

## Warriors for Peace ©

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel  
At the North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist  
Second Sunday of Advent  
December 4, 2016

*“True peace is not merely the absence of tension. It is the presence of justice.”  
- The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

*“We have not forgotten. In nature we seek you- in the whisper of wind, in the new green wood, your presence is near. We have not lost hope. In the dust of the desert, in the rush of the wave, in the rise of the mountain, your presence is near. We remember the cycle. In the promise of blossoms, in the dying leaves, in the bare branches, your presence is near.” -- Julianne Lepp*

This weekend, over 2,000 U.S. veterans have converged in Standing Rock, North Dakota, to act as human shields. They are acting as human shields between police and water protectors of the Sioux nation, who are standing their ground to resist a 3.78 billion dollar gas pipeline that crosses four states.

It's a pipeline that was re-routed around predominantly white communities and now crosses sacred tribal land and puts the Sioux nation's drinking water at risk. Some of their ancestral burial grounds and sacred prayer sites have already been destroyed.

The Sioux understand this standoff as part of a long history of colonial oppression and takeover of their land. Their vigil is deeply rooted in tradition and prayer. They call themselves water protectors. The media calls them “protestors” or “activists”. And despite the first Amendment to the Constitution which guarantees- what?- freedom of religion,

the right to peaceful assembly  
and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances,  
despite their treaties with the U.S. Government,  
despite the fact that they remain unarmed,  
they are facing violent treatment at the hands of pipeline corporation,  
Energy Transfer Partners, and the government as well.

In recent weeks, militarized police and private security guards  
have used attack dogs, tear gas, rubber bullets and concussion grenades against them.  
They have shot water cannons from armored trucks at protestors  
in below freezing weather, which resulted in 300 injuries and 26 hospitalizations,  
including bone fractures and hypothermia.  
One of 26 people hospitalized was 21 year old Sophia Wilansky,  
a 2016 Williams College graduate, who may lose her left arm.

As one of the veterans arriving this weekend has said,  
“We want to offer them a moment of peace,  
and, if we can, take a little bit of pressure off.”

Last week, Governor Jack Dalrymple ordered an emergency evacuation  
of the land by tomorrow, December 5<sup>th</sup>, due to the winter weather-  
ostensibly *for the protectors safety* and that of others in the area.  
Those who do not vacate the land by Dec. 5<sup>th</sup> may face arrest,  
and those who deliver supplies to them may face \$1,000 fines.

Still, folks are planning to stay.  
They are taking an unarmed, non-violent stand at Standing Rock.  
And the veterans are there, with them today, forming a human shield,  
having joined in interfaith prayer at 10:00 this morning.  
One might call them peaceful warriors, warriors of peace.

We have a tendency, especially at this time of year,  
to think of peace as an absence of all tension or conflict.

'Tis the season of cards with snowy scenes, shining stars, quiet mangers and doves.

'Tis the season for nostalgia for some magical, peaceful past-  
in many cases for a past that never truly was.

Yet, some folks- including some of us here at North Parish-  
go to tremendous lengths to try to help create that sense of peace  
at Christmas—of sweet music, and quiet presence, complete rest, even grace.

The reality is that most of the time, life isn't peaceful,  
even in the weeks leading up to the Solstice, to Christmas.

The reality of life is that the baby cries, the bills come in, the kids fight,  
the parent gets ill, the neighbor gets mad, the boss yells, the doctor calls with bad news.  
In the wider world, the media intrudes with more bad news,  
the bullets and the bombs still fly, kids still go hungry, families are torn apart,  
political parties go to war and countries do too.

In the spiritual or religious realm, tension exists  
between competing theologies and competing religions.  
Tension exists between our worst impulses and our better selves,  
between self-absorption and generosity to others,  
between our feelings of turmoil and our longing for peace,  
our feelings of hate and our desire to love.

The list could go on.  
Life is full of tension and conflict- within ourselves,  
our relationships, our neighborhoods, our communities, our nation.  
So the question becomes, how do we find peace or equanimity  
in the very midst of anxiety and tension and conflict?  
How do we protect our spiritual, emotional, physical, ethical health and well-being,  
while at the same time, not abandoning others or the world?  
How might we become warriors for peace- both peace within and in the world?

For a start, I invite you to think about those times and places when you find peace on a personal or spiritual level. Perhaps they are in this sanctuary, the chapel or out of doors, while listening to music, lighting candles or watching the faces of sleeping children, while watching birds from the breakfast table, joining others in meditation, becoming lost in a project or enjoying the silent companionship of a friend.

Thank goodness for those moments! We need them. We need to guard them like the precious jewels they are. We need to guard them like warriors, for our own sake and that of others. Without them, we're less able to be fully alive and awake in the present moment. Without them, we're less able to be fully present to others, to life or to God. Without them, we're less able to be fully alert, fully functional, ready to engage with those in true need, ready to face the troubles and evils of our time.

Guarding your moments of peace might mean going on a media blackout for a while, putting down your phone, going on retreat or a daily walk, or coming to church once a week. It might mean reciting the Serenity Prayer about 36 times a day, trying mindfulness meditation or observing a Sabbath time in your week. Guarding your peace like a warrior might mean setting aside a regular date night with your spouse or friend, or making time each day for meditation or prayer, poetry or music.

Guarding your inner peace like a warrior might mean seeing what it feels like to take a little bit of pressure off by giving the anxiety that won't stop over to something greater than yourself—whether you name that God, or the Universe, the Spirit of Life or Creative Mystery or something else. You might imagine yourself literally laying your burdens down.

These are all habits or practices we can return to again and again over a lifetime. But for people of faith, they are intended to be a path to engagement, not permanent escape.

If you stay on retreat or a media blackout forever, you'd miss a lot of what's going on, and inadvertently abandon a bunch of other people who *can't* escape the impact of reality, folks who don't have the *luxury* of retreating from the world.

As people of faith, we seek a peace that is not an absence of tension, but can be found in the midst of it. For an illustration of this, I'd like to turn to one of my favorite preachers for a bit of historical perspective.

On March 28, 1956, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church called *When Peace Becomes Obnoxious*. The Montgomery bus boycott had begun Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, King's home had been bombed in January, and nine days before this sermon he had been indicted as a leader of the boycott and ordered to pay \$500 or serve 386 days in jail.

It is clear from his words that King was being criticized by some in the community for creating tension by leading the boycott. He was being criticized for destroying "good" race relations. And when he preached this, he was awaiting trial the next day. Here's part of what he said:

"A few weeks ago, a Federal Judge handed down an edict which stated in substance that the University of Alabama could no longer deny admission to persons because of their race.

With the handing down of this decision, a brave young lady by the name of Autherine Lucy was accepted as the first Negro student to be admitted in the history of the University of Alabama.

This was a great moment and a great decision.

But with the announcement of this decision, "the vanguards of the old order began to surge."

The forces of evil began to congeal.

As soon as Autherine Lucy walked on the campus, a group of spoiled students led by Leonard Wilson and a vicious group of outsiders began threatening her on every hand.

Crosses were burned; eggs and bricks were thrown at her.

The mob jumped on top of the car in which she was riding.

Finally, the president and trustees of the University of Alabama asked Autherine to leave *for her own safety and the safety of the University.*

The next day after Autherine was dismissed, the paper came out with this headline: "Things are quiet in Tuscaloosa today. *There is peace on the campus of the University of Alabama.*"

Yes, *(he continued,)* things are quiet in Tuscaloosa.

Yes, there was peace on the campus, but it was peace at a great price:

it was peace that had been purchased at the exorbitant price *of an inept trustee board succumbing to the whims and caprices of a vicious mob.*

It was peace that had been purchased at the price *of allowing mobocracy to reign supreme over democracy.*

It was peace that had been purchased at the price *of capitulating to the force of darkness.*

This is the type of peace that all men of goodwill hate.

It is the type of peace that is *obnoxious.*

It is the type of peace that stinks in the nostrils of the Almighty God."

Doesn't that just sound like King? He had such a way with words—  
“allowing mobocracy to reign supreme over democracy”!

He goes on to suggest that every Christian is involved in a kind of war—  
not a physical war, which he cannot justify, but a spiritual war, a war of ideas.  
And then, as a Christian himself, King turns to the words of Jesus. He says:

“In a very profound passage which has been often misunderstood,  
Jesus utters this: He says, “Think not that I am come to bring peace.  
I come not to bring peace but a sword.”

...What He is saying is: “I come not to bring this peace of escapism,  
this peace that fails to confront the real issues of life,  
the peace that makes for stagnant complacency.”...

I come to declare war over injustice. I come to declare war on evil.

Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion,  
but it is the presence of some positive force—  
justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God...

This is *real* peace—a peace embodied with *the presence of positive good*.

The *inner* peace that comes as a result of *doing God's will*.”

Peace is not the absence of tension or conflict.

Rather, King suggests, it exists in the midst of tension and conflict,  
when, grounded in faith, love and a sense of justice, a sense of God's will,  
of being on the side of love, we seek the positive good.

***And so, as people of faith, we seek the positive good.***

We seek peace, community, God or love.

We seek justice, goodwill, brother and sisterhood, the Kingdom of God on earth.

We commit to participate ourselves in creating such things, right where we are.

We become trackers, detectives, treasure hunters, evangelists, disciples...

we become prisoners of hope, warriors for peace.

Back in 1956, King said,

*1) If peace means accepting second-class citizenship, I don't want it.*

*2) If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil,  
I don't want it.*

*3) If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo,  
I don't want peace.*

*4) If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated  
and segregated, I don't want peace.*

As a leader of a non-violent, peaceful protest,  
King had to figure out how he and his people  
would not be permanently embittered or destroyed by what they faced—  
the visceral hate, the constant verbal and physical threats,  
the use of law enforcement and the threat of violence by economic powers,  
the institutional resistance, the silence of good people, the relentlessly damaging status quo.

*Does that sound familiar?*

It is the same list of assaults  
that the people in Standing Rock are facing right now.

Some of the veterans who are there today  
are members of a group we're familiar with,  
thanks to North Parish member Pat Scanlon- Veterans for Peace.

Part of the logo of veterans for peace is a dove,  
that long standing symbol of both peace and, in the Christian tradition, the holy spirit.

The dove is also part of the symbol of Unitarianism in Romania- but it is only part.  
The symbol in full is a dove encircled by a serpent,  
both of them under a crown. *(Here it is.)*

This symbol has some staying power- as it and the faith it represents



lasted through years of dictatorship in that country.

I've been told that the crown may represent the Kingdom of God.  
The dove and the serpent- it seems to me- show us how to get there.  
They come, of course, from the same words of Jesus  
that we heard in the reading the morning,  
words repeated by the Rev. Martin Luther King.  
They are from the gospel of Matthew, 10:16.  
"Be ye therefore wise as serpents and gentle as doves."

As King points out, this phrase is an image of opposites,  
of being able to contain both the gentleness of a dove and the wisdom of a serpent.  
It is an image about out-foxing the powers that be  
with each new trick they try- *and they will try many*.  
It is an image of refusing to let the powers that be  
destroy you or your inner gentleness.  
It is an apt image for Warriors of Peace.

Let us join in meditation and prayer.  
Spirit of life that moves through the earth, Spirit of love that moves through humanity,  
spirit of God, Goddess, of Mystery, of Creation-  
help us to seek the positive good, to help create and magnify goodness in the world.  
Remind us to set aside time to find the small, still voice inside each of us,  
to find stillness and rest in our hearts.  
Remind us to listen for the voices of the troubled, of the abused, of those facing injustice.  
Help us to become as wise as serpents, and to act towards one another as gently as doves.  
In this season of increasing darkness, among ourselves, among strangers,  
and among the vulnerable, may we form a human shield of love. Amen.

**Reading:** from a sermon by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., *A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart*:

"The strong man or woman holds in a living blend strongly marked opposites.

Not ordinarily do we achieve this balance of opposites.

The idealists are not usually realistic, and the realists are not usually idealistic.

The militant are not generally known to be passive, nor the passive to be militant.

Seldom are the humble self-assertive, or the self-assertive humble.

But life at its best is a creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony.

Jesus recognized the need for blending opposites.

He knew that his disciples would face a difficult and hostile world,

where they would confront the recalcitrance of political officials

and the intransigence of the protectors of the old order.

He knew that they would meet cold and arrogant men

whose hearts had been hardened by the long winter of traditionalism.

So he said to them, 'Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves.'

And he gave them a formula for action,

'Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.'

It is pretty difficult to imagine a single person having, simultaneously,

the characteristics of the serpent and the dove,

but this is what Jesus expects.

We must combine the toughness of the serpent and the softness of a dove,

a tough mind and a tender heart."

Here ends the reading.