

Peace! Be Still!

June 24, 2018

This past Sunday I was in Appleton at First Congregational Church to celebrate the baptism of our second grandson, Kyle Frederick Pahl. To honor the occasion, I played on the tenor sax—with piano accompaniment—the beautiful tune written by the great jazz big band leader Thad Jones, “A Child is Born.”

The lyrics go like this: “Now, out of the night, soft as the dawn, into the light! This child, innocent child, soft as a fawn, this child is born. One small heart, one pair of eyes, one work of art, here in my arms! Here he lies, trusting and warm, blessed in this morn, a child is born!”

It was a beautiful day with my family—and I’m delighted to say that we all got along. As our Psalm for this morning put it: “How pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”

But it’s not always that way in our family, like it’s not always that way in life. A couple of years ago, I started writing a book entitled “*Brotherhood*.” There are lots of books on dating and mating, and lots of books on parenthood. But, I thought, there aren’t many books on being a sibling. So I hoped this might be a book that would be both marketable and interesting, given how important brothers and sisters can be (and how important they are in scripture—think Cain and Abel, Rachel and Leah, and on and on).

Anyway, I outlined the book and started writing. It wove together stories from my own childhood and youth as the oldest of three brothers, along with stories from scripture, and literature, and film. And, I thought, since I was telling stories about my family members, I should probably let them read it before sending it to a publisher. I gave them the first three chapters one day when we were all gathered at my brother Andy’s cottage on Washington Lake near Shawano. Oh, man. Andy said: “I don’t remember any of this [stuff].” Dave said: “That’s not how it happened.” And my parents said: “You can’t write that about us!” Even my sister-in-laws and wife piled on the critique. It was the harshest set of reviews I’d ever received in my life. I haven’t touched the book since.

So, how pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. And how unpleasant it is when we’re fighting, in conflict, or living through violence.

In our gospel for today, I can assure you that the storm in this story is a metaphor for something more than natural wind and waves. Storms in scripture are almost always a metaphor for violence. In Genesis 1, the Spirit of God moves over the face of the deep; that deep—the Hebrew word is *tehom*—is a stormy chaos. In some other creation stories from the ancient near East, upon which the writers of the Genesis account drew, that deep is the home of a monster, named Tiamat, who inspires violence. And in Genesis 6, in the well-known story of Noah and the flood, the story begins by saying that “God saw that the whole earth was corrupt, and full of violence.” Violence is like a flood, just as a flood does violence. The equivalence in the ancient mind between storms and violence was vivid. Storms are metaphors for violence, and stories like the one we just read from the Gospel of Mark are how we dramatize our experiences of violence and how we respond to them.

So, when confronted by violence and storms, our animal response is generally one of two forms—you know this: fight or flight. But both of those F words come down to yet another F word: FEAR. Jesus says it quite directly to the disciples, and to us: “Why are you afraid?”

Fear is a powerful motivator—it gets the disciples moving, and it can move us, too. But fear often motivates us to actions we come to regret, in retrospect. Fear inspires us in *reactive* ways. When we take the course of flight, for example, we avoid hard choices. Life is filled with such hard choices, where there’s no good option. Albert Schweitzer, the great Lutheran medical missionary, musician, and scholar, wrote that even when we try to live with reverence for all of life, as I do, we must nevertheless make difficult choices that mean some life will receive benefits and support while some will receive less. We must prioritize. Life has its tragic elements. When we’re frightened, sometimes flight makes the most sense.

But not many people are taking that approach in America today. Fight is more prevalent than flight in the current U.S. cultural ethos. When faced with fear today, most Americans choose to fight. Let me count the ways.

Our debased political rhetoric is “weaponized,” as the pundits put it, based on negative “attack” ads that demonize opponents. Our military budget—our commitment to fighting—dwarfs our peacebuilding budget. We don’t have a Secretary of Peace. We do have a Secretary of “Defense” (whose title used to be the more honest Secretary of War). We have immigration policies that led previous Presidents to build family prisons—wrap your brain around that notion, and that now under this President *separated* children from their families at the border. We have a system of mass incarceration that puts behind bars 716/100,000 citizens. The next closest is Russia, at 455/100,000. Germany—which has been welcoming immigrants and refugees in ways the U.S. used to—incarcerates 76/100,000. We have gun policies that would let me buy an AR-15 and all the ammo I want at my local Fleet Farm. We have an economy where 1% of the population holds 38% of all privately held wealth, and where the average CEO earns 361 times the salary of the average worker in his (usually) corporation. In 1960—when the economy was still really booming and all boats were being lifted, and not just celebrity yachts—the typical CEO earned a salary only 12 times the average worker. There are storms swirling around us, no? The predominant reaction to fear in modern America is to fight.

But, of course, this is not just an American problem. Globally, the case I know best in this regard is in Turkey, where the storms threaten to get really violent. The current President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has taken step after step to turn what many hoped would be a model democracy in the Middle East into an authoritarian kleptocracy. He started by targeting the free press as the enemy, and eventually he shut down dozens of newspapers and radio and TV outlets. Meanwhile, as the Reza Zarrab case decided a few months ago in a New York Court made plain, Erdogan managed a scheme to evade UN Sanctions against Iran, and to deliver gold bars to the Iranians in exchange for cold cash that went directly to his family and his cronies. Meanwhile, Erdogan staged huge political rallies that stoked religious-like fervor for himself, and that employed religion as a weapon against political opponents. Finally, following a failed (and possibly staged) coup attempt in 2016, Erdogan displayed sheer contempt for the rule of law, establishing an “Emergency Rule” that arbitrarily labeled people “terrorists,” fired judges, police officers, and professors not deemed loyal enough to him, imprisoned journalists, revoked passports, and seized assets in the billions of dollars from companies run by perceived rivals.

So, it was in the midst of a storm like this—an empire degraded by its own violence, turning on its own citizens, threatening to overwhelm and drown all with waves of fear and fighting—that Jesus says three little words: “Peace. Be Still.” Say them with me: “Peace. Be Still.”

It’s probably not insignificant that the first thing we see Jesus doing, while the storm is raging around his boat, is sleeping. Sleep is holy. This Sunday, driving to church for my grandson’s baptism, I listened to an NPR interview with the filmmaker David Lynch, in which he described how he locates the source of his creativity and artistic focus in his practice of meditation. Some spiritual practice is crucial to find peace within and to create peace without. Peace doesn’t just happen. But it was the Dalai Lama who put it best, when he said: “Sleep is the best meditation.” Really—Jesus shows us the way. Get those eight hours, no matter what storm is raging. Sleep is holy.

Because when we’re sleeping, we don’t engage in fight or flight, do we? When we’re sleeping, we don’t react to fear. We might wake up in the midst of a nightmare, but we will then reassure ourselves that everything is OK. This reassurance of the durability of peace is the first principle of active nonviolence and peacebuilding, as scientists and social scientists have been studying it. Walter Wink, in his beautiful little book “*Jesus and Nonviolence*,” puts it this way: DO NOT MIRROR EVIL.

When we face violence, when we are frightened, we tend to become like whatever it is that is frightening us. So, we need a spiritual foundation for peacebuilding, like Jesus’ peaceful breath as he sleeps soundly on that storm-tossed boat. For me, one of the peacebuilding practices I engage is simply counting my breaths. I learned this simple meditation from Phil Jackson, the former coach of the Chicago Bulls and LA Lakers. He wrote a book entitled “*Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*.” And he taught his players—including Michael Jordan, of course—that the simplest way to calm a storm is simply to breathe and to count one’s breaths. Let’s try it together. Simply inhale, and exhale—that’s one—and we’ll count 10 breaths together in silence; we’ll become a Quaker meeting for a minute or two.

OK—now, we’ve calmed the storm. Amazing! Say those three little words of Jesus with me again: “Peace! Be Still!”

Prayer is a foundation for social practice. Peace within translates to peace without. But the opposite is also true. We can discover peace by working for justice. The dynamic is different, but the outcome the same: when we work for justice with others, we let go of our calculating ego, and we discover that whatever storm we are facing has a way of being calmed. This is true even if we are at the front of a protest, or facing a mob, or in prison. Working for justice calms whatever storms that rage around us.

Millard and Linda Fuller, the founders of Habitat for Humanity, knew this kind of peacebuilding well. They had it all, according to some standards, at a young age; Millard was a millionaire while still in his 20s. But their marriage was falling apart. So they sold Millard’s direct mail business, moved into an intentional Christian community, and there the idea for Habitat for Humanity developed.

Last week I had the opportunity to work with a team on the Faith Build here in Green Bay—and those four hours were four hours of collective solidarity. Together, through our work, we LIVED those three little words of Jesus. Say them again with me: “Peace! Be Still!”

The great political scientist, Hannah Arendt, argued that POWER is the capacity of people to act in concert. We often confuse power with force. But force, Arendt points out, can destroy power—the capacity of people to act in concert—but it can’t create it. True power takes consent, and true power creates.

True power, then, is actually a lot like love. Love is a verb, after all. And to love is to be in touch with God’s power that can calm any storm. And if God is love, which God is, then God’s power is pure action; pure energy—deep down at the heart of things, like our breath when we sleep. We can miss it so easily, but it’s always there, no matter the storm: that creating, redeeming, sustaining loving Presence that says (one more time): “Peace. Be still!” Amen.

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Mark 4:35-41
June 24, 2018