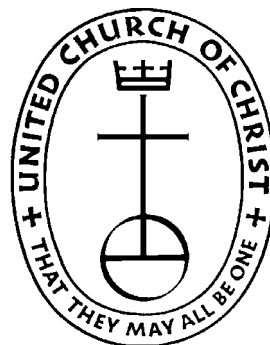


Kicking the World to Pieces

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
August 15, 2010



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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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Kicking the World to Pieces

I am the same age as former Vice President Al Gore. We both graduated from high school in 1965 and entered college as part of the class of 1969. Fifteen years ago, Gore returned to Harvard for his 25th reunion, and in a speech to the alumni association he addressed those present for their 50th reunion, those from the class of 1944, the World War II generation.

Gore said only eleven members of the Harvard class of 1944 attended their graduation ceremonies – the rest had already left to enlist in the military. Some did not come back – their names now engraved on the walls of Harvard Memorial Church.

Gore spoke about the class of 1944's sacrifice; through their efforts the world changed. They had gone off to war filled with idealism, challenging oppressive and dangerous foes. Although that war was as ugly as all wars, those who participated really believed what they were doing was right and needed to be done.

It was not the same with the war fought while Al Gore and I were in college, the Vietnam War. By 1969, the atmosphere on college campuses and throughout the nation was mostly one of bitterness, anger and cynicism. For many of us, our idealism had withered with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and had come to a crushing end in 1968 when both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. were assassinated. That same year, American soldiers in the Vietnamese village of My Lai raped and killed as many as 500 women, children and the elderly. Americans couldn't do that, could they? What had happened to us?

Vice President Gore said, "While we went to class and heard lectures and wrote papers ... the war in Vietnam was blasting that small country apart physically and ripping America apart emotionally. A dark mood of uncertainty from that tragic conflict clouded every single day we were here."

On campuses, protestors like me were full of rage about the war. Those like Gore, who decided to go ahead and serve in that war, were confused and bitter. It wasn't like the class of 1944 – marching off to cheers, fighting for that which seemed noble, returning to ticker-tape parades.

In 1969, my senior year, my life changed. A philosophy major at Occidental Col-

lege, I remember a conversation with Cyril Gloyn, head of the philosophy department. He knew I was a finalist for the Rhodes Scholarship and the Marshall Fellowship, but he also knew I was in deep trouble, on my way to being thrown out of college for my anti-war efforts. Dr. Gloyn said to me that we were the brightest generation of students he had ever taught; the most serious. But we were also the most depressing students he had encountered, the most angry, self-righteous, bitter and cynical.

Now I think the anger and cynicism of the late 1960s has returned to our current era. People today are increasingly cynical about the possibilities for themselves, our society and our future.

There is concern about what we have accomplished in two Iraqi wars and in Afghanistan. We have spent billions of dollars and taken countless lives, while all we have to show for it are two devastated nations and millions of people throughout the world who now hate and despise us. Not much for which to be hopeful.

There is also the cynicism arising from the difficult economic crisis, banks and large corporations bailed out while working folks are left unemployed and small businesses flounder. The rich always seem to come out well, no matter the circumstances.

Or there is the environmental crisis of an unprecedented oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico – many ordinary folks have lost their means of making a living while the oil companies seem to thrive.

There is much deeply rooted cynicism today – a feeling that there is nothing I can do to make a difference. Look at the Tea Party Movement – they want to throw everybody out of office, they don't trust anyone.

Centuries ago, Martin Luther said that if he were God, he would kick the world to pieces. We understand that. When we listen to the news, when we contemplate the various crises, we too would like to kick the world to pieces. Thus, the cynicism.

Al Gore said, "Once it is widely accepted, cynicism – that stubborn, unwavering disbelief in the possibility of good – cynicism can become a malignant habit in democracy." He said, "In a time of social fragmentation, vulgarity becomes a way of life. To be shocking becomes more important and profitable than to be civil or creative or totally original. Given the vulgarity that fragmentation breeds, cynicism seems almost irresistible."

Just think about the talk-show programs and their hosts. They are often mean, nasty and vindictive, self-righteous and cynical.

Cynicism causes us to retreat – to think only of ourselves, becoming indifferent to the fate of anyone or anything beyond ourselves. In terms of religion, cynicism means giving up on the possibility of truly making a difference in life. It means we ask of our churches and faith communities only for that which will make us feel better. Churches become communities of me, me, and me. People come, like to a gas station, to be filled up with something comforting and then to depart, forgetting their neighbors.

Gore said, “Cynicism is deadly. It bites everything it can reach and then devours itself. It drains us of the will to improve; it saps our inventiveness; it withers our souls.”

So how do we escape cynicism? How do we avoid bitterness?

Novelist Frederick Buechner wrote of his struggle to find hope amidst what he called “our obsession with terrible things.” He said he learned that we cannot count on God changing things. Buechner said, “God doesn’t change things. What God does, is change people. And then people change things.”

Now to put that notion into language consistent with my own theology: The Ground of All Being that we call God is a force, an eternal presence, a spirit of love at the very core of life. When we align ourselves with that force and let that unconditional love flow into us, we are changed and then we can change the world in which we live.

That for me is the starting point of hope

Let me read you part of a story from the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew slaves liberated from Egypt were convinced God was giving them the land of Canaan. They planned to destroy or drive away those who had lived on that land for generations. They gathered outside the city of Jericho, waiting to attack. Rahab who is central to the story is generally considered a prostitute, but the Hebrew word could also mean an inn-keeper. The version from which I am reading today uses inn-keeper for her.

Joshua secretly sent out two spies, ordering them, “Go, scout out the territory – especially Jericho.”

The spies set off. In Jericho, they went to the house of an innkeeper named Rahab (Rach-av), where they spent the night. When word reached Jericho’s ruler that two Israelites had arrived to scout the territory, the ruler sent Rahab this message: “Bring me the two who are lodging in your house, for they are to spy on my land.”

But Rahab took the two spies and hid them, then told the ruler, “Yes they did come here, but I didn’t know where they were from. And after dark, knowing the gate

would be closed soon, they left. I don't know where they went. But you might catch up to them if you hurry."

As a matter of fact Rahab had taken them to the roof and hidden them under stalks of flax. The ruler's posse set off in pursuit. The spies had not yet bedded down when Rahab came to them on the roof ... She let them down through the window with a rope. Then she said to them, "Go up in the hills and hide out there from your pursuers. Stay there for three days until the posse returns. Then you can go on your way.

Amidst violence, chaos and fear, amidst cynicism about the intentions of any foreigners, Rahab reached out in love and compassion to strangers.

The Gospel of John calls Jesus "the word made flesh." In a conversation with a retired mentor of mine, he said the older he got the more he valued the image of "the word becoming flesh." Now he didn't mean Jesus as the Son of God dying for our sins. He meant that in Jesus we can see divine love lived out by a wise and kind teacher.

There was great despair in first century Palestine. Jesus and his followers were among the expendables of the Roman empire. They were landless peasants experiencing great oppression. But in that setting, Jesus said there is another realm besides Rome's, the realm of God which is far superior to Rome's empire. God's empire is about acceptance, mercy, love and peace. Jesus helped people believe in themselves and believe they could make a difference.

Al Gore, talking about overcoming his own cynicism said, "At the 1992 Democratic Convention, I talked about a personal event that changed the way I view the world: an accident that almost killed our son. I will not repeat the story," he said, "except to say the most important lesson for me was that people I didn't even know reached out to me and my family to lift us up in their hearts and prayers with compassion of such intensity that I felt a palpable force, a healing reaching out of those multitudes of caring souls; calling us like a mantle of divine grace."

So – God does not change things. But those who align their lives with the divine presence of unconditional love, they are changed. And then they make a difference. God doesn't change things, but God changes people and people change things.

It would be easy to be cynical about the possibility of peace in our world. It would be easy to simply lament the 330,000 innocent people killed sixty-five years ago in the fire bombings of Japanese cities and the direct nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But Bob Kalayjian and Steve Schatz saw making origami cranes as a way of finding hope arising from those horrible events from the past. We remember the events

but we let the cranes move us from despair into the hope that we can make a difference and build a more peaceful world.

When Janet Rhodes saw all the homeless folks at Lincoln Park each Sunday and when she learned that all the social agencies are closed on Sunday, she decided we just had to open a Drop-In Center for the homeless. I kept asking pragmatic questions, like how we going to pay for this, but she had little interest in those questions. We would just do it. She refused to let cynicism stifle her dream. And here we are today, years later, feeding 300-500 people each Sunday, sharing our computer lab and the services of a nurse. Cynics would say it can't be done; but Janet and Brad Lara-Gagne and others have done it.

Dorothy Baker had a similar vision when she saw increasing numbers of poor children in downtown Long Beach. She refused to be cynical, to say it is hopeless, to run from that poverty. Instead she started our Summer Day Camp program and now, forty years later, Nancy Valencia keeps that vision alive. For six weeks this summer, we had 200-250 neighborhood children and teens at the church all day, five days a week for six weeks of enrichment experiences. Some of the children were crying when the program ended – they wanted it to last all summer.

I see the financial reports for the Summer Day Camp and the Drop-In Center. I am not sure how both programs manage to keep going, but Brad and Nancy are too busy helping folks to fret that their dreams may not work.

I think of Harold and Ellen Kameya, helped by PFLAG (Parents, families and friends of Lesbians and Gays) to affirm and accept their lesbian daughter. Ellen and Harold took that message of acceptance to the Asian community which struggles with issues of orientation. It would have been easy for the Kameyas to give up, to become cynical – but they keep on trying to make a difference, and things are changing.

If you return to the words that scholars are convinced Jesus really said – and if you let go of words put on Jesus' lips by the early churches – it is clear that Jesus was far more interested in how people behaved than in what they believed. He didn't offer a set of dogmas; he wasn't particularly religious in terms of prayer and meditation. To those who came to hear him, he said: come join me on a journey of hope, a journey of radical hospitality in which everyone is welcome, a journey of love. And there simply was no room for cynicism on such a journey.

The gospels make it clear that the quest for liberation and equality, the quest for a just peace, is at the heart of genuine spirituality. The living journey of hope becomes our prayer.

At the same Harvard alumni event where Al Gore spoke, Neil Rudenstine, who was then President of Harvard, said: "Somebody once said that opera is when a guy gets stabbed in the back and instead of bleeding, he sings. Transforming a tragic death scene into a beautiful aria, making something extraordinary out of an event that might have been destructive, discovering ways to rise to the occasion with zest or courage or imagination."

When we feel like kicking the world to pieces, when cynicism and despair creep in, when we want to give up and isolate ourselves, we need to remember that God doesn't change things; God simply changes those who align themselves with God's love, and then those people are the ones who change things. May each of us be one of those people. Amen.