

“Ain’t Gonna Study War No More”

Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage
December 1, 2019 (1st Sunday of Advent)

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

[Sing: “Down by the Riverside”]

Our scripture from Matthew this morning is often read at Advent, while we’re waiting for Christ to come. But Advent is an odd time for us. Historically, Christ already came, so what are we waiting for? What are we keeping awake for? If we combine this passage with the reading from Isaiah, we see that Isaiah sees a time when people will stream to God’s temple in order to learn from God’s teachings. So, one way we can interpret the reading from Matthew is that we are to keep awake and pay attention to what Jesus is teaching us.

If this is the message of Matthew, then we very much want to be the one taken, metaphorically, to the mountain of God’s teaching. According to Isaiah, what we will find there is a message of peace. Swords will be turned into plowshares and we will study war no more.

We could really use this message of peace right now—a teaching of how not to study war, but of how to study peace. Not only is our world torn with wars, insurrections and skirmishes, but our own country, our states, even our families are harshly divided. How might we turn the swords of our anger, the swords of our judgments and the swords of our tongues into plowshares?

Earlier this week, I was talking to my son about a group of people that I deeply disagree with, wondering why they uphold certain beliefs despite what is, to me, all factual evidence to the contrary and despite their stated value system. My son is a political science major and reads a lot of the internet forums of both the left and the right so that he can know what people are thinking. His response was that the people I’m concerned about aren’t really acting based on their values or even on their beliefs. They are angry, he said. Furious. They are sick of how they are being treated. Sick of being judged. Sick of people telling them how to be. They feel like others look down on them. And fury leads to irrational behavior and a desire to win at all costs. It’s not about truth and it’s not about upholding or living out values. At this point, they’re feeling so ostracized from people who hold my views that it’s just about beating people like me.

I wonder if he’s right? I wonder what I might have done to contribute to this anger? And I wonder to what extent I’m acting in just the same way? Am I furious at them and hoping to win at all costs? How often have I used judgmental phrases to describe people I don’t agree with? How often have I used outrage as a weapon against someone, rather than as a tool to galvanize my own action? How often have I tried to bludgeon someone with my knowledge or my convictions?

I’m not sure. What I can say, though, is that when I sit in my living room and ask my son how “those people” can think the way they do, I have certainly made them into the Other.

Anger and outrage are appropriate emotions to have sometimes, especially when another person’s life or well-being are being put at risk. So, I’m not advocating quietude or inaction. I’m not suggesting that peace is order or the absence of tension. I’m not even advocating compromise,

at least, not when we're talking about people's lives and their well-being. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr has said, focusing on order and the absence of tension, is a "negative peace" or an illusion of peace. It just leads to or allows more injustice, so it's not real peace. Most of the time, real peace requires that the underlying tension, which we who don't like conflict try to ignore, be brought out. Once that tension is brought out and is named, we can talk about it and work together to solve it.

But we are not going to solve the problems that outrage us by othering people, or by making them into a "them," which is what happens when we direct our outrage at people.

So how do we turn our swords into plowshares in this time of outrage? Well, this is why we celebrate the season of Advent each year, even though Christ was already born so many years ago. We get a new chance, every year, to be surrounded by hope, peace, joy, love and wonder. We can sit quietly, watching new-fallen snow, listening to soft Christmas music, looking at the lights on our trees, or thinking about the joy of a newborn baby Christ, and let peace and wonder permeate our entire being.

From this place of peace, we can look inward and honestly ask what our own motivations have been. Have we been trying to win against a group at whom we feel outrage? Have we been making any person or any group of people into an "other" or a "them"? Have our actions even unintentionally caused this effect? How have we been studying war this year?

My hope this Advent season is that, remembering the message of love and peace that this time of year brings, we can then seek to understand those that we disagree with and to see them as part of our one-world family. Seeing someone as part of "us," instead of as "them," changes the way we interact. It doesn't mean that we will suddenly agree about everything, but it does change our attitudes and behaviors. The effect can be that we might act in a less judgmental, less rage-filled manner. The effect could be to induce the same kind of understanding from those with whom we disagree, since actions of love and peace tend to be contagious.

You might remember that I read a story to the children a few weeks ago about Mooch the Cat. When he came across an angry dog barking at him, Mooch thought about what he would do if he were in heaven. Instead of running away or hissing and scratching the dog's nose, Mooch gave the dog a huge hug. And the dog hugged him back.

Directing fury and outrage at others produces a cycle of fury and outrage. Actions of love and kindness produce a cycle of love and kindness. And so, let us be guided by the teachings of Christ, and start that cycle of love and grace. May it be so. Amen.