

My Memories of War (and Peace)

Sermon by Rev. Mark Belletini

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All Souls Church, New York City

Memorial Day Weekend used to be a time when folks brought flowers to the graves of those who have died in wars. That doesn't seem to happen as much now; the weekend has become something of 3-day weekend "Gateway to Summer."

However, in the spirit of the beautiful *Faure Requiem* we heard this morning, I want to look at the more traditional themes of the day. But I want to do that by talking about my own experiences with war...and yes, peace.

In order to do that, I need to tell you one of the central stories of my life... it changed my life and it guided my ministry these last 40 years.

No angel on a mountain top, mind you. No apparition in a grotto. Just this:

Fifty one years ago this month, I was coming home from seeing the movie *Dr. Zhivago*. My friend Tom was driving. The two of us had seen the matinee performance, so when we came out of the dark theater, the full blast of summer heat and bright sunset was upon us. We drove westward into that tangerine colored sky.

We stopped at a red light. Through the windshield I could see a woman leaning out of her second story window just ahead of us. Her face looked in the direction we were travelling; her arms were folded on the sill. She seemed as entranced by the warm light of sunset as I was.

The light turned green. We moved forward toward the spectacular sunset. Out of nowhere, Tom asked me, "Did you see that woman leaning out of her window?"

"Oh yes, of course," I answered.

"You know what?" said Tom.

"In all of your life you will probably never see her again; and yet her life is just as important to her, as your life is to you."

His insight, not entirely typical for him, grabbed me and has never let me go. The simple truth of it was immediately apparent. And since then, that insight has sat on my shoulder during any conversation I have. In all the congregations I have served, and with all my friends and every stranger. And Tom didn't say that all lives are the same, or all situations are equal or anything foolish like that. He said each of our lives is as important as each of us in unique but parallel ways. Important whether we are happy or sad or somewhere in-between. Important whether we are home or away. Important no matter the gender or erotic orientation. Important whether we are walking peacefully down 57th Street on our way to Whole Foods, or standing in the Iraqi wartime desert reacting to bright shell-fire on the dark blue horizon. Each life is important to the person living that life.

Now in my life, which most certainly is important to me, I have three experiences touching on war, even though I have never served in the military, like any number of my friends.

One: Every time I've been here at All Souls this year, I stay at my beloved friend Doug's place down on East 57th Street. I met his neighbor, a wonderful woman named Rita Fredericks Salzman, several times by the elevator. One day she invited me over to see her place, blest with a truly fine art collection. After the art tour, we sat and talked for hours, about her life and mine, our loves and losses. Her friendships with dance greats like Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and Bill T. Jones, and any number of directors and theater people, wowed me as much as her art. She asked if I was going to see any shows while here. I said No, but she said, "Oh, you must see the piece down at Bedlam Theater, Cry Havoc. Do try and get tickets. It's quite remarkable! I know the director well. He's good." Well after our conversation, I certainly trusted her opinions, and so I got tickets for my friend Bernie and me. We both thought it was as good as she said in every way. The one-man show... Stephan Wolfert was performer's name...dazzled and deeply moved both of us.

The show was about veterans. Wolfert is a veteran. He described to us how he was crisply trained to respond to the possible violence in war. He clearly took that preparation deep inside his whole being. He eventually left the military and went to a theater school.

He told us, however, that the people who often fight in those wars, and survive battles, and then come back home, find no one, NO ONE, who cares enough to UN-train them. No one puts them through a different kind of "reverse-basic training," one that enables them to live a world once again of grocery stores, subways, family dinners, secular employment and parklands for camping safely with friends. A homeland where the great majority of the killing, save of course for all the young black men and black boys of late, is mostly done on the movie screen with fake bullets and computer magic, in Dolby Stereo and with cheers. Or, on the computer screen with vivid imaginary guns and totally imaginary death.

When Wolfert was done, I was drained, and in a way, I had an experience, through Wolfert's intense and demanding performance, of how totally encompassing and destructive war is.

I learned that night, and have since confirmed, that far, FAR more veterans take their own lives when they get back...20 per day...than actually die in any war, or even a long list of wars. I began to see how war is not just something far away, but also very much here. I realized it was not just about millions who perish in battle and bombings...soldiers and civilians alike, but the hundreds of thousands who, abandoned by their own nation, then perish by their own hand.

Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saecum in favilla, the *Latin Requiem* continues: "Day of Wrath, that terrible day when the world dissolves into ashes"...I assure you, those veterans, so many of whom now sit, homeless, at our busy intersections, begging for support, could themselves have written that ancient terrifying text... and in a hundred languages beyond Latin. And each of their lives was just as important to them as my life is to me. Or your life is to you.

So many millions over the last century, and in the beginning of this one....*Requiem Aeternam*. May they rest in peace. We cannot bring them back. No matter how just the cause...to save, to protect...

As I said, Wolfert convinced me that war is here, not some other place. Just like Anna Akhmatova tells us in her poem, written in 1921, she sees the harps, the souls, of all those who died in the war and revolution, many of whom she loved dearly, hanging in the bright trees around her. Palaces in the sunlit rain-shower all around her...beautiful, yes, but she understands clearly that the shadow of war was still all around her, even though the beauty of the willows

trailing the water breaks her heart. On Memorial Day, its best to understand that, so we don't fool ourselves the next time another war is fought, no matter where.

Two: And of course, the second poem makes clear that war WAS here. Not just Pearl Harbor or 9/11, so terrible especially here in this great city. But that other war, which not everyone was aware of right away...remember the lines?

The names of the dead
are messages on black marble
and plunge into the earth.
They are notes of a war
we imagined forgetting.

Michael Klein's poem expresses my experience very well during those years. I buried dozens of people I cared for and loved. Week after week. Service after service. *Requiem aeternam dona eis...* Mark de Wolfe. Amen. Stephen Mistler. Amen. Alex Stevens. Amen. John Zimarowski. Amen. Frank Siskowski. Amen. John Sikes. Amen.

I felt that I was in a trench, the rest of the world above me, with me, and my compatriots who were dying at that time, having to fight for doctors to notice us. We had to fight the president to get him to even mention it. We had to fight for medication that didn't make things worse, and fight for money for research. We had to fight our families, who threw us out, or certainly didn't want to hug us anymore, and who were afraid to let us close to the children in the house, whether we were positive or not.

We had to fight in the streets with the great Larry Kramer of New York City as our general. Whether we were HIV positive or not made little difference. Like soldiers in a war we all had to fight. Like Florence Nightingale at the battle front, we all had to tend to those who were suffering. And then we had get up and go to our ordinary duties, and take care of our own families, and work at our own jobs, and...yes, pretend we were not at war, although I do think we were not very good at that.

Oh we had allies. My church for example, out in Hayward, California. After a board meeting one night, they said to me "Your best friend is dying of AIDS, and we think you work too much here at the church and are not spending enough time with him. We will take care of things here. Go." And I did. I wept when they said that. I felt seen and heard. I wouldn't have survived those years without allies like that. When he died, they all came to the synagogue where the rabbi allowed me to conduct the memorial myself.

Today I follow the AIDS Memorial site on Instagram, a social application very different from Facebook. Instead of the AIDS quilt, with the names of all those who perished quilted on panels, this site invites those of us who survived the unacknowledged war to write biographies for each and every person. For, after all, their cut off lives were as important to them as our lives are to each of us. And I read these biographies every single day, for as I said before, war is not somewhere else, or some when else, but here and now. We imagined forgetting, says Klein, but we can't. When you've been in a war, it stays with you. In a different way than Wolfert meant. But perhaps you get what I mean.

Three: I have never, as I said, served in the military. I thank those who have chosen to do that, or, who, back in my youth, were drafted to do so. I have friends in the military now. There were

many parents in the congregation I served who had either served themselves or had children who entered the service.

One of the fathers in my congregation was himself an articulate pacifist. His first wife and he had divorced, and they shared their son, although the mother of the young man had him more often because he attended school in the town where she lived. He decided to go into the military. His father was not happy about it, obviously, being a pacifist, but supported his decision. Then he was sent to Iraq.

His father called me often. He would say, "I can't stand it. Every time the phone rings, I think it will be 'the CALL.' I am a nervous wreck."

I would say, "You are his father. I'm not sure how else you would feel. If my son was in harm's way, I would feel exactly the same. Call me anytime you want. I will listen. But I cannot put salve on your feelings. You are, after all, his father."

One day, I was in my office during the summer. I had been away for two weeks and had come in to get the stacks of mail. The phone rang. It was him. "The Call came" he said through sobs. "Come over as soon as you can."

I dropped everything and drove to his house. I came to the door. It was unlocked. I entered. The poor man was on the floor, sobbing and writhing. What could I do? Nothing. So I got on the ground next to him, and the tears came easy to me. We cried together for a long time.

For his son's life, which had been just as important to his son, as his life was to him, was now gone. Burned in a fire bomb. *Dies irae, dies illa, salvut saecum in favilla...*

After the one-man show was over, the incredible actor, Stephan Wolfort, invited all 60 of us to take a seat on the stage. It was a talkabout. He asked who the veterans were. There were four, two women, two men. Marines, as I recall.

He asked them to tell their stories, to relate to what he had told us. It was very moving. He asked the parents of children in the military to speak. So many. The stories were beautiful, and harrowing, and confirmed everything he had said. Finally, I raised my hand. And I said, "I am a minister. I never served. My son never served in the military, but I am his father. Here is what I myself know of the experience of war, and how it spreads concentrically, like rings in a pond, far beyond the actual battle field." And then I told the story I just told you. A tale of war...not in Iraq, but in a minister's heart.

And in all the world, in every nation, religion, culture and politics, what family members would feel any different? Grief is not only universal, it's central to what it means to be human at all.

And what of peace, you may ask? How does one make peace in such a world? How does one begin to frame the meaning of peace after all the deaths in Manchester this week, or in Syria every week, or in Yemen every day. What makes sense to me is that peace is not the same thing as a truce. It's not just beating your swords into plowshares, and your spears into pruning hooks, as the prophet said. I doubt that war will ever disappear completely, since absolute power corrupts absolutely, and there seems to be little way we can remove the seductiveness of craving power from those who crave it. Sociopaths may always exist for all I know. And limits have to be drawn.

But what makes sense to me is that in both Hebrew and Arabic, the words for peace, *Shalom* and *Salaam*, mean a lot more than a truce. They mean wholeness, and balance. They mean soundness, and human welfare. They mean food on the table, and all people AT that table having their say. Peace means something creative and embracing, not merely the absence of conflict.

Such things ARE in our hands. Yes, we cannot reform the twisted political systems with a wish, or topple oppressions by writing sarcastic comments on Facebook. We can, however, be honest about our own feelings when we learn of tragedies like Manchester. We can admit we are shaken and don't know the answers. We can resist universalizing every tragic act, or smothering it with finger-pointing and blame. We can pick one simple thing to do every week that brings us into the presence of someone far different from us, whoever we are, and we can then reflect honestly about what it felt like and what systems may be in place that made us think this person was so different after all.

We need to be honest with ourselves and with each other first. Marches may come. Voting. Protests. But first this: No need for an angel on a mountaintop, or a vision in a grotto. Just the heart that knows that each life on this earth is just as important to that person as your life is to you and my life is to me.