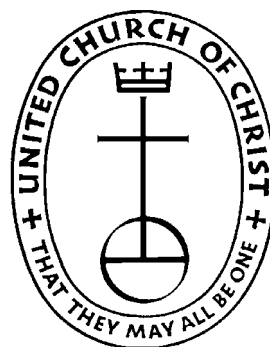


Imagining a Post-Nuclear World

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
August 8, 2010



To imagine a post-nuclear world, we must first recognize the fundamental oneness of human kind. The second thing we must do is recognize that the idealistic possibilities of peace may be more pragmatic than the so-called realism of a strong defense rooted in an abundance of weapons of death.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Reading: Amos 9:7; Isaiah 2:1-3; Galatians 3:28

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Imagining a Post-Nuclear World

Sixty-five years ago, the unthinkable happened. Our nation dropped two nuclear bombs on the people of Japan. Nothing like that had happened before, nothing like that has happened since. We are the only nation to have used a nuclear weapon.

In 1945, for six months the American military fire-bombed the civilian populations in 67 Japanese cities in order to force the Japanese government to surrender and thus end the Second World War. As a result, Japan was exploring surrender if they could be assured Emperor Hirohito would be unharmed and the office of emperor would be left intact.

But President Truman didn't wait. On August 6, 1945, a nuclear bomb nicknamed "Little Boy" was dropped upon the city of Hiroshima. Three days later, on August 9, a second bomb, "Fat Man," was dropped onto the people of Nagasaki. In both cities, tens of thousands of men, women and children were instantly incinerated. Many others suffered slow, agonizing deaths from thermal burns, injuries from the intense blast, dreadful radiation poisoning, and severe trauma and shock.

Historian Edward Hoyt says the impact of six months of fire bombings plus the two nuclear attacks killed 330,000 Japanese civilians. To set that in perspective, 3,000 American civilians died on 9/11. 476,000 Japanese civilians were wounded. 2½ million homes were destroyed.

Sixty-five years ago, by targeting for death primarily the elderly, women and children, the United States crossed over a moral line. Historian Nicholas Patler, writing in *The Progressive Christian*, said the two nuclear bombs were used "precisely and strategically to incinerate ordinary people and their homes in a storm of heat and fire. Before this," he said, "there had been in place strong moral inhibitions against intentionally bombing civilian populations, even among the most seasoned American military brass."

Fleet Admiral William Leahy, President Truman's chief of staff, decried the use of atomic bombs against Japan. He said, "I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."

Now once we crossed that threshold, once Americans could live with what we did in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then we could begin to disregard innocent lives in subsequent wars. We could drop napalm onto entire villages in Vietnam. Or in Iraq, the American forces have killed at least half a million civilians. Our drones kill innocent civilians almost weekly in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

We just don't get alarmed about killing civilians anymore. In 1996, a journalist asked Secretary of State Madeleine Albright about the 500,000 children killed due to our economic boycott of Iraq after the first Gulf War. She said, "The price is worth it."

What has happened to us?

Is it even possible for us to imagine a post-nuclear world? The first Start Treaty between the United States and Russia dramatically reduced the number of nuclear weapons deployed by those two nations. That treaty expired and a new Start Treaty was signed earlier this year – reducing American and Russian deployed nuclear weapons from 2,200 to 1,550. The Senate hasn't ratified that treaty, and in an attempt to win votes need for that ratification, President Obama has submitted a budget that increases funding for nuclear weapons research and production programs.

So how do we get from where we are – thousands of nuclear weapons in the US, Russia, England, France, Israel, Pakistan, China, India and North Korea – and perhaps Iran to be added soon.

How do we get from where we are to a nuclear-free world? Let me lift up two ways of thinking that are essential to even envisioning a new world.

The first is recognizing the fundamental oneness of human kind. That seems obvious – we are all basically alike. But we don't act like it is obvious at all.

Rini Ghosh, a Hindu, began her presentation at Thursday's interfaith service by saying, "May the Divine in me greet the Divine in each of you." We must recognize the divinity in every human being. Virtually every issue of social justice revolves around one group of people refusing to recognize their oneness with another group.

Opponents of marriage equality, shocked by this week's legal decision, continue to affirm that straight folks are better than people in the LGBT community, that the only form of genuine marriage is between a man and a woman. They demean the personhood of those of other sexual orientations.

Look at the debate over immigration – do you think the minutemen or the sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona see the divinity in those who cross our borders seeking a

better life?

Two weeks ago in Temecula, people protested plans for a new mosque. One protester said, "This is a Christian country, not a Muslim country." She said, "Muslims are all known terrorists trained to kill people from the time they're in their youth." Fred Carlson drove his pick-up truck past the site of the new mosque twice, shouting out that Muslims are pedophiles. Ridiculous stereotypes that demean another group of people.

And we use language to strip people of their common humanity. So gay and lesbian people are called "fags" to show they are beneath others, no divinity in them. Immigrants are called "wetbacks" for the same reason. Muslims are called "towel heads." And we know the various names used by members of the white majority for people of color or people from other cultures.

And we do the same with language when we go to war. From his pulpit during the First World War, a Christian minister said he regretted not being able to plunge a bayonet into the gut of a Hun. Germans were Huns, less than human. The Vietnamese became gooks. And American soldiers call Iraqis "camel jockeys," "jihad johnnies" and "sand niggers."

You see, if you come up with a demeaning term, those you kill are outside the circle of a common humanity. And so it was that in 1945, Americans detested those they called "Japs." Many believed the 330,000 victims of those nuclear bombs were not fully human. Many American Christians felt that since the Japanese were Shinto and Buddhist, they couldn't possibly have the spirit of God's love within them.

Let me finally turn to today's texts. The Hebrew prophet Amos challenged the Hebrews to see their neighbors as fellow children of God. He said these were God's words to the Hebrews:

Aren't the children of Ethiopia the same to me as you are, children of Israel? I brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, but I also led the Philistines in their exodus from Caphtor and I brought the Armenians out of Kir.

Amos knew that God's love extended to everyone. I wonder if he wouldn't have God say to us today: "Aren't the children killed by those drones in Afghanistan the same as the children who gathered at the base of this chancel today?"

Or Isaiah, another Hebrew prophet, spoke of a final day when God's love would affirm everyone. He said:

In the last days, the mountain of Yahweh's temple will be established as the most important mountain and raised above all other hills – and all nations will stream to it.

God's love wasn't restricted to the Hebrews; all nations shared that love.

Then in the Christian Scriptures, Paul told the Galatians:

In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one.

So we must constantly seek that oneness, reaching out to greet the divine in the other from that place of divinity in ourselves. Otherwise, we will never be able to imagine a post-nuclear world, little alone a post-war world.

Now the second form of thinking central to imagining a post-nuclear world is recognizing that the idealistic possibilities of peace may be more pragmatic than the so-called realism of a strong defense rooted in an abundance of weapons of death.

Those of us who advocate non-violent solutions to conflict are often seen as idealistic do-gooders; those who want to fight are realists. But look at the world today after American military efforts in two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, Bosnia, Somalia, two wars in Iraq and now Afghanistan. Is the world a safer place to live? Are we more secure? Do Israelis feel safer today and worry less, after that devastating attack on Gaza? Do you feel safer today than you did ten years ago?

War hasn't made us safer; it hasn't qualitatively improved the lives of the world's people. No, if you want to be realistic, if you want to see what has made significant change, look at the results of non-violent resistance.

What ended Jim Crow segregation? It was Martin Luther King and his nonviolent movement for change. It was people sitting bravely at lunch counters and standing up to police dogs and fire hoses.

How did India break free of British imperialism with very few casualties – it was through the courageous use of nonviolence by Gandhi and his followers.

Look at Hungary nonviolently standing up to Austria's power in the 19th century; Denmark's nonviolent resistance to Hitler; Norway's nonviolent resistance to the Nazis.

Look at the new South Africa created nonviolently by Mandela, Tutu and others.

Who are the realists? Those who try to bomb people into change, those who put their trust in nuclear weapons, or those who use creative nonviolent tactics?

It is time for us to recognize that modern warfare, including those nuclear weapons, is an incredibly archaic way of solving conflict. Bishop Jack Spong said: "There is something about war today that seems so primitive. It seems an activity of creatures caught up in an evolutionary time warp, contending over the same bone or defending clearly marked turf. Human beings seem to sense this irrational quality and feel compelled to develop high sounding rhetoric to justify inhumane actions. Nations contemplating war today sound like testosterone-filled little boys proclaiming, 'my old man can lick your old man.' Human beings now contemplate cloning, genetic engineering and stem cell research, yet we still settle conflicts with childish war games."

Spong said, "We clearly have not evolved beyond the mentality where might is assumed to make right."

I've told this story before. Samuel Marshak, a Russian writer of children's books, had a conversation with some six- and seven-year-olds. "What are you playing," he asked. They replied, "We're playing at war." "How could you possibly play war? You know war is bad. You should play at peace." The children paused, then responded, "That's a good idea. But how? How do you play at peace?"

That's our question too – how do we play at peace? What must we do in a world filled with death and devastation arising from our wars, a world with weapons that can do such incredible damage?

Receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, Congregationalist Jane Addams said: "Nothing could be worse than the fear that one has given up too soon and left one effort unexpended which might have saved the world."

The gently swaying peace cranes above us remind us that we can't give up – we must envision a post-nuclear and a post-war world and then act to bring that vision to fruition so that in Isaiah's words:

They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, one nation will not raise the sword (or the machine gun, or the nuclear bomb) against another, and never again will they train for war.

Amen.