

“Choices: The Costs of War”
Justice Sunday

April 6, 2008

Hank Blakely, Al Carlson, Lillian Christman, Paul Cohen, Judy Fincher, Ben Hamblin, Maxine Jaubert

Lighting of the Chalice: Lillian Christman
The Task of the Religious Community

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

--Mark Morrison Reed

For the Child in All of Us, Performed by Lillian Christman

If You Want Wine...

Once upon a time, the mayor of a small town decided that it would be a good idea to have a dinner for everyone in the town. He told his idea to 12 of the town's leading citizens and added, "I will bring the food, if you will each bring a jug of wine."

"Yes, of course, of course," they all agreed.

But, almost as soon as he agreed, the youngest of the leaders was already unhappy with himself for having agreed to part with one whole jug of wine. He did not have much wine in at home, and he did not want to spend money either. "There must be another way," he told his wife. And he sat down to think.

After a while a smile crossed his face. "All of us who were asked to bring wine will be pouring our contributions into a huge pot. Could one jug of water spoil so much wine?"

"Hardly so, my clever husband," she answered.

And so it was that on the day of the dinner this man put on his favorite dinner clothes, filled his jug with fresh water from the well, and went to the picnic. On his way he met up with the other leaders. They were greeted at the dinner by the sounds of music playing, and the delicious smells of food cooking. The mayor motioned for the leaders to pour their jugs of wine into the enormous pot.

First there was music and game playing. Then the dinner bell was rung and everyone sat down to eat.

The leaders sat together at the head table. Volunteers filled each leader's cup with wine. Each person waited patiently for the last guest to be served. They were anxious to taste the fine, refreshing wine.

The mayor gave the signal and the guests put their cups to their lips. They sipped, and sipped again. But what they tasted was not wine but water, for each of them had thought, "One jug of water cannot spoil a great pot of wine." Each of them had filled his jug with water.

They looked at each other sheepishly, avoiding the eyes of the mayor, and then continued to drink as if it were the finest wine their lips had ever tasted.

That day a new saying arose among the people of the town, a saying that spread around the world: "If you wish to take wine, you must give it also."

A SERMON IN MANY VOICES

THE STORM:

An Ill Wind to the South, *Hank Blakely*

The storm fell upon the city like a crazy man with a gun.

On August 23rd, 2005 it is nameless. Meteorologists refer to it as "Tropical Depression Twelve," a fusion of a tropical wave and the remains of an earlier "Tropical Depression Ten." It is now somewhere over the Bahamas, steadily gaining in strength.

On the morning of August 25th, still relatively weak, it arrives on the southeastern tip of Florida, and then grows rapidly as it passes over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. By 1:00 PM, August 27th, it has intensified into a category 3 hurricane, now twice its original size, extending 120 miles from its center, with sustained winds of 125 mph. And now it is called "Katrina." And on this day it is the fourth fiercest hurricane ever recorded, and the strongest ever experienced in the Gulf.

By 10:00 AM, August 28th, it is briefly upgraded to category 5, and residents are ordered to evacuate the city of New Orleans.

At 6:00 AM on August 29th, it makes its second landfall in Plaquemines Parrish, headed for New Orleans. It is now a Category 4, with sustained winds of 145 mph.

At 8:00 AM on the 29th, it enters New Orleans and the devastation is immediate. Waves rise to 45 feet in some areas. Levees crumble one after the other—53 fail in all. Within a few hours, the city canal floodwalls collapse, and Lake Ponchartrain breaks through in a second wave of flooding. By noon it begins to subside, but it is still a dangerous Category 3 with winds of 125 mph...still a killer.

Katrina remains strong for hours, cutting a wide swath of destruction 150 miles long, deep into Mississippi. It dissipates gradually, until at last, somewhere near Clarksville, Tennessee, it is downgraded to a tropical depression.

The resultant destruction is nearly incomprehensible. 26,000 residents of New Orleans have been evacuated to massive temporary shelters, but thousands remain trapped by the surging waters. At one time eighty percent of the city is submerged. The death toll directly and indirectly attributable to the storm has risen to over 1500 in Louisiana, and more than 300 in Mississippi and elsewhere.

Federal disaster declarations cover an area of 90,000 square miles. Within that area, three million people are without electricity. Most of the major roads into and out of the city are severely compromised. Even the sheltering Superdome has withstood significant battering. In all, the damage throughout the hurricane's path is estimated to be \$86 Billion dollars, the costliest Atlantic hurricane in history.

“Heckuvva Job, Brownie,” Paul Cohen

Depending on one's perspective, governmental response to Katrina was either pathetic or criminal.

It was immediately apparent that federal, state and local governments were surprisingly unprepared for a calamity of this degree, and woefully unequal to the task of confronting the destruction.

For days following the disaster, the news media featured a parade of public officials wearing similar deer-in-the-headlights expressions, mouthing similarly unconvincing promises, amidst a swelling chorus of horror stories of squalid conditions and violence in the shelters. Added to this was the steadily rising number of fatalities due to drowning, dehydration and exhaustion.

The circumstances of the mounting death toll led to the incorrect but widely believed conviction that most of the dead were African Americans, and with that perception as foundation, the national conversation quickly turned—as do so many American conversations—to the subject of race. Many now believed that the government's abysmally poor performance was due to the fact that so many of the victims were poor and black, and that this bias was glaringly evident in the media's reports of the disaster's aftermath. The rapper Kanye West summed up this feeling when he said

“I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, ‘They're looting.’ You see a white family, it says, ‘They're looking for food.’ And, you know, it's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black...George Bush doesn't care about black people.”

For whatever reason, the government's performance in the disaster area has been widely judged to be more of a hindrance than a help. The federal response has been condemned for incompetence—scathingly iconized in the somewhat infamous person of FEMA Director Michael Brown, affectionately addressed as “Brownie” during incongruous presidential praise of his performance, shortly before he was recalled to Washington and unceremoniously removed from his post.

Even today, almost three years into the post-Katrina period, the city of New Orleans has yet to yet to make significant progress. Reconstruction for all practical purposes has ground to a halt. Virtually none of the grandiose plans for urban rebirth have been realized, or even seem likely.

At present the state of Louisiana has spent less than ten percent of the hundreds of millions of federal and state funds appropriated for recovery. Affordable housing is practically non-existent. Rents have risen at least 40% and in many cases has doubled.. Tens of thousands remain in cramped and toxic trailers. Chronic homelessness has doubled since Katrina, and is now up to 12,000 people living under bridges, in abandoned warehouses and condemned structures. Construction of new homes has become mired in local disputes, law suits, and draconian federal ethics regulations designed to curb corruption.

Not surprisingly, despite rosy projections and glib promises that are abandoned almost as soon as they are made, New Orleans repopulation has stalled; now at somewhere near 240,000, half of its former size—you can't live where there is no place to live. In short, the city's condition is emblematic

of that of the area defined by Katrina's path—a region laid low by nature and kept there by the failings of its nation..

Music: Ben Hamblin

Louisiana, 1927, Randy Newman

THE WAR:

Shock and Awe, *Hank Blakely*

It began with a lie.

A lie so sweeping, so bold, that few dared disbelieve, and even fewer dared challenge.

It was breathtakingly simple: An insane Islamic group had struck America. And now another, equally insane, was preparing to strike us again. This time it was an entire nation, and they had the means to do it: weapons of such far-reaching power that no American was safe from them. And this was not conjecture; this was indisputable, brass-plated fact, accepted and sermonized by the highest authorities of the American government, and testified to by intelligence experts from our allies. We were faced with a clear and present danger, and there was no choice other than to take immediate action. It was kill or be killed. And anyone who didn't understand that was a fool or a traitor.

And then there were all those lovely fringe benefits: not only would we rid the world of a dangerous tyrant, but we would liberate an entire people who would flock to us in the streets to present us with garlands and bouquets—why, it would be just like France at the end of World War Two! Besides that, this war would pay for itself—the whole place was *lousy* with oil!

The logic was impeccable. We could both respond to a threat *and* come away as heroes. It was beautiful. It almost seemed like... like God was *telling* us to do it.

And so we made holy war.

On March 19th, 2003, American forces took action based on high-confidence intelligence assurances that Saddam Hussein and his family were located in a palatial complex in al-Dora, a small farming community outside Baghdad. Early that Wednesday morning, U.S. planes obliterated the compound, dropping four 2000-pound bombs, and firing 40 Tomahawk Cruise missiles. Fifteen people were killed, but neither Saddam nor any member of his family or forces were among them, since, as was later learned, he had not visited the compound in eight years. No, the dead were all civilians, including nine women and one child. And thus the war began with what was to become a long tradition of pointless innocent death.

At 9:30 AM, Eastern Standard Time, American strike aircraft bombed selected targets in Baghdad. The war in Iraq had begun.

From the beginning, the attack was designed to be stupefying, a brutal display of overwhelming power designed to render the enemy dazed by the sheer, crushing force of the assault, and paralyzed by misperceptions of the course of battle—a tactic technically known as “Rapid Dominance,” or more familiarly as “Shock and Awe”—a 21st century equivalent of *Blitzkriegs* waged by Hitler.

The war went quickly, and on May 1st, the President stood upon the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* and announced that combat operations had ceased. All was well, our 21st Century weapons had defeated our 20th Century enemy.

The bright banner overhead proclaimed “Mission Accomplished.” We had brought freedom to Iraq, and now Middle Eastern peoples everywhere would see how their own nations could benefit from democracy, that is to say, *true* democracy, spelled with a capital “A,” just like “America.” And now every nation in the region could have the same blessings as America; liberty, justice...and a *Starbucks* on every corner.

The King Midas War, Paul Cohen

But a funny thing happened on the way to Iraqi democracy. At war’s end, we were *not* presented with flowers and kisses in the streets of Baghdad. It turned out that the Iraqi people were no happier with us than we were with the British two and a half centuries before. It turns out that occupations are generally unappreciated by the occupied.

And, complicating the problem was the fact that the Iraqis didn’t seem to have a great deal of regard for each other, either. With the removal of Saddam, Iraq quickly began to dissolve into its principal Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish factions. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. We’d been assured (mostly by people who hadn’t lived in Iraq for decades) that a free Iraq would be hungry to assert its national identity. Instead each faction began immediately to assert its own identity.

And then, to our continuing horror, it further became clear that their concepts of “democracy” were radically different from each other, and that each was even more radically different from *ours*. On one point, however, the three factions *did* agree: whatever “democracy” was, it didn’t include the other two.

In short order we found ourselves dealing with a people that we completely misunderstood, and we demonstrated that misunderstanding at every possible opportunity, piling blunder upon error in virtually every action and word we said. And in very little time we found ourselves in the middle of a multi-sided civil war, where the exact identity of the sides was neither clear nor stable.

After a while, that kind of thing begins to run into money.

At the beginning of the war, the administration came up with various estimates for the cost of the war, but generally settled on around \$60 billion. Much of this, it was thought, would be offset by oil revenues. Instead, to date we have spent over \$500 billion, and by year’s end it will be closer to \$640 billion. And recently two widely respected economists estimated the eventual cost will rise to \$3 *trillion*, and possibly to as much as \$7 trillion, once all the pipeline costs are factored in. And mind you, this is only for the war in Iraq, it does not include Afghanistan.

What could such a sum possibly mean? How many football stadiums could you fill with seven trillion one dollar bills? It might make more sense if we look at it another way:

In the time it takes me to say *this sentence*, our nation—that’s you, and you, and you, and a few others—will have spent 60,000 dollars on this war.

In the time it takes to present this service, our nation will have spent 14 million dollars on this war.

When you return here next week, our nation will have spent an additional 2.4 *billion dollars* on this war.

Every month, you, I and our fellow Americans will spend 10 billion more dollars on the Iraq war.

Surely, these expenses would strain even the abilities of King Midas. How many things would he have to touch to generate these kinds of resources?

And even King Midas' powers would count for little when it came to recovering the loss of life and limb so far expended in this conflict. What magic could compensate the families of the 4000 men and women who have died? What enchantment could restore the arms and legs and hands and sight and hearing and mental tranquility of the 60,000 who are wounded?

And what could bring back the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi dead?

Midas came to believe his power was a curse. I think we can understand that.

Witnessing for Peace, *Judy Fincher*

From a Pastoral Letter from UUA President, Rev. William G. Sinkford:

It has been five long years of war and occupation in Iraq. Five years. Nearly 4,000 U.S. soldiers dead; many more wounded and maimed. An unknown number of Iraqi dead, some estimate a million; certainly hundreds of thousands. And millions of Iraqis displaced from their homes.

Many of you, like me, have been praying and protesting this war, since before it began.

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We know that the financial cost of this war, ultimately to be measured in trillions of dollars, has made the United States a debtor nation.

But perhaps the greatest cost has been to the spirit, to the soul of this nation.

We like to see ourselves as innocent. We like to see ourselves as fair, compassionate and kind. We like to see ourselves as freedom-loving and freedom-promoting. The Iraq war has stripped that self-image away from us. Given our actions in Iraq, innocence is no longer an option for us. We have been acting like an empire.

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...We need to acknowledge that we made a huge mistake by invading Iraq and that, as a result, the world is a more dangerous place today than it was five years ago. And we need to ask understanding and forgiveness for our mistake.

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And I would tell the world, and ourselves, that we want not only to reclaim the image, but to create the reality of Americans as fair, compassionate and kind people. We want to become the kind of people we thought we were.

A Simple Request, Hank Blakely

How are we to achieve the peace we seek? How are we to encourage our leaders to leave war behind? Discussions about peace and war don't seem to do the job; they quickly break down into meaningless abstractions. There are too many loopholes in such words. What we need is to reduce our requirements to a basic, uncomplicated request that leaves no wiggle room.

We need to ask our leaders a very simple thing: Stop killing our children and stop making our children kill other children.

We would not be asking for global hegemony. We would not be asking for regional democratization, or greater access to energy resources. We would be asking only that they stop killing our children and stop making our children kill other children.

We would not be asking to appease the egos of the powerful, or to save the reputations of vested ideologues, or to validate mad dreams of empire. We would only be asking that they stop killing our children and stop making our children kill other children.

We would not be asking that they stop in 18 months, or a year, or half a year. We would be asking them to stop *now*--before another child is killed--stop killing our children and stop making our children kill other children.

We would not be speaking as supplicants humbled before them. We would be speaking as their *employers*. As the people who send them to act in our interest, as the people who entrust them with *our* power. And as the people who can take that power away from them. We would be speaking as the *outraged*, as the betrayed, as people driven to action.

But what action? What do we do when we leave here: go shopping? Take in a movie? Curl up with the Sunday newspaper, and that's an end to it?

I hope not. I hope not. What I hope we will do—what I *know* we have it *in us* to do—is to go from here to become *evangelists* for an end to this war. To speak to everyone we know; to tell them what we feel and know is true—that this sad, twisted, heart-breaking pointless engine of death must. Stop. *Now*.

And when we do, we won't need to resort to complex analysis, or theories of regional balance, or syllogisms, or political paradigms. We need only say that we are asking a very simple thing, and that we will continue asking it until it is done: stop killing our children and stop making our children kill other children.

Music: *Ben Hamblin*

Masters of War, **Bob Dylan**

Choices: *A Different Drum*, *Maxine Jaubert*

"Stop killing our children, and stop making our children kill other children..."

We have better things to do with our lives and our resources. The costs in terms of wasted lives are surely beyond further tolerance. We must return our soldiers to their families and their interrupted lives. And we have better uses for our treasure—or whatever part is left to us after we and our children are have paid for this war and its aftermath.

In purely economic terms, what would cessation of war mean to us, to Virginians? Thus far, Virginia taxpayers have paid \$14.2 billion for the Iraq War, and will pay an additional \$2.3 billion for proposed War spending before the year is over. For the same amount of money, we could have provided 4.6 *million* adults with Health Care...

(at this point, preselected members of the congregation rise to say each line in turn)

14 *million* Homes with Renewable Electricity
350,000 Public Safety Officers
250,000 Music and Arts Teachers
2 *million* Scholarships for University Students
1,000 New Elementary Schools
107,000 Affordable Housing Units
8.2 *million* Children with Health Care
2.3 *million* Head Start Places for Children
240,000 Elementary School Teachers
260,000 Port Container Inspectors

I guess It's all about choices, isn't it?

Serving Peace, Al Carlson

This morning we have heard about some of the many injustices occurring in the world today and we have put them in the perspective of what our nation could have done if better choices had been made. But now we need to ask ourselves what we are called to do. How can we influence the choices that are made, and how can we act to defend human rights? How can we support the work of those who are active in serving justice? How can we involve ourselves in the struggle for Justice?

Many of us are engaged in one way or another, educating ourselves on the issues, participating or supporting the work of our own social action and social justice committees, contacting elected officials, etc. but we should reflect for a moment on the words spoken this morning for the lighting of the chalice, from a Unitarian Universalist perspective, "It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community."

It is when we combine the resources of many Unitarian Universalists throughout the nation that we can be most effective. The primary organization that enables us to bring to bear our combined resources in the struggle for justice is the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC). In fact, it is the Service Committee that has urged all UU congregations to designate a Sunday each year as Justice Sunday. So we are not doing this in isolation. Justice Sunday worship services are being conducted by many other UU congregations.

Let me give you one example of the Service Committee in action and how we have participated. As you may have been reading in recent issues of our newsletter, two members of our congregation were part of a team that traveled to Guatemala in February on one of the UU Service Committee's Just Journeys. The purpose was to get a better understanding of the human rights struggles the people of Guatemala have had to endure. The worship service coming up on Sunday, April 27 will be presented by participants in that Journey from our own congregation and from other congregations.

The UU Service Committee has also sent people to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and regularly speaks out on issues like the use of torture by our own government, the abuses in Darfur, as well as concerns for economic justice and civil liberties.

Since the UUSC is an independent organization, it does not receive funds from the UUA. Its primary source of support is through individual contributions and membership dues. You will find two inserts in your order of service – one is an envelope that you can use to enroll as a member of UUSC. The other is a brochure that describes additional ways you can support the Service Committee. If you choose to join or make a contribution, please send in your contribution directly to UUSC and don't forget to indicate the name of this congregation, because we want them to know that our congregation is supporting them.

And finally, we are asking for your support of our own programs at UUCR and at this time, the ushers will receive this morning's offering.

Closing Words, Lillian Christman

Gandhi once said,

*If someone with courage and vision
can rise to lead in nonviolent action,
the winter of despair can, in the twinkling
of an eye, be turned into the summer of hope.
It is possible to live in peace.*

And he added,

The future depends on what we do in the present.

Gandhi knew that peace cannot be achieved alone or through inaction. The yearning for peace lies deep in the human heart, but it comes to us only by invitation; and even then it does not take up permanent residence; it is only a guest, and an often inconvenient and demanding guest at that, for although peace breathes in hope, it must be fed by sacrifices of time and effort. In that sense, each of us is responsible for the achievement of peace. We must invite peace into our lives by *becoming* peace, and we invite it into our nation by taking action to prepare the way for it. None of us is exempted from this responsibility; *If we want wine, we must bring wine.*

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