



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Rev. Bruce Sanguin

Sirach 10: 12-18, Luke 14:1, 7-14

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14th Sunday after Pentecost

“Make Conversation, Not War”

We don't know all the details yet concerning the safe release of the Korean hostages in Afghanistan. Tragically, four were killed before this release was negotiated. Surprisingly, most were not. This leads me to question the fundamental principle coming out of the White House when it comes to the Taliban – namely, that you “don't negotiate with terrorists.” At one level this makes sense. If you start paying off hostage-takers, then you risk creating a sub-culture of hostage taking for profit. But the principle as it stands – which has been supported by our Prime Minister – is based on the notion that the Taliban are a sub-human species. You can't even talk to these people, because they are not really people. They are evil beasts incapable of rational dialogue.

But this recent release of hostages causes me to question this belief, just a little. It hasn't been confirmed that there was any exchange of money, for example. They wanted the Koreans to withdraw their troops – which the Koreans have agreed to do. As well, they wanted them to stop sending Christian missionaries to convert the Muslim population. As regards the first, we might not agree that this is an acceptable demand. We might judge that the best way to help the Afghan people is to kill or drive out all the Taliban. One might

question how rational that position is however. Maybe it's possible. Or maybe you just create new generations of Islamic fundamentalists bent on revenge. As regards the second demand – that they stop sending missionaries to convert Muslims – this request seems eminently rational. What on earth were those Christian Koreans thinking? Have they no sense of history? Did they not understand that Muslims associate Christianity with imperial ambition? Finally, the Taliban actually withdrew their demand for the release of captured Taliban, when they heard that the Koreans had no power to effect this demand. All these gestures point to some form of rational capacity, not typically associated with evil beasts. So, why is it that we cannot be in conversation with them exactly?

A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon that explained that we all live and move and have our being within different value systems and associated worldviews. The hostage-taking incident represents an all too familiar clash between two competing value systems – namely, the blue, absolutist worldview of the Korean Christians and the blue, absolutist worldview of the Taliban. This worldview believes fundamentally it is in sole possession of the Truth, and that it is their mission to bring others to their Truth. Historically, this has been the cause of

too many wars and too much bloodshed. It was the worldview of Hitler and his henchmen. People forget that Nazism was at core a religious movement, based in a belief that Germans were the chosen people, who had a right to wipe out gypsies, gays, and all nations who didn't recognize their supremacy. Violence is almost always caused, to use the lesson of Jesus' parable, by states and religions believing that only they have a right to the seat of honour at the banquet of life.

In order to kill other human beings en masse you need to see them as sub-human, as evil incarnate. They need to be made out to have no soul, no interior value that confers upon them any dignity whatsoever. Once this is established, killing is relatively easy – the snuffing out of a cockroach. The way we do this is to project all of our own evil on to the other. When we refuse to look within and see our own evil, we locate it outside of ourselves – in Jews, in gypsies, in gay and lesbians, in the Taliban. Or, if you're Taliban, in the American Empire and Jews. When all evil is located in the other, we kill with impunity.

President Bush has no sense the potential for evil resides within him. What is happening in Iraq is the result of Saddam Hussein. It's the result of Islamic fundamentalism. It's the terrorists. They wanted a fight, those evildoers, and so they got one. By *God*, they got one. It has nothing to do with his own unspoken agenda to Christianize the heathens in the Middle East, and nothing to do with neo-

imperialistic impulses to take the seat of honour at the table. Ain't no flies on *him*. Might be flies on some of *those* guys, but there ain't no flies on him. How much more difficult it is to look deeply into one's own soul and see there the potential for evil. This projection of our own shadow onto the Taliban is so complete that most of us have come to believe that the only good Taliban is a dead Taliban.

Incidentally, even Jesus had to deal with his own inner shadow. As our own Susan McCaslin pointed out in a brilliant essay, published in the Observer magazine, Jesus was doing shadow work when the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. It was an inner wilderness – the geography of the shadow. He looked deeply into his own soul, and saw his own attraction to power, status, and security. Yes, I'm saying that part of Jesus wanted to rule the kingdoms of the world. Yes, he wanted to use his special powers to draw adulation from others and gain status. Yes, he was a little bit shaky as to whether God was really with him, through thick and thin – and he discovered that maybe this uncertainty is not such a bad thing, if the alternative is absolutism. And when he left the wilderness to engage in his ministry of proclaiming and enacting the Kingdom of God, he did so knowing that the same urges as he saw operative in kings and rulers and priests and the village-people, were also operative in him. Their potential for evil was no greater than his own – it was just unexamined. And left unexamined, it gets projected on to others. Violence is the result.

Don't misunderstand me. I am in no way supportive of the Taliban and their ways of oppression. They are by no means paragons of virtue. But perhaps we've learned a lesson from recent events. Perhaps, if we can withdraw our projection of absolute evil, we can imagine dialogue as an alternative to war. Maureen Mayhew, who attends Canadian Memorial, served as a medical doctor in Afghanistan, and did exactly that. She had tea with the Taliban. Maureen found that the stereotypes and clichés we've been fed in the West just didn't hold up. She's going to tell her own story to us one of these Sundays this fall. No, she doesn't agree with their position on women, their judicial system, and their religious beliefs. But at the end of the day, she encountered human beings, capable of dialogue. They had their own needs and wants, their own fears and hopes for their children, and their own capacity for evil and for good.

Sirach is a book of the Bible found in the Apocrypha, which means "hidden things". This is where you find wisdom literature. The problem with human beings according to wisdom traditions is foolishness. The author of Sirach says that pride in human beings is the first sign that we've "withdrawn our hearts from God" (Sirach 10: 12). The Koreans were not too proud to sit down and have a conversation with the Taliban. I'm not saying that this is a magic bullet that will solve all the problems. But it is the one kind of bullet that hasn't been used historically. Our

absolute commitment to *not talk* seems like a folly we cannot afford.

Authentic dialogue requires enormous humility. Think about your own intimate relationships for a moment. How quickly we jump to the conclusion that our take on reality is the only valid one. Look at how quickly we assume we know everything there is to know about the other. How quickly we defend our own position rather than listen deeply, for fear that listening might mean we have to change. If it's this difficult with people we love, think of how challenging dialogue is with our enemies. An interesting study could be done on the thesis that all war is born of the refusal to engage in conversations of depth and meaning – before war gets started. It has not gone unnoticed by feminists that war is gender specific. Women don't make decisions to go to war. The thing about us men is that we don't talk so good. It's not easy to imagine women having an in-depth conversation and at the end conclude that the massive slaughter of their sons and daughters is the only viable solution.

I can hear the skeptics out there, saying "Yeah well, Chamberlain tried to talk to Hitler and look where it got us." Well, the Second World War was the direct result of the First World War, and a soldier named Adolph Hitler was in the trenches, pledging that he would get his revenge. Most historians agree that the conversation that never happened was prior to WW1. The nations of the world had their guns locked and loaded, their war

plans were drawn up, and right up to the moment when war was declared what was missing was a commitment to dialogue. As Lewis Lapham, former editor of Harpers magazine points out, we're just emerging as a species from a 10,000 year romance with war. The rhetoric of Oliver Wendell Holmes in a speech he gave to young men in a football stadium in 1895 sums up this romance:

"I do not know what is true. I do not know the meaning of the universe. But in the midst of doubt, in the collapse of creeds, there is one thing I do not doubt...that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, a cause which he little understands."

On the other hand, war historian John Mueller, challenges this romance in his book *The Remnants of War*: "The central burden of this book is that war is merely an idea. Unlike breathing, eating or sex, war is not something that is somehow required by the human condition or the forces of history. Accordingly, war can shrivel up and disappear..." War will not end until men in high places become so disenchanted with war, that they give up their desire to have the seat of honour at the table of privilege and truth. War will not end until men make an absolute commitment to deep, gut-wrenching, heart-opening, mind-expanding dialogue. You are wrong Prime Minister Harper and President Bush. We need to talk to the Taliban.

Derek Evans, a Quaker and acquaintance of mine, author of *Dispatches from the Global Village*, was sent by Amnesty International to mediate a dispute in Sudan between the Sudanese government and the warlords. He arrived at a village of 7000 that had just been wiped out by bandits. At considerable risk to his life, he arranged to meet with the warlord responsible for the devastation. All that remained in the village were three chairs. They sat in two of them and started to talk. In the distance they saw a young boy, whose leg had been blown off by a land mine. The conversation turned to their respective hopes and dreams for their *own* children. Just as the conversation was coming to an end, another calamity forced them to flee the area on the same boat. The conversation continued for hours. As trust grew, they wondered aloud whether there was another way that didn't involve sons and daughters losing limbs. As Derek Evans reflected on the experience he wrote:

"Peace is not based on the eradication of enemies – peace is based on reconciling enemy with enemy". We are each other's future. We are going to share this planet." Jesus tells a parable about some guests who arrive early at a banquet to take the seats of honour at the table. He explains that it is foolishness. What is required is humility. There are no seats of honour when it comes to peace. Only three lonely chairs in a devastated global village. One for us. One for our enemy. And one for a brave soul who can help us talk to each other. We owe

it to these veterans here this morning
to pull up a chair and begin to have
deep conversations personally and
politically about the things that make

for peace. In making conversation,
not war, we honour their dedication
and their sacrifice