

A Time for Peace

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 26, 2024 – Memorial Day Weekend
Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Memorial Day has always been a special holiday in my family, which is ironic because no one in my immediate family, or my extended family for that matter, served in the military. Yet, from my earliest days, I was taught that Memorial Day, more so than any other federal holiday, was unique and sacred because it honored all those who had fought, and died, to preserve our freedoms as citizens of the United States. As I explained briefly last week, in my family we also broadened out that remembering and honoring piece to include family members who had died and, as I have reflected on this recently, I have come to appreciate the importance of that broadened circle of remembrance. I see it as entirely appropriate because when a nation is at war, all the citizens of that country are directly impacted. Whether that war is on our own lands – like the Revolutionary War and the Civil War – or on foreign lands, the impact is deeply felt. In my own family's case, I know that my mother and her mother took seriously their responsibility to manage the war rations coupons so that not only could they feed the family but they also knew that by doing so they were making more food available to the troops overseas. My dad volunteered to help with scrap metal and rubber drives and made sure the family home was entirely blacked out when the fear of possible attacks on the steel mills of Pittsburgh did not sound as far-fetched as they do now, 80 years later.

I was reminded powerfully of how much we are all still impacted by the sacrifices made by others in times of war this past

week when I was, of all things, driving to Ace Hardware in the nearby town of Barrington. Barrington, which is nestled in between Riverside and Warren on the East Bay, is very proud of being at one point in time designated as an “all American town.” So it was not unusual that, as I was driving to Ace Hardware in Barrington, I noticed a number of Memorial Day banners flying, lovingly attached to the town’s old-fashioned street lights adorning the main street. Each of these banners had a name, and insignia of some sort, and the war in which the person being remembered fought. I was shocked to see that one of these was honoring someone who fought in the Revolutionary War and several others were for soldiers from the Civil War! When I first saw this, I was astounded. I don’t know about you, but when I think about Memorial Day, I tend to connect it primarily with the war dead from the wars in which I personally know people who served – World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf Wars. I’m ashamed to say I never, until that moment, really connected my heart to my head and remembered that we are honoring war dead on Memorial Day weekend that pre-date the birthday of our country itself.

This is what makes Memorial Day so unique among the national holidays we celebrate. On this holiday which we sugarcoat with layers of cookouts and Little League baseball games and yard work and boating and going to the beach, lies a holiday created to honor one simple idea – people die in wars. Real people with real lives, families who love them, spouses and children, parents and siblings – these are the people who die in wars. They are enlisted folks and officers. They are ground troops and pilots, medics and nurses, strategic command on the

battlefield connected all the way to the Pentagon in Washington. At every point along this military trajectory there are people, real people who have already made the decision that this country, our country, is worth fighting for if need be, worth dying for if that's how things work out. That, dear ones, is a very remarkable thing, worthy of our notice, our appreciation and, yes, our prayers.

But, honestly, where does faith fit into all this? How is the church, any church, our church, a part of this dynamic? That's what I'd like us to reflect on for a bit today. That's why I chose the Scripture text from Ecclesiastes as the foundation of this morning's message. This is one we all know quite well, if only because some of us remember when *Turn! Turn! Turn!* was a hit song back in the 1960's. Recorded by The Byrds, it is based entirely on this text from Ecclesiastes and was originally intended as a war protest song during the Vietnam War. I vividly remember the first time I heard it, when I was in Middle School (then called Junior High). I immediately recognized it as a scripture text, although I couldn't exactly remember which one. But I will forever remember that last line they added to the text: "A time to love, a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace. I swear it's not too late."

I swear it's not too late. How prophetic that line has become since it was first sung because all too often it feels like it is too late as peace for our country, for the world remains so elusive. And dear ones, this is a very complex issue – this notion of peace. Achieving peace in any corner of our lives feels more and more elusive every day. Violence and threats of violence are everywhere these days, not just on the battlefield, which is truly impossible to wrap one's head around. Yet the newspapers remind us every day

how some are threatening violence if the upcoming election does not turn out as they want it to. Dear ones, we are left to wonder what has become of us?

And yet, God is with us still during all of this madness. God is with us, through all these seasons of being human so beautifully articulated in this passage from Ecclesiastes. More even than the lyrical language of these beautiful verses is the reality that they reveal to us that our current situation, as frightening as it feels in some moments is not new. We've been here before, at a moment in history when everything feels unhinged, off track and out of control; when we cannot envision how we will be able to move forward as competing visions for this country literally battle it out on the media with us as helpless spectators. We've been here before, and the lesson of history is that, we'll get through it somehow. God will walk with us, step by step, tear by tear, prayer by prayer.

I was reminded of this simple truth quite powerfully when my daughter told me about an amazing limited series on Apple TV. Called *Manhunt*, based on the book of the same name by James Swanson, it is the story of the twelve days that John Wilkes Booth was on the run following his murder of President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, DC on April 15, 1865. That simple description, while accurate, does not do justice to this complex historical drama. As is so often the case when a book is dramatized, details from the book are omitted or condensed, but still, I highly recommend both the series and the book. What I found so compelling in both is their stark depiction of details of a vitally important historical event that I thought I knew and understood but clearly did not. For example, I did not understand

there was a Confederate Secret Service based in Montreal, Canada whose sole purpose was to function as a subversive and disruptive force in the North. I did not understand that this group clearly had some role in the assassination of Lincoln meaning this traitorous act was not the act of a lone crazy person. I did not understand that it was at one time suspected that President Andrew Johnson, President's Lincoln's Vice President who succeeded him after the assassination was a Southern sympathizer who was only given the spot on the ticket as Vice President to placate the Southern border states who were shaky supporters of the North. I had a vague notion that Johnson had not been a great President, but I did not know that almost as soon as he was sworn in, he began to systematically undo most of what President Lincoln had already put in place to address the complexities of the rebel states' return to the Union. I did not realize that if President Lincoln had not rammed through the 3 Constitutional amendments protecting the rights of the formerly enslaved, there was a real danger Johnson and his cronies would have found a way to return slavery to a reality in the South. I did not realize that John Wilkes Booth escaped capture for 12 days because of the many Confederate sympathizers who aided him and his companion David Herold while there were on the run. I did not realize that the towns in Maryland where he spent those days on the run no longer have the same names as they did because it was thought everything connected to Booth needed to be wiped out, so great was the hatred for him for what he had done.

I could go on and on, but I think you get my point. This series and the book on which it is based provide a grounding for

understanding why so many of the troubles swirling around us today – right now in 2024 – have their roots in that fateful day in 1865 when one man literally and deliberately changed the course of history by murdering one of the most remarkable men ever born. Incidentally, John Wilkes Booth expected to be hailed as a hero for killing the man he regarded as a devil and a dictator. He reasoned Lincoln had to be both of these things to be as successful as he had been because Lincoln believed that all people were indeed created equal. Booth was a white supremacist to his core and his hatred of all people of color is what drove him forward on his relentless quest to be the savior of the Confederacy when he killed Lincoln as his co-conspirator attempted, and failed, to murder Secretary of State William Seward. Another co-conspirator was to murder Johnson but he supposedly lost his nerve so Johnson remained alive. As Johnson systematically moved forward to dismantle many of Lincoln's plans for reconstruction after the war, some began to wonder if his survival was no accident but instead a part of the original assassination plot all along. We'll never know. But the enormity of this conspiracy which we now do know and understand, and the after affects it has had on our country are undeniable and ongoing.

And yet, here we are. 159 years later and we are still here. Slavery was not reinstated, but we still struggle mightily with its legacy. Arguments over the real cause of the Civil War – states' rights or the eradication of slavery – still exist. Confederate War Heroes guilty of treason, literally, are still honored in some parts of the South. The Insurrectionists on January 6 carried Confederate battle flags with them when they stormed the Capitol. Dear ones, the legacy of the Civil War looms large because we

have not been able for various reasons to come to grips with the whole thing – the why of the whole situation remains unclear and unresolved. Yet, here we are anyway. The Civil Rights movement changed the course of history just as much as those Confederate generals whose ancestors turned on the black activists with water cannon and police dogs and the specter of lynching ever present. And who was on the front lines of all those marches, all those protests, all those times when black children needed escorts to go into all white schools for the first time? Christian clergy and church folks, that's who. People who dared to put themselves on the line, literally, for what they knew to be true. And what was that? Of course we know what Jesus would and did say. That we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have, even when that means putting it all on the line to protect and advocate for someone else we don't even know.

But these folks also knew something else to the core of who they were, and who we still are, which our friend who wrote Ecclesiastes said so well:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*

*a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

A time for peace. I swear it's not too late. And we are living proof of that. May God guide us forward, one step at a time, on the path to peace. Amen.