

Sermon *There is no way to peace, peace is the way.*

The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

May 17, 2015

10:30 a.m.

Maurice Schwarz, the great Yiddish theater impresario, once said, "There is no way to peace, peace is the way." It is so striking how hard a message it is; it is so deceptively simple until you say it out loud. There is no way to peace, peace is the way.

Maurice Schwartz was born in the Ukraine, a half a generation after my grandmother Dora Berlind. He made it to the United States at the turn of the century, as my family did before him. My family settled in New York's lower east side. Three blocks west and a world away, Schwartz founded the Yiddish Art Theatre on New York's 2nd Avenue. His major contributions to American theater were bringing the works of Jewish playwright/essayist Sholom Alecheim to stage and screen. In 1939, a year after Nazi Germany annexed Austria, Schwartz directed and starred in a film adaptation of Alecheim's "Tevye the Milkman", the original of the later Broadway musical "Fiddler on the Roof." (from Hal Erickson's All Movie Guide)

Our families escaped the deadly Jewish pogroms of 1919, but not the violent anti-Semitism that preceded them. My gut-level understanding of the violence that one people can commit upon another, and the humanitarianism that can spring up in the midst of that violence, is part of my calling to ministry. It is also my family story. On one side, I am from people who fled religious and ethnic violence. And on the other side, I am from a woman who fled her slave-owner father and the father himself. We all have these stories, and they give us perspective on life.

"If there is to be peace in the world," said this morning's call to worship, "there must be peace in the nations." I say there will be no peace in the world until there is peace between the world's religions. And in considering that, there may be lessons on how we maintain peace in our hearts.

Does religion lead to violence? In the aftermath of the Tsarnaev conviction, it is a question that is on everyone's mind. It's easy to point a finger at Islam. But we can point our fingers at all religions. Think about it, when humans believe they are accountable only to a higher being and not to each other, there is nothing to prevent discrimination, intolerance and violence. Christians persecuted Jews for centuries.

Let's take a walk around the world's hot spots:

Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq;

Catholic and Protestant Christians in Ireland;

Jews and Muslims in Palestine;

Christian Orthodox Serbians and Catholic Croatians and

Serbian and Bosnian and Albanian Muslims;

Muslims and Hindus in the Kashmir;

Sikhs and Hindus in India;

Muslims and Christians and animists in the Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Eritrea;

Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka;

Muslims and Timorese Christians in Indonesia;

and in the Caucasus, Orthodox Russians are fighting Chechen Muslims and

Muslim Azerbaijanis are waging war with Catholic and Orthodox Armenians. (Sam Harris, *the End of Faith*)

In America – a country seized from its original inhabitants, settled in large part by religious heretics, founded under the major precept of freedom of religion, we have done our fair share of violence against Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Animists, Quakers, Unitarians, Universalists and Neopagans.

To this day we still systematically discriminate against Wiccans and atheists and anyone who looks and sounds different in our military and our prisons and elsewhere.

No, we can't single out Islam. We have predatory extremists everywhere. What do they all have in common, at home and around the world? They claim to know the truth and that because their truth answers to a higher authority, their truth gives them the right to harm those who don't. Oh, culture and ethnicity and economics and politics play a role, but essentially, it's a battle for truth.

These truth claims are not supposed to be about violence. A truth is supposed to help us discern: how to live a worthwhile life, to know what's expected of us and how to cope when bad things happen. The world's religions hold different truths, and different paths to attaining the truth, or a state of grace, or wholeness, or salvation, or enlightenment – whatever you call it. Even people of no faith at all have a frame of reference from which they view the world. Those of us who work with people who are very ill or in some crisis know what I mean. People find ways to explain what is happening to them, and cope. When bad things happen, one person will believe it is bad luck. Others will believe it was their own fault or someone else's. Another will believe it is God's punishment. I've learned that it isn't my job to tell someone "It's not your fault," or "God still loves you." No, everyone has a way of understanding the bad and managing a way to deal with it. That way might be to repent, to forgive, to confess, to pray, to make major changes in one's life, to make pilgrimage, to make a sacrifice. My call is to learn what in a person's faith or worldview will make them worthy of healing or give them the strength to endure. And then we walk that path together.

Does one religion tell people the one truth about peace and how to find it? Do we Unitarian Universalists have the one truth? No, we don't. Because peace is not the end result of one truth. The world's religions will not help humanity reach peace until people of faith dedicate themselves to finding a common path to peace – not a common truth, but a common peace. Peace is the end result of a commitment to peace. When we encounter a different truth, peace requires that we respond only with peace.

We have to be intentional and articulate if we are to resist the power of religion to foment injustice. We have tried heroically to do that in our Unitarian Universalist faith. We affirm the human dignity of all persons and look to find the ways in which we are all called to be responsible in maintaining that dignity.

In churches like ours, we find ourselves in a unique position to fully grasp what is needed for peace. We are sitting with one another, right next to one another, and we know that each and every one of us has a different grasp of truth. So, let's practice peace on one another. Let's turn to each other and ask each other two questions: (1) what event in the world today has made you angry or despairing? (2) what stories in your own life help you find hope? Talk to each other by rows. You have five minutes.

What was that like?

When we don't understand the truths and the reality of one another, we cannot be free to walk toward peace with one another. When we don't understand each other's truths and realities, we have less understanding of our own. Let us commit ourselves to honoring the differences between each other. Let us commit to our responsibility to free ourselves and one another from that which makes us less fair, less just and less compassionate. Let us respond to extremism wherever we find it, and whenever we find it in ourselves. May there be peace in our hearts.