

Blessed Are The Peacemakers – October 14, 2012

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by David Green

Of the seven Unitarian Universalist Principles – our guidelines for living we affirm and covenant with each other to keep – the sixth one is this:

The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

It's worth remembering our principles did not spring out of nowhere. Each one is the result of careful study and collaboration, a way to say to ourselves and the world: this is what we believe and practice as individuals and as a congregation, both within and beyond the walls of our church.

Some principles have their basis in religious teachings, while some are more grounded in ethical and moral ideals that can stand apart from any faith tradition.

Today I'd like to talk about one element of the sixth principle: peace.

Peace is a loaded word. For one thing, it can apply to so many situations. It affects how we operate on a very personal level, in our relationships with our families, our friends, our neighbors, co-workers, people we do business with.

Peace affects how we work together in any organization, including groups like this Fellowship. It impacts how we respond to political or social issues.

Our attitudes about peace obviously influence the domestic and foreign policies of nations. So, peace on the one hand is an intensely personal thing, but it also has global implications.

Peace also doesn't seem to come very naturally to us. Humans appear to be wired with a strong "fight or flight" tendency. When someone disagrees with us or does us wrong, our immediate response is usually defensiveness, anger, and retribution.

The idea of peace as an alternative might not even cross our mind. What we want – what feels justified – is fighting back.

That's why peace often looks like weakness or submissiveness.

And human history is proof: for all recorded time, there's never been a single moment where someone, somewhere in the world, was not at war with someone else. Quite often, ironically, these wars have been and continue to be fought over differences of religion, with each side at the same time insisting that theirs is the faith of peace.

So, peace is always a conscious choice that's made, not a natural response. In so many ways, it's counter-intuitive. And although peace is an important concept in every religion, that concept can fly out the window pretty fast when the faithful believe their religion is being threatened.

And, peace is only an empty word unless it's put into action. It doesn't really work as an abstract concept.

That's why Jesus was quoted as saying, "Blessed are the peace-*makers*," not the peace-thinkers, or the peace-wishers. The word "peace" itself may sound all warm and fuzzy, but the hard truth is, it always takes persistent work, patience, and sacrifice. And all too often, for those who do the work of peace, the ultimate sacrifice is paid. The question is, if we're committed to peace, personally and globally, then how are we to be the makers of peace?

In the last century, there have been countless people we could name who worked for peace; people we could look to for guidance and inspiration. Today I'd like to talk about two of the best-known peace-makers: who they were, how they achieved peace, and what inspired them.

They're now known to varying degrees as religious leaders as well as peace-makers. But there's an interesting insight into both of these men; a common thread. Neither one – at least in early childhood – actually expressed a strong inclination toward orthodox religion.

And, in their active work as peace-makers, even though they were identified with their respective faiths, and even though they both used religion as a vehicle for promoting the cause of peace, at the very same time they sought to bridge differences of religion as an essential part of their mission.

When Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2nd, 1869 in Porbanar, India, it was under the firm grip of the British Empire. I'm an Anglophile – I love all things English – but even I have to admit the attitudes and policies of the British at that time were racist, domineering, and abusive.

Native Indians were less than second-class citizens in their own land, in ways that didn't differ all that much from slavery. Ostensibly, the British in India and in all their dominions were introducing civilization – at least in Western European terms – which meant having a white guy pointing a rifle at you. The truth was, the natural and human resources of India were things to be used by the British for the prosperity of the Empire, not the Indians.

Many Indians did their best to get along with the British, and adopted British customs and sought to improve their lives by living and working in the English way. But they had few legal rights, and if any Indians had the gall to object to their British overlords, it was called a rebellion, and it was dealt with harshly.

Gandhi's father held a relatively high government post. To follow in his father's career path – as his family wished – after college he went to London in 1888 to study law. Being far away from India seemed to reawaken his own Indian identity, including an interest in religion he'd never taken so seriously. He took a vow to observe the Hindu practices of abstaining from meat, alcohol, and promiscuity.

As a child, he'd been influenced by reading classics of Indian literature; epic stories of mythical Indian heroes like Shrivana, and King Harishchandra. He later claimed to identify strongly with the values of truth, justice, and love exemplified by those characters.

In England he also joined the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 to further universal brotherhood, and devoted to the study of Buddhist and Hindu literature. He also studied the *Bhagavad Gita*, an ancient allegory about ethical struggle and selfless action. Gandhi later referred to the *Gita* as his "spiritual dictionary."

After becoming a lawyer in 1891 he returned to India, but in 1893 accepted a job in the Colony of Natal, South Africa, also part of the British Empire, where he stayed for 21 years.

There, his views on politics, ethics, and leadership flourished. Gandhi was a Hindu, but was employed by Indians in South Africa who were predominantly wealthy Muslims.

At the same time, Hindu Indians there were largely impoverished indentured servants with hardly any legal rights. It was there he developed the perspective that being Indian transcended religious differences.

Because he was not white, in South Africa he was also victim of racial discrimination on a scale he'd never known before. Once he was thrown off a train for refusing to move from the first-class section. On a stagecoach he was beaten because he didn't make room for a white European traveler. He was kicked out of hotels, and was taken to court for refusing to remove his turban.

All those events and more awakened his understanding of injustice, and solidified his sense of social activism. He began to question not only his place in society, but the standing of Indians in the British Empire. In South Africa he led an unsuccessful campaign to help Indians gain the right to vote. Although they lost, in 1894 the effort led to the founding the Natal Indian Congress, which became the unifying political voice for Indians in South Africa.

For his leadership he was attacked by white mobs, but he refused to press charges because his principles called him not to seek redress for wrongs in court.

In 1906, the South African government sought to have all Indians registered as a separate but unequal group. In response, Gandhi urged Indians to defy the law through non-violent protest, and suffer whatever punishment.

He called his method *Satyagraha* – or devotion to the truth. For seven years, thousands of Indians were flogged, shot, and jailed for refusing to register. The public outcry was so great against this violence against peaceful Indians, South African leaders were forced to compromise with Gandhi.

Initially, Gandhi was focused on the plight of South African Indians, not blacks. But in 1906, the British declared war on the native Zulu Kingdom. Gandhi actually served as the head of an all-Indian volunteer ambulance corps for the British, but in doing so he not only grew in awareness of the plight of blacks, he realized the power of the British military in his own country could only be resisted through non-violence.

He returned to India in 1915, now with an international reputation as a peace-maker. Life for Indians – Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs – was still harsh under British rule.

For decades, groups that protested unfair treatment were often simply massacred by the British Army, and Indians often retaliated with violence against British civilians, and the cycle continued.

Gandhi joined the Indian National Congress, a political party dedicated to gaining independence from Britain, and became its leader in 1920. In that role he insisted on using methods of non-cooperation, peaceful resistance, and non-violence. He was popular with both Hindus and Muslims, and helped lead non-violent protests for fair wages, against unfair taxes, and for property rights.

He made constant demands and compromises with the British, urged the boycott of British products, encouraged Indians to weave and wear their own traditional clothing, and went from one end of the country to the other leading peaceful protests and calling off any demonstrations that could result in violence. Time and again, he was thrown in jail. He became known for fasting, both as a spiritual practice, and as a method of peaceful protest.

After the start of World War II in 1939, and with Gandhi still demanding independence, the British simply threw him in jail for the duration of the war, along with tens of thousands of Indian National Congress members.

After the war Gandhi worked with Muslims toward the aim of a united India. But tensions between Hindus and Muslims, and the development of religious political parties led the British to partition India into two separate countries: India in the south for the predominantly Hindu population, and Pakistan in the north for the largely Muslim population there.

That was 1947, and while both countries were granted independence as a result, it was not at all what Gandhi had envisioned and worked for: Indians of every faith coexisting peacefully. In January 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist who believed Gandhi was too conciliatory in his relations with Muslims.

It's hard to overestimate Gandhi's influence, politically, economically, religiously, morally, and simply from a humanitarian point of view. I mentioned before the concept he first developed in South Africa that became his overarching philosophy: Satyagraha.

Satyagraha is an amazing, holistic blending of ideas: from the eastern religion Jainism, and from Buddhism, notions of nonviolence, vegetarianism, the avoidance of killing, and "agape," or universal love. Gandhi also borrowed from Islamic and Christian traditions of equality, the brotherhood of humankind, and the concept of turning the other cheek.

He said, "I do not claim to have originated any new principle or doctrine. I have simply tried in my own way to apply the eternal truths to our daily life and problems...The opinions I have formed and the conclusions I have arrived at are not final. I may change them tomorrow. I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills."

Satyagraha does away with antagonisms without harming the antagonists themselves. It arms the individual with moral power rather than physical power.

A student of Gandhi borrowed this concept – and renamed it "soul-force" – in his leadership of a movement we're more familiar with.

Martin Luther King, Jr. saw through Gandhi how non-violence and truth – and how it was used politically and quite successfully in India to overcome oppressive rule – could be applied in his own context: the segregationist south of the United States.

Again, we know much more about the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. than Mahatma Gandhi, but here are just some basics and how Gandhi's principles influenced him.

He was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, the son of a Baptist minister. What might be surprising is that young Martin questioned the truth of some of the most basic doctrines of Christianity: the virgin birth, the miracle stories, and the resurrection. Nonetheless, he still went into the family business. When he was only 25, in 1954, he became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

One of King's mentors was the civil rights leader, theologian, and educator Howard Thurman. Thurman had served as a missionary in India, where he'd met Mahatma Gandhi, and in 1959, King traveled to India to visit Gandhi's birthplace.

Speaking about his trip, King said, "Since being in India, I am more convinced than ever before that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. In a real sense, Mahatma Gandhi embodied in his life certain universal principles that are inherent in the moral structure of the universe, and these principles are as inescapable as the law of gravitation."

Civil rights activist Bayard Rustin had also studied Gandhi's teachings, and encouraged King to dedicate himself to the principles of non-violence. He was King's main advisor and throughout his early activism, and the main organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.

On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, led by King, soon followed. The boycott lasted for 385 days. The situation became so tense that King's house was bombed. King was arrested. But the campaign ended with a United States District Court ruling that ended racial segregation on all Montgomery public buses.

Until that moment, non-violence – what had worked in India for Gandhi – had been an untested ideal for King. But he had proved it worked. The concept was transplanted to the American south, and became the central philosophy behind everything King accomplished from that point on. He said "Christ gave us the goals and Mahatma Gandhi gave us the tactics."

In 1957, King, Ralph Abernathy, and other civil rights leaders founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or the SCLC. The idea was to harness the moral authority and organizing power of black churches to reform civil rights, consistently applying non-violent principles.

If nothing else, King realized that organized, nonviolent protest against segregation would lead to extensive media coverage. They strategically chose the method of protest and the places where protests were carried out.

In city after city, there were dramatic stand-offs with segregationist authorities, and sometimes they turned violent. In Birmingham, the Police Department, led by Eugene "Bull" Connor, used high-pressure water jets and police dogs against protesters—including children. King himself was arrested and jailed 29 times.

The newspaper stories and televised footage of the indignities suffered by blacks, and of the violence and harassment of civil rights workers and marchers, produced a wave of sympathetic public opinion. It convinced the majority of Americans the Civil Rights Movement was the most important issue in American life in the early 1960s. Most of these

rights were successfully enacted into law with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

But King's peace-making didn't stop there. By 1965 he began to publicly express doubts about the Vietnam War. In 1967 he delivered a speech, "Beyond Vietnam," where he connected the war to economic injustice, both overseas and in America.

He said, "A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: 'This is not just.'"

"A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

His opposition to the Vietnam War cost him dearly in terms of support from whites, including President Lyndon Johnson, union leaders and powerful publishers.

In 1968, not long before his assassination, King and the SCLC organized the "Poor People's Campaign" to address issues of economic justice. He traveled the country to assemble "a multiracial army of the poor" that would march on Washington to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience at the Capitol until Congress created an 'economic bill of rights' for poor Americans.

The campaign culminated in a march on Washington, D.C., demanding economic aid to the poorest communities of the United States. Just days after King's assassination, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Among other things, it prohibited discrimination in housing on the basis of race, religion, or national origin. It was later expanded to include sex, family status, and disability.

Well aware he had long been a target for assassination, King had spoken about what people should remember him for at his funeral. He said rather than his awards and where he went to school, people should talk about how he fought peacefully for justice: "I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to, say that I was a drum major. Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter."

What's the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr? Who has adopted non-violence in the face of injustice? Who have been the peace-makers?

To name just a few: Lech Walesa of Poland, Petra Kelly of Germany, Harvey Milk, Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia, The Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, Liu Xiaobo of China, Liberia's President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee, and Yemeni women's rights activist Tawakul Karman.

When you and I look to our principles – the values we affirm – we need to know the legacy behind them, the price that's been paid, and the work that's still being done.

Peace cannot be an abstract concept for us, but the work we do. It's up to you and me to act, in every aspect of our lives, to be the makers of peace.

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