

Steps Toward Peace in the Middle East
A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss

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I would imagine that almost everyone has a cherished fantasy of what it would be like to live in a world that is at peace. Unlike many of the people in the world, I am aware that I am relatively unaffected by the various wars that are currently raging in one place or another. I know that we pay higher taxes in order to keep the United State's militarily strong. And I know that for any family who has a member or friend either deployed in the war against terror, or who has lost someone dear to them in any military struggle the cost of war may seem overwhelming. And yet I don't think I am out of line when I say that the majority of Americans have little sense of the realities of war.

We know few of the more than 20 million refugees who are currently displaced from their homes in 122 different countries around the world by war. We do not suffer daily shortages of clean water, food and medicines due to wars raging around us. While we may fear another terrorist attack, we do not live with the weekly experience of bombs, mortar shells, or rockets exploding in our neighborhoods.

When we advocate for peace, we do so, not so much out of fear for our own lives, as out of a wish that others could know the degree of security with which most of us have been living almost all our lives.

Every now and then I contemplate how many of the problems that plague humanity could be solved if we devoted even half of the world's military budgets to peaceful ends and the vision of how well the world could work for everyone is astounding. Given that peace promises so much to humanity, and that wars are so destructive, why is it that peace has proved so difficult to attain?

I think the answer lies in that fact that while we all have a vision of peace, few of us are prepared to opt for peace at any price. Certainly the ethical purity of the Buddhist position so eloquently voiced by Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama is appealing. Their witness to what it means to practice the type of peace one hopes to call forth in others is inspiring. And yet one wonders how long people with their practice might have survived under Hitler's Germany or under the rule of the Taliban.

In this country we owe our lifestyles if not our lives to the non-violent protests that made the civil rights struggle one of transformation rather than one that precipitated a race war and yet even this success was made possible by the fact that this country was founded on principles of freedom however inequitably applied.

I know that for many of us, while peace is a goal to work towards, it is not the only means by which we need to work toward the goal. And if we allow for the fact that lethal force is justified in some situations, it is incumbent upon us to make moral decisions about those situations in which we are willing to go to war, and those in which we are not.

As someone who accepted the call of this congregation to be one of its ministers and to speak the truth to power, I find myself in a position where I feel I have to say that I think the current position taken by President Bush that it is OK for him to take action against Iraq without UN Security council authorization is just plain wrong.

The arguments for why this is the wrong course of action are too numerous to cover in a 20 minute sermon. If you have been reading the editorials in our Wyoming newspapers or listening to National Public Radio you are probably already familiar with most of them. Many of them were stated in Senator Edward Kennedy's recent address to the John's Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, a copy of which you can find on the table in the social hall. There is also an excellent piece there from the American Friends Service Committee, as well as copies of editorials, and various other resources. Feel free to look at these resources during coffee hour, and to make copies of them in the administration

office if you'd like to take one or more of them home.

I am aware that I am not alone within the religious community in seeing this course of action as a poor one. In the social hall or on the web you can find not only letters opposing this strategy from the Unitarian Universalist Association's president Bill Sinkford, but links to letters signed by the leaders of the world council of churches, as well as the leaders of Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutherans, Catholics, Quakers, Baptists, and many other church bodies including the Mormons. In fact, it's hard to imagine making a case for preemptive war from a religious perspective as long as there is a chance of getting Iraq to disarm through the use of agreed upon inspections.

I am aware that many who voted to authorize the President to go to war did so, not because they saw war as the best strategy for dealing with Saddam, but because they thought that having the threat of preemptive strikes hanging over his head might force Saddam to cooperate with weapons inspectors and to eliminate his weapons of mass destruction. While there is a slim chance that this may turn out to be true, I don't think our chances of getting Saddam to disarm are significantly greater than they would be if we worked exclusively through the UN. And I think there is a much greater chance that by having the US isolate itself from international support and risk engaging in a war that will cost tens of thousands of innocent lives of people who happen to be Muslims, we will be pursuing a course that will backfire on us in ways we have yet to imagine.

Of all the things I have read that have disturbed me about our current situation, I think the one that bothers me the most is R. C. Longworth's summary of our new National Security Strategy, a summary published by the Wyoming Tribune Eagle on Oct. 3. In it he outlines the development of the new first strike option which is our current official policy for maintaining national security. Let me quote briefly from this article.

"The new American doctrine was issued Sept 20 by the White House. It is a 31 page document titled The National Security Strategy. Its main points: That America's military might remain 'beyond challenge,' presumably forever, so overwhelming that no nation, friend or foe, has any 'hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.'

"Deterrence and containment, the keys to the previous strategy, are out. 'Traditional concepts of deterrence will not work' it says. 'Some enemies cannot be deterred.' Pre-emptive war – a first strike policy of hitting anyone who might be thinking of hitting us – is in. The new key is 'anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. The U.S. will, if necessary, act preemptively.'

"Current international law approves of pre-emptive attacks 'on the existence of an imminent threat.' But sometimes threats will be more vague, so 'we must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries.'"

Alliances and international organizations are seen to have their uses, but as the dominant military force in the world, the U.S. should be ready to go it alone heedless of the limits of international law if that is what we see as in our own best interest. The rest of the world as President Bush has so clearly stated "will either be for us or against us."

The success of this policy depends on people's accepting the moral superiority of America's positions and that other nations will gratefully accept American guidance based on our judicious use of our overwhelming military power. But its failure is almost certain if the rest of the world sees us as selfishly pursuing our own interests at the expense of others.

[Pardon me while I rant, but how likely is this given this summary that comes from the American Friends Service Committee:

"Around the world, the international and diplomatic community is reeling as a result of the choices made by the Bush Administration, including (but not limited to):

The announced intention of withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, so painstakingly created to bring sanity to a Cold War-dominated world.

The refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, paving the way for a horrifying return to escalating nuclear proliferation.

The startling undermining of the Convention on Chemical and Biological Weapons – ostensibly to protect U.S. chemical and pharmaceutical plants.

The rejection of the concept of an International Criminal Court – a logical place to seek justice after terrorist attacks.

The scuttling of the laboriously negotiated Convention on Small Arms. The U.S. delegates presented conditions at the last minute that made international agreement impossible.

The refusal to ratify the environment agreements of the Kyoto Accords, the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and UN Conventions on Terrorism, which would have disrupted the financing of terrorists and encouraged international information sharing.

And as a capstone to this record, The Bush Administration has given notice that it intends to withdraw from the International Treaty on treaties, a foundation of international Law”.]

The world has not dealt kindly with bullies no matter how enlightened they see themselves as being, and I don't know about you, but I do not relish the prospect of the long range consequences of our trying to go it alone on the world stage, particularly given our recent record in international non-cooperation.

Psycho-dynamically, dominance invites resistance and outright rebellion, the very dynamics that fuel terrorism when the potential terrorist has little to lose and feels their cause is just. While it is natural to feel that we would be safe from attack if we were just more dominant, that is not how the world really works. And yet if we are to forswear dominance as an approach to security, where else are we to turn?

I think we can find guidance in our UU Principles, which speak of “justice, equity and compassion in human relations” and “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” I often drink my first cup of coffee in the morning from a UU Service Committee cup that says “Plant Justice, Harvest Peace.” A peaceful world community is inextricably linked with the issues of liberty and justice. And so if we want to work towards peace anywhere in the world, particularly in the Middle East I think we need to pay careful attention to issues of justice for all the people of the region.

Unfortunately this means coming to grips with the fact that there will not be peace in the Middle East, or anywhere else in the world until the plight of the Palestinians is being dealt with more justly than it currently is by Israel. I know that it is unpopular to say so, but we have to look beyond the terrible destruction of innocent lives that has been brought about by suicide bombers, to the desperate conditions that would lead someone to think that this tactic is a good idea.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that suicide bombing or terrorist attacks are justified. I hate to say so, but the self immolation practiced by Buddhist monks during the Vietnam War would be a more effective way of getting the world's attention, as it would attract attention to the fact that the majority of Palestinians are the ones who are suffering far more injustice than the Israelis who are seeking to establish security through dominance.

Rather than attacking Iraq, we could move closer to establishing our own security far more quickly if we developed the moral courage to facilitate a workable final solution to the conflict between the Israelis and their neighbors. Impossible? Not really. The framework for a final solution already exists in UN Security Council resolutions, and a final set of resolutions could easily be established by vote of the Security Council if the United States would be willing to forgo the use of our Veto.

That this would currently be politically unacceptable to Israel is obvious, and yet if the UN were to impose the same economic boycotts that have been used on other nations such as South Africa and Iraq, it would not remain so for long. UN troops could be used to separate the radicals on both sides to see that they could not destroy the newly

implemented peace and we could then move on to dealing with those who are seeking to dominate others with threats of violence in a much less volatile world and one in which the United States would be much less subject to attack on the basis of being the perpetrators of injustice towards Muslims.

I am convinced that this is the direction in which we will eventually move. I think it is just a case of how many more thousands or tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of people will have to die before we realize it. Am I saying this because I am somehow anti Jewish? No! I was heartened by the fact Britain's chief Rabbi, leader of Britain's orthodox Jews, has joined with what the Conservative, Liberal and Reform Rabbis have been saying for some time, that Israel must change its conduct with respect to how it is dealing with the Palestinians.

There is a hitch of course or the world would have moved forward with a solution to the Palestinian -Israeli conflict long before now. Part of the hitch involves U.S. politics and the question of how to develop the political will to do what is necessary in an atmosphere where every political campaign requires so much money that folks dare not alienate any possible contributor.

But even more challenging, is confronting those within both the Jewish and the Christian community, both in Israel and in the United States, who believe that God wants Israel to occupy the West Bank and all of Jerusalem. There are many folks who seem to be blind to the injustice in the plight of the Palestinians, precisely because they think God intends for Jews to occupy all the lands which he supposedly granted to them during Biblical times.

For many folks, both within the Jewish community and within the right wing Christian community, Israel's occupying all of its original lands is seen as a necessary precondition for the coming of the Messiah, or Christ's coming again, depending on one's theological orientation. At that time, they envision a great battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil as delineated by one's belief system, so injustice towards those who do not share their beliefs becomes a non issue as they are by definition under the influence of the anti-Christ, and destined for destruction anyway.

Folks who have this belief system, primarily those on the Christian right, are sending thousands of dollars to Israel for further development of the West Bank and there are Israelis living there who have sworn to fight even their fellow Israelis rather than surrender "their land." At the same time, in just one town, thousands of Palestinians are living under curfews that place their lives in danger if they have to leave the house in the middle of the night to get medicine for a sick child, so that 400 Israelis can feel more secure in their west bank homes. The situation is so intolerable it can not last, and at times I fear that is the point – to push the Palestinians to the point that there is another war which could be used as justification for pushing them off the land entirely.

If that happens, those who are looking forward to Armageddon may well get their wish at least as far as a cataclysmic war is concerned, but I am afraid they will be disappointed when they encounter their returned messiah, for if she or he survives the carnage she will probably immerge in the form of a child, who, despite all the hate and all the hurt, is willing to sow love where there has been hatred, pardon where there has been injury, light where there has been darkness, and joy where there has been sadness.

It will not be easy to get people to exchange their triumphal images of a returning messiah for one who simply offers love, understanding, and pardon. I certainly would support their right to keep the triumphal image if they wish, and I cannot continue to support through my silence, the ongoing injustice which seems to be a precursor to the triumphal messiah's return.

We can do better. It has occurred to me, that even the disputed right of return, might be resolved by selling rather than dismantling the current Israeli settlements on the west bank, and using that money to help build homes for those who would be permanently displaced from the lands they had once occupied that were within Israel's reestablished pre 1967 borders.

I know that there are undoubtedly other perspectives on what steps need to be taken next with respect to moving towards Middle East Peace, and so in about 15 minutes, we will form a dialogue circle in the Library where additional

sharing can take place. Feel free to join us if you feel so inspired.

Closing Words

In the spirit of love and truth we have gathered.

In the spirit of love and peace we depart.

May we learn from others' wisdom and may we share our own.

And may we each find ways to offer our light of peace to the world.

Amen, Shalom, and Blessed Be.