

MEMORIAL DAY TALK: "The Prophetic Call to Resist Militarism and Cultivate Peace"  
Rev. J. Mark Davidson, May 25, 2020

I join you on this Memorial Day to remember all those who have lost their lives in war. Certainly our fallen American brothers and sisters, our family members, neighbors, and fellow citizens. But also our brothers and sisters in the global community, our fellow human beings in Iraq and Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen, and other locations who have suffered, and are suffering, under the heavy boot of American Empire. Their lives matter, too. No Memorial Day is complete without naming them and mourning the loss of their lives to the ravages of war.

As a pastor, now retired after 40 years of shepherding, I know very well how important healing rituals can be for doing the work of grieving, honoring, and remembering, helping us mourn, put our losses in perspective, and move on with our lives. So I want to acknowledge the great value of what we do today when we commemorate all the victims of war.

That said, I have always felt that our culture glorifies and mythologizes war, and that we need to press beyond conventional, nationalistic observances -- beyond the parades, and picnics, the wreath-laying and the flyovers -- to the deeper questions, the too-often-neglected questions like: Why does war persist? What are the alternatives to war? And How can we create a world beyond war?

I've entitled my talk: "The Prophetic Call to Resist Militarism and Cultivate Peace." Here it is in a nutshell: Prophetic peacemakers from ancient times to the present day do three extremely important things for humanity: 1) they offer us a life-saving, radical critique of war and militarism, 2) they show us that viable alternatives exist, and 3) they create, by their words and deeds, powerful symbols of the peaceful future we desire and deserve.

First a word about where I'm coming from. I came to prophetic peacemaking by a long and circuitous path and so many formative experiences, too many to mention. But I have to start with a life-changing week Allison and I spent with Dan Berrigan in 1982 as he gave a series of lectures at Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian Conference Center in the high desert of New Mexico, entitled, "The Pentagon as the Anti-Christ". And I would highlight three hugely important books -- James Carroll's **The House of War** which chronicles the rise of the Pentagon to the gargantuan idol of militarism that it is today, Richard Gregg's **The Power of Nonviolence**, and Phillip Hallie's **Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed**. But for me, the call to prophetic peacemaking harkens back to the Bible, to the call of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, 600 years before Jesus. Jesus stood in that long line of prophetic peacemakers, and Dr. King and Dorothy Day and the Berrigan brothers, and the Plowshares 7 in our own time stand in that long line, and we too stand with them in this line. Here's how he experienced this call: "***Then the Holy One put out his hand and touched my mouth, and said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'***"

What strikes me especially about this call is that of the six strong action words, four of them -- **plucking up, pulling down, destroying, and overthrowing** -- have to do with the work of dismantling, tearing down, de-constructing, while only two of them -- **building and planting** -- have to do with re-construction, with rebuilding from the ruins of the old world. In other words, the prophetic call to make peace is 2 parts deconstruction, 1 part reconstruction. The work of reimagining a culture of peace is critically important. But what is more heavily emphasized is the work of unsettling and shattering the status quo. So, if we are serious about peace, and intend to approach it prophetically, then we must be focused on the sacred work of denouncing, resisting, and dismantling the infrastructure of war and militarism. I believe the Holy One doubly emphasized this part of the prophetic call because the children of darkness are shrewder than the children of light, they are ever busy at their work, they are extremely well-organized and heavily funded, and because they are motivated by powerful base instincts from the reptile part of our brain such as fear and greed. The larger and stronger these forces grow, the greater their reach into all aspects of life, the more entrenched they become, the harder it will be for the forces of life and love, freedom and compassion, to take hold and grow the world we long for.

Let me illustrate the need to unsettle the status quo. My source here is William Robinson, a California sociologist who studies and documents the increasing militarization of the global economy, or if you want to turn it around, the monetizing of militarism. He cites an alarming growth over the last 20 years in **privatized military companies** -- the Blackwaters of the world. Private military contractors (let us call them what they are, mercenaries) outnumbered U.S. soldiers 3-1 in Afghanistan and Iraq. Military-trained ex-soldiers contract out their lethal skills to governments for handsome sums. This is a booming business employing millions worldwide. There's also been explosive growth in **private security companies** contracting highly-trained ex-military to transnational corporations. We saw this at Standing Rock. Energy Transfer and its petroleum industry partners, pushing the Dakota Access Pipeline, contracted with Tiger Swan, a secretive private security firm, to neutralize the nonviolent Water Protectors at Standing Rock in Indian country. An Ex-Marine employed by Tiger Swan infiltrated the protest encampment at Standing Rock and fed intelligence to Energy Transfer and local law enforcement who were in league together. You had heavily armed ex-military private contractors with military-grade assault rifles protecting lucrative Earth-damaging contracts from what? From freezing nonviolent Water Protectors desperately reminding us that Water is Life. This isn't only in the U.S. In half of the world's countries private security agents outnumber police officers. The British conglomerate G4S does a booming business worldwide selling "private security services." The City of Durham had a G4S contract which, thankfully, has since been phased out because of public complaints.

**Global weapons sales** increased by nearly 40% between 2002 and 2016. Military industrial profits quadrupled from 2001-2011. Global South countries who can little afford to do so are buying the latest weapons. The U.S. has several of the world's leading war profiteers, Northrup Grumman, McDonnell Douglas, Boeing, General Dynamics are raking in lavish profits from government contracts to manufacture highly destructive weapons for the global arms trade. The U.S. is the world's largest arms merchant by far, the greatest purveyor of death and destruction.

**Surveillance, monitoring, and biometric technologies** have all seen a dramatic increase over the last 15 years. The hi-tech giants like Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook are all tied up in the military-industrial complex. Google hosts CIA's data in its clouds, and co-launched a spy satellite with the Pentagon. The war on immigrants, the caging of children, ICE raids, the border wall, for-profit prisons, all of this is being facilitated by Silicon Valley firms like Palantir, Google, and Amazon, and the banks that fund their operations. There is also a rapid increase in imprisonment in what is being called the "carceral state" here and abroad. The militarization of our southern order has led to a new industry -- "the border security industry." Social repression is a lucrative economic opportunity for private capital. I'm listing some of these harrowing developments to show the octopus-like entanglements of the military-industrial complex, how deadly dangerous militarism is, how it spreads its tentacles into virtually every nook and cranny of American life and the global economy. In addition, **the obscenely bloated military budget** steals public resources needed for essential human services and programs of social uplift for the health and flourishing of American citizens --- healthcare, the Green New Deal, rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure, and so much more. So, we have our work cut out for us.

War is the greatest purveyor of death, misery, and trauma in the world. It is the conspicuous failure of our better selves, and equally, the triumph of our baser instincts, our tendency toward idolatry, still prostrating ourselves before the god of Moloch, the ancient human sacrifice cult. Violence and war are endemic in our culture and our social conditioning. We have a "fallen mindset" society, what black theologian Willie Jennings calls "a diseased social imagination". Our social imagination is infected by what Dr. King called the evil triplets of racism, militarism, and poverty. The Poor Peoples' Campaign, picking up where Dr. King left off, has added a major 4th social evil -- environmental collapse. To denounce and resist these evils, we have to decolonize our minds and hearts, to resist "the militarized mind," "the racialized mind", the colonial occupation and pollution of our capacity to think freely, to dream a peaceful future.

The militarized mind eradicates the dream of peace, believes instead that war is inevitable. To the great dismay of many of us, the supposed inevitability of war showed up in Obama's Noble Peace Prize speech, of all places. Let us say it loud and clear: **WAR IS NOT INEVITABLE**. War is a societal phenomenon. There is nothing ontological, necessary, or automatic about it. Slavery, another societal phenomenon, was also presented as necessary and natural. It was premised on false racist ideas, such as that so-called "inferior races" were considered enslavable by so-called "superior races", and this was simply the natural order of things. For nearly 300 brutal years, the transatlantic slave trade was defended and justified as necessary and natural. Just the way things are. Until we evolved beyond it, until the distorted moral narrative that buttressed it shifted and public support for it dissolved. Until it was abolished. There is nothing to prevent this from also happening when it comes to war. That is, if militarized minds are demilitarized, if public opinion shifts, if citizen support for war dissolves, if we evolve as a species and respond to crises with our higher capacities rather than our lizard past, if what wins the day is our undeniable capacity for empathy, compassion, understanding, and wisdom.

.Let us say another thing loud and clear: **ALTERNATIVE STRUCTURES FOR SECURITY AND PEACE EXIST**. Nonviolent social change has an inspiring and distinguished past. Recently, political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan showed why nonviolent civil resistance works. They analyzed campaigns of nonviolent resistance from 1900 to 2006, and found they were more than twice as effective as their violent counterparts. They proved better able to mobilize supporters, better at developing innovative resistance strategies, and, most importantly, ushered in more durable and internally peaceful democracies, which are less likely to regress into civil war. I'm told that social historian Gene Sharp studied the treasury of the world's nonviolent struggles and discovered 190 nonviolent resistance tactics that have been utilized in various times and circumstances. If war were truly a "last resort", we should have to try all 190 of them before turning to war, only this never seems to happen.

Finally, let me point to the power of prophetic peacemakers to create symbols that inspire our hopes and dreams of the peaceful future we desire and deserve. C.S. Lewis said: "Symbols exist precisely for the purpose of conveying to the imagination truths that the intellect is not ready to receive." The imagination is the human capacity we most need to draw upon and appeal to in these dark, chaotic times. We need inspiring, symbolic examples of the world that is possible. Never underestimate the power of these symbols. Two examples spring to mind. The **Demilitarize Durham 2 Palestine** campaign was a brilliant example of this. A broad public coalition of anarchists, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ, and Palestinian solidarity activists, Jewish Voice for Peace, prison abolitionists, and peacemakers did careful, thoughtful research and pushed back against the militarization of Durham policing. They got it enacted as policy -- and defended it when there was an attempt to rescind it -- that Durham police would not go down the path other municipalities have gone down, contracting with Israel, for instance, for militarized counter-insurgency police training field-tested on Palestinians, nor would they take surplus military weapons from the Pentagon.

The other brilliant, inspiring example is the stirring witness of **Plowshares 7**. On the anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, they went onto the Kings Bay Trident Nuclear Submarine base on the Georgia coast. They enacted the ancient prophetic peacemaking call to Isaiah, to "**beat swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.**" They hammered nuclear missile cones and scattered their blood to call attention to the unfathomable destructive power of these weapons, and to call for them to be abolished from the earth. They face sentencing in June, and our hearts and our prayers are with them. We are so very grateful to God for them and for their sacrificial witness to peace.

Shining, creative gestures of hope -- these bright symbols -- disclose to us a world that is possible -- the peaceful future we glimpse and long for. Those who create these symbols assure us peace is possible. We are ever in their debt. But all of us best honor their contribution by rededicating ourselves to the work of prophetic peacemaking - the sacred work of unsettling the status quo of war and militarism, insisting war is not inevitable, declaring that war does not make us safe or guarantee our freedoms, lifting up viable nonviolent alternatives, and each of us in our own way providing the evidence that peace is indeed possible.

