Christ's teaching and destroyed his world by the distortion of that teaching." [quoted in Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 319]

When I am old, and I consider the great moral challenges of my life, I wonder if I will feel like Father Zabelka. I wonder if I will have recognized those challenges at the time or only after it was too late.

The passage from Luke describes such challenges as the “time of your visitation from God.” In that passage, Jesus is so emotionally distraught over the violence and injustice of the city of Jerusalem, that he weeps as he approaches it.

Luke is telling this story from the perspective of fifty years later, after Jerusalem had been besieged and destroyed by a Roman army in A.D. 70. When Luke says that, “enemies will set up barricades and surround you and hem you in and crush you and your children to the ground and not leave one stone on another,” the Roman army has already done exactly that. Looking back from that time, Luke believes that the reasons for its destruction were already clear. If the city had recognized that Jesus was acting on behalf of God and responded to his teaching and his action, it could have avoided its own destruction.

When Jesus entered the temple and drove out those who were turning a house of prayer into a den of robbers, he exposed the corrupt heart of the religious life of Jerusalem and the province it ruled. The Jerusalem temple was like a giant money-sucking machine that stole from the poor to give to the wealthy priestly class, and masked it all by saying that was what God wanted. Jesus’ action was a prophetic protest against that system. If people had heeded that prophetic act and pursued justice and peace instead of corruption and oppression, perhaps the later destruction could have been avoided. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was, Luke says, “the time of visitation from God.” “If only,” he laments, “you had recognized the things that make for peace,” your judgment day could have been avoided.

Father George Zabelka likewise wishes that he had recognized “the things that made for peace” in time to speak out against the mass slaughter of civilians. Perhaps if he had, he would not have had to live with the death of nuns and children on his conscience. Perhaps, if he had included not just Catholics within the circle of his moral consideration, but also those who observed Buddhist and Shinto traditions, he would have realized earlier the time of his visitation from God. His story and that of Jesus, challenge us to recognize in our own day “the things that make for peace,” so that, years from now, we do not have to live with the guilt of what we could and should have done. This little passage confronts us with the sobering reality that there are pivotal moments in our lives that can be considered divine visitations, moments where we are confronted with fundamental moral and spiritual choices that we cannot escape. The ethicist Roger Shinn called these visitations “forced options,” because we have to make a choice, and doing nothing is still making a choice.

Recently, I heard a story about a pastor who on his first Sunday in a new church showed up disguised as a homeless man. He wore dirty, disheveled clothing, had several days growth of beard, and looked like he had spent the night in the gutter. Some people were hospitable and welcoming to him; others were repelled and avoided him. When it came time for the sermon, he went forward, and revealed himself as their new pastor. It had been a visitation, in which the people of that congregation had been tested on the things that made for peace. Some of them passed the test; many did not.

Jesus once said that he would one day judge the nations, based on whether when he was hungry, they gave him food, when he was homeless, they gave him shelter, and when he was alone, they welcomed him, and when he was in prison, they visited him. Both those who fail the test, and those who passed it, question, “when did we do those things.” The response, “When you did it to the least of these, to the hungry and the homeless, to the lonely and the imprisoned, to the ordinary suffering people who surround us each day, you did it to me.” The time of God’s visitation will often come in ways that are easy to overlook. There will not be neon lights or angelic choirs proclaiming it. It will be ordinary, very ordinary, and if our conscience is not finely tuned, if we have not learned the things that make for peace, we will often miss it.

Yesterday, I participated in the Red Deer Inter-Church Curling Bonspiel. I happened to notice that one of the sponsors of that event was a company that I happen to know is owned by an Ismaili Muslim family. I wasn’t too surprised, as I know Ismaili Muslims are very community oriented and pretty progressive in their views of other religions. But I was impressed and pleased that they would support an event that was being attended overwhelmingly by Christians.

And in the aftermath of the horrific massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, in which a gunman entered two mosques with an assault weapon, shot and killed 50 people (by the latest reports) and wounded 48 more, it was striking to me that hateful rhetoric against Muslims (along with Jews and other minority groups) is not just bearing false witness against our neighbours, but also contributing to horrible acts of violence. I see that kind of rhetoric on social media with some regularity, and I see it on the signs of the yellow vest protestors downtown.

Perhaps that is another form of God’s visitation. When we confront anti-Muslim rhetoric (or anti-immigrant or anti-Jewish rhetoric), whether it is a post on social media or a joke made in a coffee shop, we have a forced option. We can challenge such rhetoric (politely of course), or we can do nothing. But doing nothing is still

making a choice. God has still visited us. But have we left God weeping or smiling?

During this season of Lent, we are considering how following Jesus through the wilderness of this Lenten journey can help us to be more fully human. Jesus, who referred to himself as the Son of Man, the Fully Human One, helps us recognize what is really important in life, how to tune our conscience so that we will not miss what will help us be more fully human. And a big part of being fully human is recognizing the things that make for peace, recognizing the time of our visitation from God, when we are confronted with forced options, pivotal moments that require a response:

- When confronted with temptation, will I be faithful to my spouse?
- When the demands of work are all-consuming, will I make adequate time for my family?
- When a friendship proves demanding, will I live up to the challenge?
- When I encounter sexist, racist, or homophobic comments, how will I respond?
- When I am confronted with hard choices, which road will I take, the wide and easy way, or the narrow and difficult road?

Will I have the wisdom to recognize the time of God's visitation and the moral courage to respond appropriately?

And there are also challenges that qualify as forced options and divine visitations that we must face together: Are we responding appropriately to ecological issues? Are we squandering our democratic birthright to polarizing stereotypes and financial interests? Are we defending the biblical vision of a just society against the growing divide between rich and poor? Do we really know the things that make for peace? Is Jesus weeping over us this day, lamenting "if only you had known the things that make for peace."

When I think about these things, I often feel inadequate as an individual. It is comforting to know that I am not alone. I am part of a community of faith here at Sunnybrook United Church, and this congregation is part of the United Church of Canada and the United Church is part of the Canadian Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches, and at many levels we are in constant dialogue and discussion with people of other faiths and ideologies about peace and justice and moral living. All these intersecting communities have a collective moral conscience more finely tuned than my individual one, and that often alerts me to things I would otherwise overlook. It is reassuring to me that as part of a community of faith, we can do more than we can separately. As part of a

community of faith, we can support the efforts of those working on issues we can't or don't address ourselves. The church is of course not perfect. Sometimes it is as complacent as I am, and sometimes the efforts to challenge some of the injustices and problems create conflict and struggles within the church. And sometimes there are prophetic voices within the church that are unheeded. I can imagine Jesus weeping over our church, lamenting "My people, my people, if only you knew the things that make for peace."

There is one thing that relieves my dread over having to face the judgment of God and my grandchildren. It is simply this. God is visiting us, trying to teach us the ways of peace. Just as Jesus entered Jerusalem and upset tables in the temple, God sends us prophets whose challenging message is sometimes difficult to hear. The warning is there if we pay attention.

The future will pronounce judgment on us for our failures, our limited vision, our short-sighted priorities; that we can be sure of. There is no way that we can know all the consequences of what we do or don't do, and some of those consequences may be tragic, but when we do know, we must act. For what we don't know, we can hope for forgiveness, from God and from our grandchildren and from ourselves, but we should never take that forgiveness for granted, or allow the promise of forgiveness to excuse complacency today. What we can do is to pay attention, stay alert for the ways in which God is visiting us, trying to teach us the ways of peace, and then as part of a community of faith and moral discernment, try to live out those ways, as fully as humanly possible.

Let us pray together a prayer of confession.