

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

I hear my people crying
In cot and mine and slum;
No field or mart is silent,
No city street is dumb.
I see my people falling
In darkness and despair.
Whom shall I send to shatter
The fetters which they bear?

We heed, O Lord, thy summons,
And answer: Here are we!
Send us upon thine errand,
Let us thy servants be!
Our strength is dust and ashes,
Our years a passing hour;
But thou canst use our weakness
To magnify thy power.
– John Haynes Holmes

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting *Begin*, by Brendan Kennelly

Begin again to the summoning birds
to the sight of light at the window,
begin to the roar of morning traffic
all along Pembroke Road.

Every beginning is a promise
born in light and dying in dark
determination and exaltation of springtime
flowering the way to work.
Begin to the pageant of queuing girls
the arrogant loneliness of swans in the canal
bridges linking the past and future
old friends passing though with us still.

Begin to the loneliness that cannot end
since it perhaps is what makes us begin,
begin to wonder at unknown faces
at crying birds in the sudden rain
at branches stark in the willing sunlight
at seagulls foraging for bread
at couples sharing a sunny secret
alone together while making good.

Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
that always seems about to give in
something that will not acknowledge conclusion
insists that we forever begin.

Sermon

Peace Be with You

(c) Sylvia Stocker

I once did a chaplaincy training at a hospital for the mentally ill. In addition to making rounds to various units and assisting with music therapy and pet therapy, one of my jobs was to assist with the Friday afternoon Catholic mass. Catholic mass was sort of an ecumenical event: I did the readings, one of the Lutheran chaplains played the piano, and Sister Jane, a Catholic nun, led the mass and offered communion.

Over the course of the year, I became familiar with the liturgical exchange between priest and congregation. During the mass, the priest (or in this case, Sister Jane) said, “Peace be with you.”

The congregation responded, “And also with you.”¹

Doubtless some of you are well acquainted with that exchange.

Well, some weeks after my training ended, my former supervisor called me. “I need you to come back,” he said. “Sister Jane has been called away to a meeting of her order. She’ll be gone for a month. I need you to lead the Friday masses.”

Life is full of surprises, but I wasn’t prepared for that request.

“I’m not a Catholic,” I said.

“I don’t care,” he replied. “You can do whatever you want.” The words of a desperate man!

That is how I came to lead four Friday masses at a hospital for the mentally ill. I knew my people. They were Catholic, and they wanted a mass. So, after researching Catholic liturgy, I produced a hybrid service – the liturgical words for a mass, the lectionary readings for the day, a reflection on the

¹ I have since learned that currently the congregation responds with the words, “and with your spirit.” At the hospital where I served, however, the mass included the older verbiage, “and also with you.”

readings, and some songs to promote the message. But no communion. I felt it would be disingenuous for me to offer communion, a holy sacrament in the Catholic church. Communion meant something very different for practicing Catholics than it did for me. Besides, I was sure that my offering communion would violate Catholic doctrine somehow. I knew my hybrid service was sort of like offering a BLT without the bacon, but it was the best I could do to serve my people while simultaneously maintaining my integrity.

At the first mass, I came to “peace be with you” line. Only this time, I was the leader “Peace be with you,” I said. and a chorus of voices responded, “and also with you.”

Maybe if you hear and speak those words week in and week out, they wash over you after a while. But for me, that 3-second exchange was profound. UU services include nothing like it – no moment when the congregation, as a united body, provides the worship leader with some blessing. But for one and a half seconds, that congregation of mentally ill patients offered something back to me: Peace. That felt like an infusion of something I can best describe as *possibility*. Because for that brief flash of time, I felt peace. And, because it was present then, I thought maybe it could be present other times, too.

This month our Sunday school is studying the sixth UU principle. If you are new to Unitarian Universalism, or if you feel challenged remembering the UU principles, let me explain we have seven principles. The sixth one is this: We covenant to affirm and promote . . . the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Our kids use plainer language: For them, the sixth principle is to “build a fair and peaceful world.”

To illustrate the sixth principle this month our kids will study John Haynes Holmes, an early 20th century UU minister who strove to build a fair and peaceful world. (Information about Holmes comes from the following sources: <http://uudb.org/articles/johnhaynesholmes.html> and <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/story/183733.shtml>)

Born in 1879, Holmes grew up in Malden MA and attended Unitarian churches with his father. Holmes was greatly influenced by his beloved grandfather, who had known and worshiped in the church of an earlier, famous 19th century minister: Theodore Parker. Theodore Parker was an ardent abolitionist and promoter of justice. Parker was the originator of that wonderful quotation, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Martin Luther King, Jr., made those words famous, but Parker uttered them first.

John Haynes Holmes grew up believing in justice – and also, profoundly, peace. After graduating from Harvard Divinity School, Holmes took up his first pastorate in Dorchester, MA, in 1904, later moving to the Church of the Messiah in Brooklyn, NY. He was a man of such strong convictions that a contemporary once remarked that Holmes was “accused of many things during his life, but never of being moderate.”

While at the Dorchester church, he criticized Unitarianism for the clubby aspects it demonstrated at the time, saying, *"Ours was a class church, a typical middle-class institution. . . . Its people had high standards of respectability and culture, and wanted these maintained as expressions of the intelligence*

and moral idealism of our time. It was from this standpoint that organized labor seemed an element alien to our society. Already, in the impending struggle between capital and labor, our churches had lined up, more or less unwittingly, on the side of capital."

Perhaps most controversial of all, Holmes was a pacifist, heavily influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Even in the years leading up to World War 1, when the nation around him – and even his co-religionists – were promoting war against Germany Holmes was a pacifist. He preached, *"While it is true that war in general is condemned in our time as it has never before been condemned in human history, it is to be noted that war in the case of each particular nation is justified today in exactly the same way that it has always been justified in the past ... War is never justifiable under any circumstances. And this means . . . for me—and for myself only can I speak—that never will I take up arms against a foe. And if, because of cowardice or madness, I do this awful thing, may God in his anger strike me dead, ere I strike dead some brother from another land!"*

Literally on the eve of the U.S. Declaration of War on Germany, Holmes addressed his congregation, saying, *"If war is right, then Christianity is wrong, false, a lie. If Christianity is right, then war is wrong, false, a lie."* The consternation that declaration induced prompted a meeting of the Board of his church. Only one member of the Board agreed with Holmes' pacifism. Nonetheless, the Board held that the Unitarian tradition of freedom of the pulpit was paramount, and Holmes should be free to preach as his conscience dictated.

Holmes' courage in expressing such radically unpopular views in his day was remarkable. So was his church Board's support of him. But not everyone defended his outspokenness. Holmes brought his pacifism to the annual meeting of the American Unitarian Association in 1917, where he proposed a resolution affirming pacifism. Holmes' proposed resolution was countered by one from the AUA president William Howard Taft (former President of the United States) that the conference attest that *"war must be carried to a successful issue to stamp out militarism in the world."* Taft's proposal carried by a vote of 236 to 9. Holmes was subsequently roundly denounced in the then denominational periodical, *The Christian Register*.

Several months later, in 1918, the AUA Board voted to deny financial aid to any church whose minister, *"is not a willing, earnest, and outspoken supporter of the United States in a vigorous and resolute prosecution of the war."* As a result, Holmes resigned his fellowship with the American Unitarian Assoc a few months later. But his ministry continued on in remarkable ways.

Could I ever be quite as pacifistic as John Haynes Holmes? I am not sure.

When I was young, I spent a summer visiting close friends in Belgium. We spent most of our time in the city of Antwerp. The parents in the family had lots of World War II stories to tell, some of them involving liberation by the Americans. We visited the Ardennes several times. The Ardennes saw terrible fighting during the war, the most commonly known battle being the Battle of the Bulge.

One day the mother in my Belgian family introduced me to a friend in the Ardennes as *"ma fille Americaine,"* my American daughter. Looking at me, the friend replied, *"nos libérateurs,"* our

liberators. In that moment, I felt proud of my country – a feeling I have rarely experienced in my lifetime. From my perspective, it seems there may be times when fighting is a lesser evil than not fighting. But it troubles me to feel that way. I wish I had the certainty about pacifism that Holmes did. But I am certain of one thing: Peace is only possible when everyone is treated fairly.

Martin Luther King, Jr., made a distinction between *negative peace which is the absence of tension* and *positive peace which is the presence of justice*. Today, of course, we have neither the absence of tension nor the presence of justice. I like King's distinction between a negative and a positive peace, because peace without justice, without fairness, isn't peace. Peace without fairness is merely oppression where the oppressed are cowed into silence and submission. Sometimes oppressed peoples put up and shut up out of fear for their safety. Sometimes out of a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness to resist. They may not be fighting outwardly, but the peace is negative. An abused woman may learn to interpret the signals of her abuser and to tiptoe around her partner so as not to provoke violence – but that isn't peace. It's fear and self-preservation.

Pacifist that John Haynes Holmes was, he also was deeply committed to justice work. He was a founding member of both the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union. He even chaired the ACLU between 1940 and 1950. He listened for the cries of unfairness, and turned his focus there. He is a wonderful exemplar of our sixth principle, to create a fair and peaceful world.

I rather like substituting the word “fair” for the word “justice.” I know it amounts to linguistic smoke and mirrors, because the two words are essentially synonymous. But the minute I utter the word “justice,” I fear I get labeled as a liberal (which I am), or a Democrat (which I'm not) or a reactionary (which who knows if I am or am not?).

But “fairness”? Everyone who's ever been a child and seen the other kid get the bigger piece of chocolate cake knows what it means to say “That's not fair!” and understands the universality of both the concept and the need for fairness. I know life itself is profoundly unfair sometimes, in ways completely beyond our control. At birth, people receive – or don't receive – certain abilities. In the course of a lifetime, people can suffer accidents or illnesses that rob them of abilities, too. Likewise, people are born into cultures of greater or lesser opportunity. Fortune has a careless aim. We may receive unwarranted good fortune or unwarranted bad fortune. Most of us receive a mixture of each. But people can create fairness in their responses to what life dishes out. People can help one another to adjust for misfortune, creating fair systems where everyone has a chance at living as satisfied a life as possible.

In her book *Waking Up White*, Debbie Irving challenges the notion that “fair means equal.” Instead it means equity. Irving, a teacher by training, recounts a conversation she had with a principal whose advice she had sought when she was trying to explain to classmates the special accommodations one student in the class was receiving.

“It's the difference between equality and equity,” the principal said. “Here's a great way to explain it to the kids. Ask them what they'd do if there was a test that involved writing their answers on a line on the board – a line five feet off the ground.”

Irving responded, “Well some of them couldn't reach it, so that wouldn't be fair, right?”

“Unfair, or *inequitable*,” replied the principal. “‘Equality’ means giving every student exactly the same thing to meet the same expectation. ‘Equity’ means both holding people of differing needs to a single expectation and giving them what they need to achieve it.” (p. 206-207)

Irving calls that leveling the playing field. I call it something more. I call it seeing and hearing another's need, responding with fairness, and laying the groundwork for peace.

“Earth shall be fair and all her people one,” wrote the lyricist Clifford Bax.

Maybe. But only if humanity does its part. Until then, the words “Peace be with you” are more a prayer than a statement of fact. I dream of the day, and I work toward the day, when fairness shall reign and peace shall follow. A day when the statement will be true: *Peace be with you*.

Benediction

Peace will reign when the day comes that earth shall be fair.
May we go forth, shining our light on injustice,
beckoning that day of peace,
and always, always, bringing our love wherever we go.
Peace be with you.