

Remembering Peacebuilders on Memorial Day

May 24, 2020

JON: Today is the seventh and last Sunday in Easter, when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Next week is Pentecost, when our focus shifts to the work of the Living Spirit. But this weekend is also leading us to Memorial Day, tomorrow. Memorial Day began after the Civil War as a way to address the trauma of death that impacted every family in the U.S. It became a Federal Holiday in 1971, and by then the Vietnam War and propaganda to honor soldiers who died became the rationale for the weekend. But the earliest impulse behind the holiday was to pray for peace so that the trauma of war would never recur. For our sermon today, following Jesus' prayer that he is glorified in those of us who love God and serve humanity as peacemakers, we will hear the testimonies of six peacebuilders—six people who changed history by taking their love for the living God into active practice on behalf of a more just, peaceful world. You may recognize some of their names; some may be new to you. They are: Henry Hodgkin, Jane Addams, Mairead Corrigan McGuire, Adolpho Perez Esquivel, Desmond Tutu, and Leymah Gbowee. Thanks to Erik Harkoff, Cheryl Myers, Lou Norsetter, Jan Davis, Patrick Klimek, and Heather Collins for reading these inspiring stories. Sources for these reflections include Nobelprize.org, along with other biographical sources. I hope you enjoy getting to know and remember these ancestors in the faith, these spiritual warriors for a just peace. They can help us to realize that we have the power to bring peace wherever we are; to enact the truth that just as God is one, so are we all.

ERIK HARKOFF: Henry Hodgkin and the Fellowship of Reconciliation

On the eve of the First World War, in August 1914, a group of people dedicated to pacifism met in Cologne, Germany to discuss how to avert war. Their meeting failed, as it was interrupted by Germany's formal declaration of war against France, which would eventually also lead England into the conflict. As their meeting broke up, two of these pacifists, an English Quaker named Henry Hodgkin, and a Lutheran pastor named Friedrich Siegmund-Schültze, parted at Cologne station with the mutual pledge: "We are one in Christ and can never be at war."

Henry Hodgkin, who was born in 1877, followed up this commitment by organizing a conference dedicated to peace in Cambridge, England, in December 1914. It was attended by 130 Christians of diverse denominations, and out of it grew the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). The group organized itself around a document called the *Basis of the Fellowship*. Its first two principles read, in words very much like our own Bond of Union:

"That Love as revealed and interpreted in the life and death of Jesus Christ, involves more than we have yet seen, that Love is the only power by which evil can be overcome and the only sufficient basis of human society.

That, in order to establish a world-order based on Love, it is incumbent upon those who believe in this principle to accept it fully, both for

themselves and in relation to others and to take the risks involved in doing so in a world which does not yet accept it.”

Since 1914, the vision of Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze and Henry Hodgkin has led to hundreds of successful non-violent movements for greater justice and peace around the world, as documented in a little book by Walter Wink called *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*. The Fellowship of Reconciliation has grown from its Christian roots to become the world’s most prominent interfaith peacebuilding organization. It has also given birth to the field of “Peace and Justice Studies,” which has grown exponentially in colleges and universities around the world over the past five decades. FOR has trained millions of people in the practices of nonviolent resistance, and in activist service as an alternative to war. Among those trained in nonviolence by the Fellowship of Reconciliation was Martin Luther King, Jr.

CHERYL MYERS: Jane Addams and Social Workers

Jane Addams of Chicago, born in 1860, was a founding member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, but she is best known for her work as the founder of Hull House, one of many so-called “Settlement Houses” established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Settlement Houses” were established to address the social problems facing mostly immigrant communities. Out of the settlement house movement, and Jane Addams’ teaching at the newly-founded University of Chicago, came the discipline of social work.

In addition to her local activism, Addams was also an ardent advocate for international peace and disarmament. She founded the “Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom” in 1919, and she was convinced, in an era when women were just beginning to win the vote, that women would lead the way to a more peaceful future. Addams was also outspoken against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, convinced that its harsh economic sanctions would lead Germany into a war of revenge.

For her activism, Addams was considered a radical by many. She refused to worship what she called the “god [small g] of things as they are,” and she had a hard time with almost all singular manifestations of institutional religion. She worshiped at many different places, and she invited anyone to work with her so long as they didn’t proselytize for any exclusivist version of their own faith. She believed in “social righteousness,” and even “social salvation.” That is, none of us could be saved until all of us were saved. Her commitment to this social salvation gave social work its deep ethic of service that continues down to today in thousands of agencies, and in social workers who advocate for policies to alleviate poverty and unnecessary suffering. Jane Addams was honored with a Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

JAN DAVIS: Mairead Corrigan Maguire

When she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977, Mairead Corrigan Maguire—who was a secretary at Guinness Brewing Company, was the youngest recipient ever, at age 32. In August 1976, Mairead’s sister Anne lost three young children in a shooting incident between the British Army and IRA Loyalists in Belfast. That was one of many acts of violence between Protestants and Catholics that had erupted over decades, and that constituted what was called “the troubles.” After the shooting, Mairead was called by a woman who had witnessed it, named Betty Williams, and together they agreed to found a

peace organization to bring an end to the bitter conflict. They called themselves “The Community for Peace People.”

Mairead, who was Catholic, grew up in a poor family in Belfast, and Williams, also Catholic, had married a Protestant. Together, the two women knew the community. Corrigan and Williams began holding weekly marches on Saturdays to call for an end to the violence. They marched through some of the most dangerous streets in Belfast. They had their homes and property vandalized, and they received death threats. Nevertheless, eventually thousands joined them, and slowly the tide began to turn away from the cycles of violence, and toward dialogue and negotiation of a stable peace. In 1998, in the “Good Friday Agreement,” the British and Irish negotiated terms of a peace that has largely held since then. The process had been instigated by the actions of Corrigan and Williams.

In a 2006 interview, Corrigan said: “Can you believe if women all around the world said: ‘No more nuclear weapons, no more war, we can’t go on killing each other, we can sit round a table and we can sort this out through dialogue, I mean we are supposed to be civilised, why can’t we solve this through dialogue?’ And I think if women put out that message, they would liberate men out of this mad mentality that somehow militarism solves problems, which we know it doesn’t. So, there is a tremendous role now that women could play in cultivating a real culture of non-violence, a culture of no killing, culture of dialogue and peace-making. Women can do that.”

Mairead Corrigan continues to be an advocate for peace in Northern Ireland, and around the globe, today.

LOU NORSETTER: Adolfo Perez Esquivel

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel was born in Buenos Aires in 1931. After training as an architect and sculptor, he was appointed Professor of Architecture at the University of Buenos Aires. In his spare time in the 1960s, he began coordinating the activities of various non-violent movements in Latin America, most of which were struggling against dictatorships, including one in his native Argentina which had been in power since 1958. Eventually, those activities coalesced into a broad-based Human Rights organization, of which Esquivel was named General Secretary in 1974, called *Servicio Paz y Justicia* (Service Peace and Justice)—SERPAJ.

In 1976, Adolfo Perez Esquivel initiated an international campaign aimed at persuading the United Nations to establish a Human Rights Commission, focused especially on abuses of human rights in Latin America. In the Spring of 1977, Pérez Esquivel was imprisoned in Argentina without cause, where he was tortured and held for 14 months. He was released only after intense international pressure. He was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1980.

Servicio Paz y Justicia was founded on Christian theologies of liberation, and Esquivel has worked closely with clergy and bishops critical of oppression in Latin America. The chief task of the movement is to promote respect for human rights, including social and economic rights. On the practical level this means that Servicio provides assistance to rural workers in their struggle for land, and to trade unions in their struggle to protect the rights of their workers, often in the form of legal aid.

Despite the opposition he has encountered, Pérez Esquivel insists that the struggle must only be waged with non-violent means. In his 1980 Nobel Prize Lecture, Esquivel said:

“It is the faces of our workers, peasants, young, old, indigenous, and children that are the face of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who calls us to the obligation to *love our brothers and sisters.*”

Consequently, he continued: “Our voice seeks to be the voice of those who have no voice, of those who are excluded, of the humble and small.

Our hands seek to speak the language of those who labor, to add to the effort to construct a new world solidarity founded on love, justice, liberty and truth.

Our analysis is a direct consequence of this commitment; our practice is the theory and use of nonviolence based on the gospel.”

PATRICK KLIMEK: Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The Anglican Desmond Tutu, born in 1931, was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his opposition to South Africa’s brutal apartheid regime. Tutu was saluted by the Nobel Committee for his clear views and his fearless stance, characteristics which had made him a unifying symbol for all African freedom fighters.

Despite bloody violations committed against the black population, as in the Sharpeville massacre of 1961 and the Soweto rising in 1976, Tutu adhered to his nonviolent line. Yet he would not blame Nelson Mandela and his supporters for having made a different choice.

The broad media coverage following the awarding of the Nobel Prize made Desmond Tutu a living symbol in the struggle for liberation, someone who articulated the suffering and expectations of South Africa's oppressed masses.

“God’s dream,” Tutu once wrote, “is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.”

In 1995, Desmond Tutu was appointed as Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC was a series of hearings that offered perpetrators of violence in the Apartheid regime an opportunity to confess their actions and to be restored to community. The primary objective of the inquiry was to put forgiveness into practice in order to heal the wounds of hatred or anger that had been created by the apartheid system. There was to be no place for retaliation in the new society that emerged after independence. Tutu taught that “one who forgives becomes a better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred.”

South Africa continues to have its struggles, but Archbishop Desmond Tutu helped it transition from a brutally unjust and racist society to one based on democracy and the rule of law. Desmond Tutu’s deep faith in God, gentle strength, and lively sense of humor helped end Apartheid, reconcile enemies, and bring greater peace to South Africa.

HEATHER COLLINS: Leymah Gbowee

Liberian Leymah (Lee-ma) Gbowee (Bowie), born in 1972, was raised a Lutheran in Monrovia, but like many young people she wavered in her faith as she grew up. She eventually wound up divorced, then in another bad relationship marked by domestic violence, and before the age of thirty she was the single-mother of four children.

In addition, Liberia was experiencing a brutal civil war between the dictator, Charles Taylor, who claimed Christianity as his faith, and a coalition of militias, most of whom claimed Islam. In 1998, Gbowee volunteered with a program called the Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program, run out of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia, her childhood church. That program worked to restore former child soldiers to civil society, and to help women overcome trauma they had experienced in warfare. Eventually, this voluntarism led her to study social work, and to earn a master's degree in nonviolent conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

In 2000, with the help of her pastor and some other women, she founded WIPNET—the Women in Peacebuilding Network. One Sunday, as a spokeswoman for WIPNET, she stood up in St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia and said: “Women, wake up! We have a voice. We want peace! No more war!” In attendance that day was a Muslim woman working as a police sergeant, Asatu Bah Kenneth. Asatu pledged to organize the Muslim women, Leymah organized the Christian women, and they went together to churches and mosques all over Liberia to organize women for peace. Eventually the two began getting the women together in public to pray, chant, and march for peace. Over three years, Muslim and Christian women gathered every day in a central plaza in Monrovia, wearing white T-shirts, and calling for an end to war.

As profiled in the documentary film, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, by Abigail Disney, these women were instrumental in getting Charles Taylor and the militia leaders to sit down for negotiations. That meeting eventually led to Taylor's exile, in 2003, and to the forging of a new Constitution for Liberia. Among the women with whom Gbowee worked was Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman elected leader of an African nation, in 2005. In 2011, Gbowee shared a Nobel Peace Prize with Sirleaf for their work in peacebuilding.

In her memoir, *Mighty Be our Powers*, Gbowee said:

“The Liberian women peace movement demonstrated to the world that grassroots movements are essential to sustaining peace; that women in leadership positions are effective brokers for peace.... Liberia's experience is a good example to the world that women ... can be drivers of peace.

Leymah Gbowee continues to be an activist for peace, with her own Foundation, based in Monrovia, and with a teaching appointment at Columbia University. Her faith is deep, and strong: “God is ever faithful, loving,” she writes. God “listens to our prayers.”

JON: These are six heroes of faith, six ancestors, six spiritual warriors, we can remember on this Memorial Day. These are individuals who can inspire **us** to be peacebuilders. They faced struggles—intense ones—and they worked for peace and

justice effectively. These are exemplars to whom we can look to know how to help our society, our community, our church, grow toward a just peace. These individuals incarnated grace, living fearlessly, and confident of God's loving embrace. They show us how we can be one, as God is one.

And they are only six of multitudes. Those who want to divide us are few. Those divisive figures may have loud voices, and they may even have weapons, but power is finally with us people, who can lean on God as we understand God for nothing less than the ultimate power in the cosmos. In this time of separation and anxiety, we can know real glory—the glory of peace, the glory of God's grace as manifest in justice. No matter what we are going through, we can be peacebuilders, too. Amen.

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Green Bay, Wisconsin

John 17:1-11

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