

“REGARDING PEACE”

The sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
By the Rev. Ken Sawyer
On February 18, 2007

The First Parish has existed since 1640, and occupied this building since 1815. But the American Unitarian Association was only created ten years after that, and this congregation declared itself part of that side of the split in the Standing Order of Congregational Churches three years later, the same year the Trinitarian Congregational Church of Wayland was formed.

At about the same time that liberalism was taking hold in congregations like ours in eastern Massachusetts two hundred years ago, Universalist churches were being started in New England with many of the same beliefs as those held by Unitarians, but with a somewhat different focus and often a less affluent or learned membership.

But the differences were not great to begin with, and over time they lessened, until the two movements merged in 1961, giving us two heritages within which to locate ourselves when it comes to a question like the attitude toward war and peace.

Both movements were in their earliest years firmly Christian, with the Bible as Scripture. This put them within a tradition that could not be more complicated on the issue of war. What is the Christian attitude toward war? It ranges all over the place, understandably. Tales of conquest from what Christians call the Old Testament glorify warfare, mayhem, and slaughter, even as those same books repeatedly glorify peace and long for its establishment. Jesus is known as the Prince of Peace, but in the Gospels he says, “Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34)

Not surprisingly, numerous acts both of peace and of war have been undertaken in the name of Christianity. One does not have to look far. One of my predecessors here, Josiah Bridge (yes, a “sometime minister” of First Parish) was an ardent supporter of the Revolutionary War – it has been said because he was so upset with the Quebec Act of 1774, one of the so-called Intolerable Acts, not only because it made Ohio part of Quebec, but even worse, it legitimated Catholic worship within Quebec – and you can imagine what that might lead to – Catholics in even New England. So he was all for war.

But the Universalists’ first statement declared in 1790, “Although defensive wars are lawful, there is a time coming when universal love of the gospel will put an end to all wars. Hence members should cultivate brotherly love, considering all men as brothers.”

And then you have William Ellery Channing, in the aftermath of the war of 1812, co-founding the Peace Society of Massachusetts, the first in the country, championing Christian pacifism. His fervor was matched by the Universalist Adin Ballou, who wrote what has been described as “the earliest complete treatise on non violence in the world” [Paul Sawyer] in 1846, titled “Christian Non-Resistance in all its Important Bearings, Illustrated and Defended.” Two years later Thoreau’s more famous essay “On Civil Disobedience” appeared.

But peaceful beliefs were tested by the existence of slavery and eventually by the Civil War itself. Even some of the Abolitionists of strongest engagement believed that

slavery should be abolished by moral suasion or economic forces or anything but war – until the war came. Indeed, even before the war, Thoreau, Emerson, Bronson Alcott and other Concordians were backers of John Brown, one of the least pacific figures in American history. (I will probably talk more about that next week.)

It was an exceptional soul who stuck to his pacifism as did the Universalist Adin Ballou. In his autobiography he wrote, “it was hard for me to understand how professing anti-war Abolitionists of long standing should so forget or ignore their former protestations against the use of violent means for carrying forward their work and freeing the bondsmen, as to be swept into the foaming vortex of blood and death. As for me, I remained unmoved, except for sorrow for such an end by evil means, and pity for the sufferer who had rashly plunged into a lion’s den.”

But neither the Universalists nor the Unitarians were among the Peace Churches, as they are called. Those are churches whose members refuse to fight, because of their Christian commitment. Basically, they are three in number: the Church of the Brethren, the Mennonites, and the Religious Society of Friends, which is to say, the Quakers. There is a lot of variety even within that group, for some members are willing to serve in a war effort as long as it does not involve killing, such as driving an ambulance. Others will have nothing to do with military service, which is also true of Jehovah’s Witnesses, although they do not consider themselves a Peace Church. There are some other, even smaller groups that are also pacifistic like the Schwenkfelders, the Amish, Hutterites, and others.

The distinction used to be more important because the government granted conscientious objector status to members of those groups but not to most other people. That is no longer the case. It is quite possible to qualify for that status as a UU, but it helps if the person has talked to me previously to establish the depth and sincerity of the commitment.

That we are not a Peace Church was most dreadfully put on display during the First World War, and right after the heyday of American Peace activities, that so flourished at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. But the Great War – or the World War, as it was called, before they knew there would be another – elicited such nationalistic militarism, it was no longer socially acceptable to demur. But two greats, among others, did so, affirming their pacifism and their opposition to the war: the Universalist Clarence Skinner and the Unitarian John Haynes Holmes.

Such was the passion of the day, though, that at the Unitarian General Conference of 1917 (their GA), led by moderator and former president William Howard Taft, passed a resolution supporting the war, 236-9. And the Directors of the Unitarian Association voted the next year that “any society employing a minister not willing [to be] an outspoken supporter of the United States in the vigorous and resolute prosecution of the war cannot be considered eligible for aid from the Association.”

Imagine. Things have swung back and forth, and by the sixties, resistance to the war in Vietnam was commonplace among the congregations of the recently-created UUA. Resolutions supporting the peaceful resolution of international conflict have been passed on many occasions by the yearly General Assembly.

And then just last June, meeting in St. Louis, the General Assembly did two things. First, it changed the way the movement handles what are now called

Congregational Social Action Initiatives or CSAIs. Time was, General Assemblies would pass quite a number of resolutions every year. But then it was decided it would be better to pass just one a year and have it go through a three-year period, by the end of which congregations would all have gotten involved in discussing and refining the motion, until it finally came up for a vote.

That meant at any given time, there were three motions making their way through the process, with others waiting in line to try to join in. In St. Louis the process was changed so that when a motion is accepted for study and eventual action, it is the only one on the table until it gets voted on three years later.

For a motion to get that far, so that it might become the issue for study and action, it has to have been proposed by a congregation or District and been approved by a denomination-wide parish poll. The first issue to be taken up in this new, more focused way, is peacemaking, which was proposed by us, the First Parish in Wayland, having been authored by Deborah Kelsey and approved by the Parish Committee after discussions and some collaborative co-editing. You can go to the UUA website, locate the videos of that GA, and watch Deborah speak to the full GA.

Here is where we are in the process. In this first of the three years, we are asked this month to make any first responses we have to this SAI, which if you tell me of I will forward to the Committee on Social Witness so they can prepare for the workshop at the next General Assembly.

Meanwhile, we are urged to reflect on the issue, and take action. Last month for the first time in years we celebrated UN Sunday. There was a meeting two weeks ago after church that has resulted in a Saturday morning public witness on the town common across the street. A group will begin in March that I hope you will all consider taking part in, a six-session small-group discussion of peacemaking, led by Deborah.

And a 32-page Resource Guide is available on-line with lots of information. You may note at the end of his introduction to the Guide, the Director of our UUA Washington Office for Advocacy gives special thanks to “the core team of [five] volunteers who made this guide possible,” all of whom are members of the team that will oversee the process throughout the three years, one of whom is Larry Shafer.

All of which is to say, we are enjoined to think how to contribute to the making of peace in the world, in our community, in our homes, and in ourselves. We will do that individually, and in clusters, and in pairs and threesome talking during coffee hour, in openness, honesty, mutual respect, and forbearance.

And as a congregation? I haven’t talked about this for a quarter century it seems, but I think I still feel now as I did then. I was making the case that matters of war and peace are not ones that “the religious community can evade; and, indeed, in a time increasingly notable for its hawkishness and a general inclination to tolerate all manner of deterioration of the common weal and of the national economy for the sake of newer, bigger weapon systems, for the past several years disarmament has moved to into the forefront of denominational attention by mainstream and increasingly by evangelical churches as well. [This was 1980.]

“The Bible itself tends to compel such attention,” and I cited some of the passages that favor peace, as in the Psalms, “Seek peace and pursue it.”

Obviously, though, “it can be debated how best peace may be obtained. . . . I acknowledge that others may be right, that a stronger national defense” – or in 2007, a

surge in troop strength in Baghdad – “may be a step on the right road, as dangerously daft as it seems to me.

“What the church has to offer is less a clear and obvious program for proceeding, then, than a place that harbors the goal, the ideal. What can the religious community do for peace? Champion it, I suppose, although our diversity of understandings of the best means of attainment leave the terms of that answer murky and problematic. Defend it, sure, but where and when and how?

“All of this is worth pondering and discussion” – as the CSAI would have us do – “but I think the central response of the church to peace is to say that we shall worship it. Worship is the act of ‘worthing,’ of ascribing worth to something, or recognizing worthfulness. Our role it is in the course of all our disagreements and debates as to how peace may be attained to worship it persistently, to hold peace out as a thing of supreme and sacred worth, greatly to be desired, of such value that our lives ought to be turned to its attainment, however we may understand the best road thereto.

“We gather to worship, to worship the holy things of life, to affirm their compelling hold on our allegiance; and then to fumble about, with every earnest intention, to discern the action such allegiance might dictate. Justice is a thing like that, and freedom and fruition and the health of the spirit, and beauty, and peace.”

I will have more thoughts to share. I trust many of you will, too. I look forward to the conversation.