

**Sermon: November 27, 2016 (Advent I) – Isaiah 2: 1-5**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev. Greg Wooley**

A dozen years ago I saw something really disturbing happen on the road, about half a block ahead of me. A cat went darting across the road, but didn't make it, catching the rear wheel of a half-ton truck. The cat's body flailed and writhed as if hit by lightning, and then, in an instant, lay lifeless at the side of the road. I'm pretty sure that the driver of the half-ton had no idea of what had happened, but *someone* other than me had seen it all: a young boy, perhaps 6 years old, who was looking through the fence that surrounded his front yard. He had seen it all.

I immediately pulled over to the curb and went over to him. I could be no help to the cat but at least I could help this little guy start dealing with what he had seen. He was looking over at the cat and I asked him, "are you OK?" He then looked up at me with perhaps the most blank look I have ever seen in my life, shrugged, and said, "it's not my cat," then turned and headed indoors.

I feared that I was looking into the future through the dead eyes of this child – his evident lack of sympathy and empathy was chilling. It didn't take much for me to draw the connection between the complete lack of empathy I saw in his expression, and the plight of a world where the needs of the poor are not even noticed, in comparison to the economic and military goals of nations.

Fortunately, working in a school over the coming years I actually saw a growing empathy among school-age children, a willingness to take up the cause of the less fortunate, a passionate engagement of environmental issues, an unwavering support of fellow students of a variety of sexual orientations. I fear that some of those gains are now being lost, as students and parents alike spend less and less time engaged in thoughtful engagement of the people around them, and more and more self-centered time, zeroed in on their smartphones; but for a while, at least, there was hope that "it's not my cat" was the exception rather than the rule.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Isaiah gives us this amazing picture, of Mount Zion lifted up and people of all nations streaming to her. And when the people get there, this happens:

*"God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."* – Isaiah 2: 5

"Neither shall they learn war any more." In addition to awakening an old civil rights chorus I learned in childhood, "Ain't gonna study war no more" - which we will be singing later on - these words begged the question, "what does it mean to teach our children the ways of war?" and "what could we do to change that?" As people of faith who long for a world where people are drawn toward God's ways of peace, love and justice, a world where there is no more war, no more love of war, no more training for war, what are we called to do? What are some habits of the heart that we can cultivate in ourselves and our society, that will counter this love of violence?

### 1. BUILDING EMPATHY

I wish that Mary Gordon could spend some time with the little guy who saw the cat. Mary Gordon is a teacher from Newfoundland, who founded an organization called *Roots of Empathy*. She says this about her work:

"I believe...that we are all intuitively empathic—but this capacity can wither on the vine if a child never experiences empathy in the attachment relationship with his or her parents. So why not learn from the attachment relationship?"

"Every month for nine months, we bring an infant into the classroom with its parents, accompanied by a Roots of Empathy instructor. Children watch love grow over a whole school year; they watch confidence and security and emotional attunement between parent and child grow as well. Through these visits we teach emotional literacy. Every time the baby demonstrates some emotion, the children talk about the baby's intention and what the baby must be feeling. They are learning the language for their feelings.

“We know from independent research that the greatest effect [of this program] is in decreasing aggression among children—a hugely important result, because aggression is the gateway to all other kinds of bad outcomes for children. What’s more, the research shows that *Roots of Empathy* creates more caring and supportive children—they’re kinder, more likely to share and help their classmates. They also feel more supported by their classmates and teacher, and they feel a greater sense of autonomy than other children do.”

In summary, Mary Gordon says this about her work: “We worry about our traditional literacy rates, but we should be more worried, I think, about our emotional literacy, our ability to connect to ourselves and one another. In schools, we teach children to read, but if we don’t teach them to relate to others, they will be lost in life—lost in their relationships, they will not have success in their jobs, and we will not have peace in the world. It’s our mountains and our continents and our oceans that divide us. But it is our similarities through our emotions that connect us”.

Of course, it’s not just children who benefit from a deepened sense of empathy toward the world around them. I would encourage everyone to take time in every day, to take a step back and truly consider the feelings and realities of other people’s lives, perhaps in a time of prayer; especially those you find yourselves relating to in a judgmental way. In addition to deepening our concern for others, as Mary Gordon intimates, we may well come to have a more accurate emotional vocabulary within our own lives, which will make us more healthy, and kind, and loving. And all of that, I believe, will contribute to a world that is much less interested in war.

## 2. RE-SETTING OUR ENTERTAINMENT

I’m not going to spend much time on this point because I freely admit, it is a long-standing personal hobby-horse of mine, but here it is: as you have a look at those Christmas gift lists, could you please resist the temptation to buy your grandchildren that shoot-em up Video Game, no matter how much they want it? There is conflicting research surrounding my assertion that the huge popularity of “shooter” games desensitizes us to real violence, but I will say this: a couple of days ago my laptop was updating its video driver, and as the driver was updating the manufacturer chose to show me these four images, over and over and over again. (Ads for violent video games)

Clearly, there is a lot of money to be made in teaching children and adults alike to have an itchy trigger finger, and there has been since the days of the first Gulf War – dubbed “The Nintendo War” because of the use of night-vision technology that made the field of war look like a video game. Everything from TV newscasts to movie blockbusters to the way sports highlights are packaged, rely on the selling power of violence. Even if I can’t draw a direct correlation between blasting away at imaginary enemies with a game controller, and having no trouble abusing someone in real life, I can say this with complete certainty: entertainment based on the joy of shooting someone dead, certainly doesn’t make the world a BETTER place.

## 3. BROADENING OUR SOCIAL CIRCLES

As our kids were growing up, nearly every organized activity they did was with children of their own age, or one year older, or one year younger. Dance was a little bit more multi-age, and some art classes were based more on interest than on age, but for the most part the community-based activities our children participated in were organized in a little three-year age window. It made sense to do things this way, since children do tend to hit certain developmental thresholds at a particular age, but there was also a significant loss in doing everything with those your own age.

The one place that our children weren’t just surrounded by those of one age or stage, was in Church. At Church, you get to have friends of all ages, all professions, all stages of life. I still think that one of the key moments of my life was, at age 16, meeting a couple of new friends and mentors through Church who were in their mid-80s, people who shared with me their wisdom and their welcome. If I had the ability to convey one thing to the growing number of northern-hemisphere families who don’t go to Church, it would be to tell them of the positive social benefit for children and adults, of getting to know and care about people whose shape of life is very different from your own:

different age, different income, different thoughts, different gender identities, different everything. And not just on a one-off interaction, but developing friendships that develop over time, and experiencing all kinds of life transitions together.

It is important for us, as a congregation, to continue doing what we can to make sure that we are welcoming to everyone who comes through our doors, and to be open to be changed by the new seekers who have joined us. For the more diverse our connections, the more we will understand about the divine goodness and love that binds us together as one, the Holy One who draws all nations to that one Holy Mountain.

#### 4. ACKNOWLEDGING MY LIMITATIONS

One of the most difficult things for me or anyone to admit, is that I may very well be completely wrong: I might be wrong about one thing in particular or I might be wrong about everything in general.

Religion, I think, gets the worst marks and the best marks when it comes to this point. If my religious beliefs lead me to believe that (a) God cares about me and people like me more than God cares for someone else, (b) my path to God prohibits all other possible paths and (c) I am doing the world a favour by either conforming others to my path, or eliminating them if they do not see the error of their ways; then something other than God's deep commitment to love has taken over and bad things are not just sure to happen – they are already happening.

On the positive side of the ledger is a growing understanding, even within more conservative religious communities, that doubts and alternate ways of thinking bring health and vitality to a community of faith. Yesterday, Ambrose University in Calgary launched its "Flourishing Congregations Institute" which brought together leaders from mainline and evangelical Churches. One of the learnings they shared was the importance of diversity within flourishing congregations: a flourishing congregation typically has room for varieties of race, gender, social class, sexual orientation and age; it welcomes questioning and uncertainty; and, realizing the challenges of such diversity, has effective conflict resolution skills among its leadership.

It is so important to underline that questioning and uncertainty be welcome, within our religious, political and relational selves. As soon as I become entrenched in my position, and proud of how much better my position is than someone else's, I become less nimble to adjust to the needs of the world around me, less able to see or hear the plight of the other. Whether I am entrenched in a belief that only those who literally believe the inerrancy of scripture and other Fundamentals of the Faith will be saved, or entrenched in a belief that there could not possibly be a supernatural realm or a God who cares for us, once I've put my fingers in my ears and stopped listening to other ideas, things are going to go sour. Once the most important thing becomes my rightness and your wrongness, I inch closer to those who are preparing for war, and further away from those who are re-purposing their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. That's not to say that every idea in the world is equally right, that there is no such thing as wrong-headed ideas or systems; but it is to say that many a feud is started and maintained, not because of the point that's being made, but by the foolish pride of the person making the point, who has stopped listening to other viewpoints.

#### THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

As we prepare to make ourselves open to the love of Christ in this Advent season, this vision – indeed, this promise - from Isaiah gives us a beautiful starting point.

- Imagine a mountain, where people of all nations gather, to be taught and to share what they already know.
- Imagine a place where each could speak their truth, and true dialogue about life and love and faith would build understanding and empathy.

- Imagine a place where people of all languages and races, all ages and all income levels, men and women and those who identify themselves otherwise, were brave enough to step outside their comfort zone and make new friends living totally different lives.
- Imagine a place where war was not seen as exciting, or desirable, or inevitable, where the tools of war were blunted down into tools of agriculture.

As we imagine those things, our heart comes a little closer to the heart of Christ – and the world inches towards God’s glorious horizon of hope. In that spirit, let us sing the old Spiritual: “Down by the Riverside.”

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