

# PEACE, SALAAM, SHALOM

Sermon by Audette Fulbright

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I've been writing sermons for more than twenty years and over time, there are some essential concepts that begin to collect baggage. "Peace" is one of those terms. This idea, one of the most profound in all of human experience, is also terribly elusive -- difficult to talk about meaningfully, and even more difficult to make manifest in the world.

A famous Unitarian Universalist minister, I believe you may be familiar with him, the Rev. Forrest Church, once said from this pulpit, while preaching about peace:

The new realist knows that today our own survival depends on our neighbors' survival. In a nuclear age, where global war is murder-suicide or genocide, the only way to win is not to war with one another. With a global environmental threat, none of us has discrete backyards any longer. Every person on this planet is in jeopardy, whether it be us, the Russians, or the Brazilians who are despoiling the environment. And, with the advent of a global economy, we are not strengthened but rather threatened by our neighbors' economic insecurity. For the first time in history, a market crash halfway around the world is like a tsunami, a great tidal wave that will surely come crashing down on our own shore. ...Our own freedom and liberty depend existentially and ontologically on justice being done for and shared with as many others as possible... Not that we should sacrifice personal liberty; we should simply modulate it in such a way that our neighbors too are served. We must move from a foundation of atomic individualism to one of community and love.

("World Peace 2000," Forrest Church. Jan. 2, 2000 - <http://www.allsoulsnyc2.org/publications/sermons/fcsermons/worldpeace2000.html>)

He preached those words back in the year 2000, at the turn of the century. But what a familiar ring. Only instead of facing the New Year with President Bill Clinton, we face it...well. With a leader who doesn't talk much about peace.

The truth is, there really have been no particularly peaceful eras in human history. We can talk about the Pax Romana and the Mongol Empire. Yes, after conquering and with the innovation of swift suppression of dissent, these were, relatively speaking, peaceful eras. And by all measures we can usefully use, our own era is actually the most peaceful of all. And yet, war and hatred remain. Peace on earth, goodwill to all remains elusive.

As people of faith, we live by a great truth: just because a thing is hard doesn't mean we don't set our hearts on it, and aim as true as we can. No matter how worn, peace is a spiritual goal worth seeking. Every generation must try anew. Every day is the opportunity to live it.

Another thing that Forrest said is that religion is the human response to being alive and having to die. I've always appreciated that; it's pithy and has the additional virtue of being true. Put less pithy, however, the multitude of world's religions throughout time have been our very human attempt to understand our place in the world; to find the meaningfulness in our experience, and to live by the greatest light we can perceive. Often less helpfully, it's also been a way we try to

control ourselves and others, but again, the aim is true. And every enduring world religion has invited us to live peace.

The Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh put it simply: "It is my conviction that there is no way to peace; peace is the way." Peace is a state of being, a manner of engaging the world, and the results that come from both of these. Remember this. It's the quiet, true thesis of this sermon.

It's at this point that the clever like to chime in with the sad truth that religions have brought more war and separation than almost anything else. The clever in me wants to slip into a debate about our human tendency toward tribalism, but we have to acknowledge this reality. Our religions were written and are lived out by human beings. Therefore they are glorious, exquisite, insipid, frequently pedantic, and practiced by flawed individuals and communities. They often enshrine prejudice and amplify the power of oppression. It's a total bummer, but true.

And. Oh, but and! The very best that has ever been dreamed by a human mind is found there also. Such beauty and love and insight that we cannot even think of it as human; we find it transcendent, inspired, transformational. And it is in those passages of that sacred text and inspired words have proclaimed, age after age, that the great pursuit of our lives should be peace.

Peace as a state of being. Peace as a way of acting in the world. Peace as the result of living together while practicing these two.

In Christian scripture, the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is heard to say, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." The children of God. How do you become the child of God? By making peace.

The root of the word Islam, *silm*, means to make peace, be in a peaceful environment, to be secure and find peace.

And the Hebrew word *shalom*, more than simply a greeting word of peace, not just a kindly wish, is like to the root of Islam - it is meant to convey a totality of experience - to be peaceful within, to act in a way to increase peace in interactions, to live utterly in the peace of God.

Our faith traditions shed that light. Peace is not a destination; it's not a goal that can be pursued. It is, itself, the way.

We live in a time of bitter divides. It can feel harder than ever to talk to people with whom we seem to have fundamental disagreements - families have split, couples have divorced over political perspective. And the great sacred texts of the world all tell us the same thing: Love one another. Seek peace.

It is a world-changing thing, to be peaceful. To rise in the morning, and center yourself in peace. To step on the face of the earth with peace. To treat yourself and your beloveds with compassion, care, gentleness, with the intention of magnifying peace. To face the powers and principalities of the world from an inner place of peace. It's not easy. The great masters have spent lifetimes cultivating a practice of peace. It requires time, quiet, patience, forgiveness, especially of ourselves, as our monkey mind throws itself from thought to distracting thought. It is the development of a rather extraordinary fortitude when we act in the world from a place of deep peace, because our biology responds to our environment with a speed that is designed to outrun

conscious thought. Thus we seek to be peace, and often have to accept that choosing to act with peace is our best stepping stone to that goal of *salaam*, of *shalom*.

How realistic is it to hope that helping one another to live peace will really make a difference? I like to tell the story about the Robert B. Coleman elementary school in Baltimore. A school with a high rate of poverty and other challenges, they decided to try an integrated program of teaching the Kindergarten through 5th grades meditation and how to talk about feelings. They wondered if children could genuinely sit in silent meditation. As the children learned, when they acted out, they were invited into the Quiet Room to meditate. They were encouraged to talk about their feelings. Which, it turns out, they can. In the first year, school suspensions dropped precipitously. By the end of the second year, there were zero suspensions of students.

Maybe you have to teach them young? Well, they tried it at a nearby high school with similar results. We can learn peace. We can learn it if we practice it, if it becomes a part of the culture we build together. Children at Coleman went home and taught their parents. The community is changing.

In a busy, hectic world, one of the best dodges for doing the deep and difficult work of becoming spiritually mature is to say, "I'm too busy." When I hear this, I remember something Ram Dass said. He said, "I try to meditate an hour every day, unless I'm busy, when I meditate for two hours." Really, practicing peace is like practicing faithfulness in a relationship, or working to be a good parent. It's a commitment you make, and then work day by day, sometimes hour by hour, to keep. You can make excuses, you can choose to be unfaithful or an absent or careless parent... but the rewards for living into our best selves are manifold.

I'd like to close this sermon with a simple shared practice. I want to invite you to share another reading together, this one from Lao-tzu. It's in your hymnal, #602, "If There Is to Be Peace." But we are going to read it slowly together; take our time with it, allow it to sink in. It is written responsively, and I'm asking the left side (Audette's side) to begin and read with me, the non-italicized part. Then the right side will read responsively with Galen, the italicized part. Listen to your neighbors; breathe into the slower pace of the reading.

*Amen, ashe, blessed be.*