**"The Hope for Peace"**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*
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In the early twentieth century, two World Wars brought together nations in a new way. The technologies of war had impacted vast swaths of the global population—millions were displaced, millions fought, and millions died. In the face of such violence and destruction, the need for a global organization to bring the nations together in the hope for peace felt urgent to many. And so, the United Nations was created on October 24, 1945.

More than 70 years later, the United Nations continues to pursue peace. This year the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office invites congregations to engage the theme of disarmament and peace as we mark the anniversary of the creation of the United Nations. Considering the stream of news about nuclear tensions North Korea and Iran, not to mention ongoing wars and conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, the theme seemed important to wrestle with from a religious point of view.

It's not difficult to make a connection between UU principles and the hope for peace and disarmament. Our principles include the affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person as well as the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Such ideas clearly call for us to promote the possibilities of life flourishing without the threat of violence.

Of course, peace is not that simple. I wish it were. I wish the hope for peace would make it so. I wish the denunciation of violence would stop it. I wish a gathering of the nations would cause all war to cease.

But it hasn't worked that way. There are neither easy nor quick answers to violence—not to the war between nations, not to the divisive racial hate of white supremacists, not to the conflict within families, and not to the fear in our hearts. Yet, this difficulty should not stop us from trying. Sometimes what matters is not whether we can immediately "fix" a situation, but whether we can help the situation to get better...or stop the situation from getting worse. In other words, are we helping to move things in the right direction?

Perhaps this sounds like a pessimist point of view. However, my goal is not to dismiss the goal of peace. I firmly believe that the best scenario is where people can walk down the street without the fear of bullets raining down upon them or where people can walk into their home and be met with a loving embrace rather than an abusive partner. There should



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be no doubt as to the goal of peace in the world. However, the path to peace may not be easy, nor quick.

Though the path to peace may be difficult, still there is a real sense of longing for peace. What then is this peace for which we strive?

Often peace is understood as the absence of something. For example, peace as the absence of conflict. Or, peace as the absence of or end of war. Indeed, 'war and peace' have been infamously linked by Tolstoy's tome of the same name. Peace in such definitions points to the absence of discord that may threaten one's life or quality of life.

And yet, I wonder how we might describe peace positively...not by what it isn't, but by what it is? What is peace to you? What does it mean for you to be at peace?

Perhaps for you being at peace is walking the dog in the forest beneath a canopy of golden and red leaves, the air crisp, the pace unhurried, and a sense that at least for these few moments, life is simply good.

Or, maybe being at peace is lying side by side, muscles relaxed, speaking in gentle tones, listening, and feeling loved.

Or, maybe being at peace is leaning against the door jam, peering upon your sleeping child, snug in a warm room with a full belly and the easy breathing of good health.

Being at peace can mean so many things to each of us in different moments of our lives. Noticing what peace can mean in concrete ways can deepen our understanding of what it is that we are working towards when we hope for peace. Peace is not simply the absence of something, it is the presence of a certain quality of life. It is life lived with a sense that what is in that moment is good and is enough.

I suspect that for many of us such moments are fleeting...that most of us do not live in a perpetual state of feeling such a sense of peace. But hopefully we all know such experiences of peace as a part of our life. Such moments can buoy and restore our spirits, assuring us that all is well. We need such moments, especially when worries and problems weigh upon us.

Poet-farmer Wendell Berry describes this need for peace, writing,

> When despair for the world grows in me
> and I wake in the night at the least sound



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in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Such moments are precious...they are the moments when we feel aligned with the world, at peace with the simple gift of being alive.

And so, to hope for peace is a deeply religious act of valuing the sacred gift of life. Striving towards peace is working to disrupt those forces and dynamics that would diminish life's value. Certainly this disruption of life is clear when we speak of the violence of war. Although international codes of war seek to provide some limits, war inevitably is a tool for killing enemy soldiers and too often civilians. And while the ultimate cost of war is born by those who give their lives, war takes so much more as well . . . disrupting access to food, safe water, schools, and medical care as well as traumatizing those who participate and witness violence and its effects. And, of course, war literally costs money. Money that could have been spent in so many other, life-giving ways.

Yet, war is not the only disruptor of peace. Violence of many kinds disrupts peace. This last week and next the facade of our Meetinghouse is lit up purple as part of a Domestic Violence Awareness campaign. Hopefully you've noticed as the point is to grab attention! For those who suffer in situations of domestic violence or intimate partner abuse—either physical or verbal, their lives are already painfully disrupted. The question for them is to find a path towards peace, to a life without violence, to an experience of life in which they feel their dignity is upheld and the worth of their person is respected. And I add that if you or one you love finds themselves in a situation of violence, please reach out and tell someone, call a hotline number, call your minister.

Violence disrupts peace. And so, to strive for peace also means striving to disrupt or to stop the violence. Our purple light is one step towards disrupting domestic violence by refusing to be silent by its presence here in our community. Disrupting violence and striving for peace will take many such steps.

One little step that I have taken in my life is to sign off emails using the phrase, "in peace, Stephanie." When I began ministry here, I chose this phrase as a reminder to myself and a



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promise to you. As I end an email by typing 'in peace', it reminds me of my intention to build relations of goodwill as a minister. Before hitting send, I pause to consider whether the words of the email work towards that goal of peace. By naming this intention in correspondence, typing 'in peace' is also a promise to those with whom I communicate. It is a little way of indicating my hope for the kind of relationship that I might have with you.

I know that this is such a small step and so many steps small and large are needed to disrupt violence and work towards peace. And while this sermon cannot lay out all the steps needed, it is important to pause and consider why peace matters and what ways we strive for peace. Perhaps like me, you have sometimes felt a certain discomfort with calls for peace. Such calls can feel saccharin and unrealistic. While I have faith in the capacity of the human spirit to be able to do good, I also recognize that we carry harm and pain that can cause us to hurt others. And we also live within social institutions and human society that reinforce patterns of injustice and violence to many. Peace is possible, but it is not easy because so much works against peace.

One model of peace-work that inspires me is the project Generation 5. Their goal is to "interrupt and mend the intergenerational impact of child sexual abuse on individuals, families, and communities." They approach their work by looking at the root causes of child sexual abuse by engaging the intergenerational nature (that perpetrators have often first been victims) as well as the impact of social context such as economic inequality. By taking a wide view, they plan for a transformation over 5 generations. They hope for peace, taking action now.

For the UU United Nations Office, this hope for peace puts them at the table of NGOs working in issues of disarmament. The goal is an international law against weapons of mass destruction as well as the strict regulation of conventional arms. No problem...I think they'll be done by lunch on Tuesday. Well, that's probably not true, but it is true that there are people working towards this goal. And like the work of Generation 5, The UN is thinking broadly about the larger context needed to promote peace and disarmament. In 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted 17 "Global Goals for Sustainable Development" that address multiple facets of building a life-giving, peaceful world.

When we consider the deeply rooted nature of violence in our society, the call for peace no longer seems easy. And yet, peace is so vitally important. The hope for peace calls us to a vision of a world in which the fullness of life is promoted. It calls us to take steps towards building a more peaceful world, to bringing more dynamics of peace where we are able. We are invited into this work, to support the peacemakers, to disrupt violence, and to orient our lives towards valuing peace. . . in our own lives and in our shared world.
So may it be. Amen.



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