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The First Congregational Church in Old Lyme
Sermon “C’mon the Table is Ready”

Text: Isaiah 11 :1-4, 6, 7-9, Jeremiah 8:11, John 14:27, Romans 12:18
October 6, 2024

On Wednesday of this past week, I found the world intruding on my peaceable kin-dom in Old Lyme when a text pinged my phone.

I’ll admit I was already on edge after listening to the latest news out of the Middle East with Lebanon and Israel exchanging missiles and the quickly dimming hopes for a ceasefire in Gaza.

I was sitting in our family room, on a zoom call. Paul had kindly made a fire in the wood stove to take the chill off. Wrapped in a warm blanket, I was tempted to nod off for a moment or two. But seconds later my phone vibrated with an update from Superintendent of Schools in Lyme-Old Lyme about a “Lock In” that had just taken place at the high school and middle school because of a high school student having a toy gun in their car...no one knew it was a toy at first of course. Thankfully, it had all been resolved peacefully and activities resumed but any peace I felt was shattered. The *What ifs* filling my brain in a surge of anxiety:

What if it hadn't been a toy?

I found out that also this week there’d been several other neighboring school systems needing to go into “Lockdown”. There were false threats of violence made resulting in the East Hampton schools, as well as Cromwell, Columbia and New London school districts. Anna’s volleyball game was canceled because of one of them.

This isn't meant to be a sermon about Gun Control and locking up guns safely, eliminating assault weapons once and for all and expanding mandatory background checks, however essential those actions are. This isn't meant to be a sermon on how one can possibly reconcile 2nd Amendment rights over the killing of children with weapons of war. Or, how we might join our voices with those protesting for safer gun legislation in this country.

It is comforting to learn that CT is now ranked no. 4 in gun safety laws¹ And I’m pleased that nationally, the Biden Administration successfully passed new gun control legislation this year for the first time since the 90’s.

I used to work in public schools. I, too, went through Lock Down, Lock In, and Active Shooter drills along with the children in my charge. But I will never forget the conversation I had with my sweet nephew Fitz, now 12, who was in kindergarten when he experienced his first lockdown drill. After school that day, he told his mom and me that they had practiced to keep the bad guy out and had to crawl in the closet and breathe quietly so they wouldn't be found.

The American poet, essayist and environmental activist, Wendell Berry, wrote a powerful essay published in the October issue of *Christian Century* magazine. It’s entitled *Against Killing Children*.

Wendell Berry, as you probably know, is among the poets here at FCCOL whose words are held sacred. Berry’s most famous for his poem, *The Peace of Wild Things*. However, in this prophetic essay, Berry asks hard questions; “How many times does a nation need to destroy civilization or the human race or the world as we have known it in order to win a war?”²

It's not enough, Berry writes, to single out offenders or groups of offenders and lay blame... "Child killing", he goes on, "is the plainest measure of our betrayal of what we used to call our humanity." How do we keep it from reducing the lives of all children, our own as well as anyone else's in the world?

The true prophet whether in the time of the biblical Jeremiah or in 2024 does not mince words. In our readings for today, Jeremiah, the great Old Testament prophet, laments for the state of the world and the hearts of his people in his time. Jeremiah cries over the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah when they were invaded by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. He seeks divine compassion for God's people, "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.

'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.' (Jeremiah 6:14)

Peace, peace when there is no peace...

Meanwhile, Berry reminds us, we Americans along with people from several other nations are so called protected by our stockpiles of nuclear weapons –but only protected by the world's rulers' fear—so far, of using them. Please know, I appreciate the service of all of our veterans and those in my family who have served, like my father. But, have you considered the fact that in our country we have an War Room, a Secretary of War, a Defense Department and countless War Industries that run for profit. Berry asks, Where is our Secretary of Peace? Department of Peace, and Academies of Peace? Imagine if we privileged those arenas as funded national institutions...

I will say that over 100 universities and colleges have now established Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies to the betterment of our young leaders and country overall.

At the end of the article, Berry asks a final question, "*Can we not speak at least an audible "no" to the meaningless suffering and death of these most precious and helpless ones given to our care?"*

I wiped away tears as I finished the last line of Berry's essay. Anna had come home from school by then and I threw my arms around her saying, I'm so glad you're safe! She hugged me back saying the Lock In had been no big deal and no she wasn't scared. She's used to lots of lockdown drills....

Only this wasn't a drill.

I don't think there are any answers to Wendell Berry's plea or each of our own prayers for a just and lasting peace here, there and everywhere but I do know that my heart is eased by being here in worship with all of you today. My heart is eased by my own faith journey and sharing in the experience of a World Communion Sunday, where churches all over the world come to the table to share a meal. To invite and include, give thanks and bless, take and eat as a way to be nourished and re-member again Jesus' words, "to do this in memory of me" and to love one another.

TO do the work of loving

"TO DO THIS" as Jesus taught, leaving his disciples with these words,

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27)

My heart is eased by the ministries of care and compassion that all of us engage in here
My heart is eased by the children and youth in our Sunday school program learning how to find peace within and practice peace in their lives...

Communion has many meanings, not the least of which calls us to sacramental union with each other and to be fed with the God of our hearts, minds and bodies. It is a revolutionary act. Choosing love over violence, peace over destruction, compassion over fear. We are called in this meal to be the hands and feet of Jesus and one another.

To listen to the prophetic voices calling for our attention and respond to the injustices of the world rooted in a faith that calls us to the discipleship of peacemaking.

The sharing of bread broken at the Table of Peace and Love must at least be our way of declaring, No more. No more war, No more weapons in the name of our children and grandchildren. No More!

Come, friends, for the table is ready. Take and eat. May you be filled for the journey ahead. Amen.

Benediction:

Hear this Wendell Berry poem for our final blessing:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

¹ <https://everytownresearch.org/rankings/state/connecticut/>

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/against-killing-children>