

**The Unitarian Church of Barnstable, UU – May 12, 2019**  
**“A Flourishing Peace” – Rev. Tracy Johnson**

I came of age both personally and politically in what has now come to be called “the Viet Nam Era.” It was that time in our nation’s history when events and technological advances came face to face allowing the horrific gravity of war to become more real to us than ever before. Broadcast nightly on the television news; the ravages of battles waged in the past twenty-four hours or so; joined us right in our living rooms. We had been protected from it prior to that and I’m not sure that’s ideal either because a sheltered naivete does us no good in the long run. But there it was, each night, with the accompanying count of lives sacrificed. Just the American ones. We didn’t hear about the other countries’ losses as far as I can recall.

Having never formally referred to myself as a pacifist, I figured it best to check the definition again to be sure. A pacifist is someone who believes that the use of war and violence are unjustifiable, according to one source. I am certain that I don’t think they are viable solutions to any problems we have as individuals or as nation states. This is what Webster’s says it means. I have always believed, also, that one should be able to defend themselves against a violent attack and I thought this would disqualify me. Turns out it doesn’t. But the second entry in the dictionary mentions opposition to conflict, qualifying that with “especially war,” and I tend to think that some conflict is a positive thing if handled well – war not being an example of that! Perhaps I am more of a pacifist than I had originally deemed myself to be.

We’ve come a long way since my youthful black and white encounters with war, too far some may say as we are bombarded with media images on a constant basis if we choose to be, and nearly as often even if we don’t. Those early images and numbers left a mark on me that I can’t deny. War was no longer something happening in a far-off place that we learned about in our history classes. It was real and vivid. Those were actual people I was seeing caught up in those scenes; eerie screen shots into a hellish environment that seemed not to be serving as a solution to anything.

Fighting in recent years in the Middle East has reawakened the disturbance in my gut as I hear of soldiers who have lost their lives on foreign soil. Feelings of dread mixed with compassion are elicited with each report as I pause before the TV I happen to be passing by and breathe in deeply; my eyes welling up with tears. Another mother’s son or daughter gone from their embrace forever. My own mother’s heart grieves alongside theirs. Practically still children and we send them off to risk the ultimate. To what end, I ask myself; to what end?

Today is Mother’s Day, celebrated each May on the second Sunday, a boon to the Hallmark card empire and restaurants offering brunch with mom in mind. Celebrations of mothers date back to the ancient Greeks and Romans who honored the mother goddesses Rhea and Cybele. In Europe, a Christian festival on the fourth Sunday in Lent where people returned to their “mother church” was celebrated, eventually becoming more secular in nature and giving way to a day to honor mothers with flowers and gifts.

“In 19<sup>th</sup> century America, Ann Reeves Jarvis is credited with the formation of “Mothers’ Day Work Clubs” to teach local women how to properly care for their children. These clubs later became a unifying force in a region of the country still divided over the Civil War. In 1868 Jarvis organized “Mothers’ Friendship Day,” at which mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to promote reconciliation. Another precursor to Mother’s Day came from the abolitionist and suffragette Julia Ward Howe. In 1870 Howe wrote the “Mother’s Day Proclamation,” [which we read this morning] a call to action that asked mothers to unite in promoting world peace. In 1873 Howe campaigned for a “Mother’s Peace Day” to be celebrated every June 2.”<sup>i</sup>

So, the original day here in the US was not about our mom’s so much as it was about the hearts and souls of mothers who were experiencing the loss of husbands and sons in war and who demanded a more peaceful means of answering disputes. The proclamation recognizes the mothers and children on both sides of the battle lines, citing a tenderness that exists, one for the other regardless of nationality, rooted in the fact of motherhood. It calls for women everywhere to take counsel with each other, first to mourn together, and then to consider ways to

bring a more peaceful existence to humanity. It was about the promotion of the “great and general interests of peace.”

I want to take a moment here to lift up the mothers and grandmothers in our midst.

If you are a great-grandmother, please rise as you are able or raise your hand so that we can acknowledge and thank you. Diane, would you please light the purple candle for our great-grandmothers.

If you are a grandmother, please rise as you are able or raise your hand so that we can acknowledge and thank you. Diane, would you please light the blue candle for our grandmothers.

If you are a mother, please rise as you are able or raise your hand so that we can acknowledge and thank you. Diane, would you please light the white candle for our mothers.

We are grateful to you all; the women in our lives who taught us the ways of peace and planted in us a seed of hopefulness for peaceful days to come. You may be seated.

Mother’s Day can be tough for some of us and I want to name that here. We have not all had the best of relationships with our moms. I certainly didn’t, but I am grateful for the opportunity I had to reconcile those differences before she passed from this life. It is hard sometimes to do that, however it can be a valuable exercise in the long run. Parenting doesn’t come with a user manual and there are no prerequisites; no rules about having your own psychology in order; nothing about sobriety, self-esteem or safety. Moms do the best they can with what they have. And if what they had was not so great, it makes sense that the parenting road would be a rocky one. So, if you are sitting out there with mixed emotions about this day, know that you are not alone. Reach out to someone you trust if you need to. Peacemaking begins within our hearts and homes and radiates most easily from us when we are, ourselves, at peace.

This idea of a flourishing peace came to me as I thought about the origins of Mother’s Day and when I read the phrase a month or so ago in “A House for Hope” which I quoted in a previous sermon. I like it more and more as I delve into the meaning a little deeper! Flourishing is about healthy and vigorous growth, especially so when it is grounded in a favorable environment. The peas in my garden exhibit this – have I mentioned my peas before – they are a metaphor for so much these days! They are several inches tall now, upright, reaching toward the sun; bright green, full seedlings. It is in part due to their environment – the soil temperature is perfect for peas and, these being new raised beds, it is good dirt which we have enhanced with lime and fertilizer; it’s not too warm out yet; they are getting plenty of water. We have created a habitat suited for their growth. The question arises then, “What do we need to do in order to ensure a flourishing peace?” What are the conditions necessary? What can we do right here to begin the process?

To flourish also means to wave something around so as to attract attention to it; to hold it up high and to point to it with words and actions. A community ministry colleague of mine in Boston is the Executive Director of an organization called Peace First. For twenty years they have been promoting the idea that young people, given the opportunity and the tools, have the answers that we need to create a more peaceful world. He recently wrote a book, a workbook of sorts, for young people to explore peacemaking in situations that matter the most to them. If you look on the website you will see links to individual stories addressing things like gender, education, equality, racism, mental health awareness and violence to name a few. They share these stories with a certain amount of flourish – getting these amazing ideas out in the open and sparking more and more interest in the cause of peace while empowering young people whose concepts of a more peaceful world offer solutions in real time and hope for the future. It is quite breathtaking.

There are certain things common to cultures that subscribe to peace as a major tenet of their existence. It begins with their values; becomes primary in their interactions; they are intentional about carrying it forward into the next generation. Generally speaking; they also promote democratic processes or consensus style decision making; they believe in gender equity and they teach peace in word and in deed, disallowing violent behavior and practicing non-violent conflict management. It is woven into the fabric of their societies; the warp upon which the

weft of their existence crisscrosses back and forth. It doesn't just happen because they think it should. Their lives address the dream they hold. Knowing that violence begets violence, they focus on the idea that peace also begets peace. If we never follow the thought through fully to this point, we will never arrive.

Faith based enclaves of peacefulness still exist today – Quakerism likely comes to mind here, but there are others. The emphasis is on cooperation, communication and a disciplined sense of spirituality. It is not simply about living peacefully in one's own community. It is also about peacebuilding outside of one's relatively comfortable circle of faith. This is the harder step to be sure, especially in these times of increased violence. It is easy to lose heart; to throw your hands up in the air and retreat to the safe confines of like-mindedness.

We know ourselves to be social beings, inherently relational and the fact is that humanity needs one another. It is likely the thing that has kept us from spirally totally out of control. We need to make peace with our neighbors in order to survive. We need to make peace with our planet in order to survive.

I hear our Unitarian Universalist tenets echoed in some of what peaceful culture grounds itself in – respect for our interconnectedness; democratic means of problem solving; equity in relationships; our penchant for justice making. The Crosby, Stills and Nash song is playing in my head and any time I can work an old protest song into a sermon, you know I am a happy woman! We need a code that we can live by; need to teach our children well so that slowly over time the hell of war and violence will go by the wayside. Feed them on your dreams, it says. Because, ultimately, the stuff that is truly important to you, will take root in them also. They will choose the peace we teach.

And these are the things I come to most frequently when I think about peace: about peace making; about peace building. First, that it must be primary in terms of our list of purposes in life. And authentically so if it is to make a difference. We need to survey our values; see if we find peace among them and place it at the fore of our mode of operation. Second, it is the idea of teaching peace, as a means to ensuring its development and its thriving. It happens in obvious and in subtle ways. When we teach our young ones to resolve differences with the give and take of real dialogue, we are teaching peace. I can almost guarantee you that downstairs, right now, they are teaching peace in some way! When we respond to violence we witness in small acts of micro-aggression and larger scale acts in the global arena by offering viable alternatives to relating to one another in our human family, we are teaching peace. When we come together in community for work and for play, cooperatively and collaboratively, we are teaching peace. When we care for our environment, we are teaching peace.

On this day of celebrating mothers may we also celebrate the original intentions of its founders. May we seek together ways to create an environment where a flourishing peace can well up in our midst. And may we do so with great flourish, boldly proclaiming and living into the peace we believe to be so necessary to the common good.

Blessed be and Happy Mother's Day!

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/mothers-day>