

"Peace in a Nanosecond"

A meditation based on Amos 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; and Luke 16:1-13

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[Although it is I doing the speaking for the next few minutes, much of this meditation is an internal dialogue I've enjoyed this week with Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk from Vietnam and Professor Bruce Epperly, Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary. I am indebted to them for the gift of their wisdom.]

As we begin, I invite you to hear again these words from Luke: "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." What kind of a system is that? Where dishonesty is rewarded? Where so-called "shrewdness"—defined by Webster's as "clever discerning awareness and hardheaded acumen"—where that kind of severe and even abusive behavior is put into the spin machine and comes out smelling like a rose? What was Jesus thinking in telling and then interpreting this uncomfortable story? These were some of my questions as I began preparing for this meditation. Initially, I had hoped that I could dismiss this hard saying of Jesus as one in which the source is debatable. But alas, this was not possible for me, nor is it for us. According to the scholars of the Jesus Seminar, who represent the best and most current scholarship available to us today in determining original material in the gospels, the majority of this passage from Luke dates back to the mouth of Jesus himself. So what are we to make of it? And more importantly, in the midst of the current unsettling political campaign, in the context of the continued suffering in our nation and our world communities, as body counts and dollar signs in Iraq and Afghanistan dramatically rise each day, does this parable and the surrounding scriptures we read today teach us that we, too, are to act shrewdly, severely, hardheadedly, in response to the happenings around us? God, I hope not! I hope that our spiritual journey takes us on a different path than the one initially greeting us in these passages. I hope that, from our deeper reflection today, we are led on a pathway in which peace is both our long-term goal and our moment-by-moment objective. Peace in every nanosecond...I hope we can arrive there from our walk with these scriptures.

Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of peace with this kind of immediacy. In his book, *Peace is Every Step*, he urges readers to acknowledge each day the brand new gift of twenty-four hours. "We have the capacity to live in a way that these twenty-four hours will bring peace, joy, and happiness to ourselves and others," he writes. "Peace is present right here and now, in ourselves and in everything we do and see. The question is whether or not we are in touch with it. We don't have to travel far away to enjoy the blue sky. We don't have to leave our city or even our neighborhood to enjoy the eyes of a beautiful child. Even the air we breathe can be a source of joy...We can smile, breathe, walk, and eat our meals in a way that allows us to be in touch with the abundance of happiness that is available. We are very good at preparing to live," writes this Buddhist monk, "but not very good at living. We know how to sacrifice ten years for a diploma, and we are willing to work very hard to get a job, a car, a house, and so on. But we have difficulty remembering that we are alive in the present moment, the only moment there is for us to be alive. Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy, and serenity. We need only be awake, alive in the present moment...Peace is every step..." So begins this little book of brief meditations.

Thich Nhat Hanh continues by offering guidance on meditative practices, attentiveness to our behaviors, and intentionality in our decisions. His teaching is not a simplistic version of the power of positive thinking, nor is it a naïve supposition that if we just use the think system of "Music Man" fame, then all will be well. Rather, Thich Nhat Hanh offers us the opportunity to take seriously our profound and significant place in the

world community. At many places in this text and elsewhere in his teachings, he claims that we can cultivate our own peace by practicing mindfulness in each moment of our daily lives. And, in alignment with process thought, Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that such personal peace will have a positive effect on the various situations of unrest and dis-ease in the world. For we are all connected, he claims. We are interconnected. What one does affects the whole.

This proposition is as close to accepted fact as we will find in the Buddhist schema...this acknowledgement of and concomitant respect for the interconnectedness of all beings. It invites us to see that our thoughts do affect global thinking patterns. Our decisions do change policies, eventually. Our actions do make a difference to the health of the world community. When we stir around in sarcasm or apathy or walk away from dialogue, the ability of our world community to repair itself is diminished. Conversely, when we intentionally love an irritating person, or go out of our way to talk with someone who has hurt us, or when we make a peaceful gesture towards one wishing us harm, then our world's ability to create peace is multiplied. That is one reason why our relationships in this congregation are so significant. To the degree that we continue learning peaceful and loving ways to live together here in this building, to that degree will our positive effects be experienced beyond our walls.

Now, I don't know the math on the actual effects of this sort of interconnectedness—perhaps some of our math and science scholars could help us with a theorem or a formula. However, from my theological training and experience with various religious traditions, including Christianity, I have come to believe that such action—good or ill—carries at least a tenfold return. Perhaps it is this cause and effect relationship that connects our journey to these scriptures we have read today.

Amos rails against the inequities in his own society. But underneath his intense anger, Amos also mourns the death of his nation's moral purposes. He recognizes that greed and injustice jeopardized his nation's very existence by creating, not peace and prosperity, but poverty and despair. Today, many Americans mourn the loss of our country's moral purpose. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11th, the United States was embraced by the world. World leaders poignantly proclaimed, "we are all Americans, we are all New Yorkers." That moment of vulnerability was an opportunity for creative transformation, for us as a nation and for our world. We were no longer an isolated and feared superpower. Acts of terrorism reminded us of the interconnectedness of all things and called us to join the community of nations as a partner rather than a bully. In the wake of 9/11, our nation was called not only to protect itself from future terrorist attacks and to bring to justice the perpetrators of these heinous acts, the United States was also called to repentance and transformation.

But, at that crucial moment, we lacked the national wisdom and courage to lead the world toward peace and abundance. Instead, we sprung into patriotic and militaristic action rather than soul searching and confession. We looked outward to eradicate our nation's enemies, as well we needed to do, but we failed to address our own hypocrisy, greed, and violence that spurred the terrorist attacks in the first place. The possibility of a world united by a common quest for peace, a common effort to eradicate terrorism, was derailed as a result of our nation's unilateral actions and uncritical patriotism. I can imagine that the prophet Amos would have grieved our nation's failure of nerve that led to self-protection rather than global cooperation. I can also imagine that God feels, along with us, the pain of unborn possibilities and the despair of broken hearts. Such are the results of this interconnected system in which we live.

1st Timothy also reminds us of the social and political dimensions of faith. Pray for everyone, not just other Christians, Paul writes. Pray for your national leaders so that you might lead a quiet and peaceable life. Now, I must admit that this is a tall order. Particularly in this past month, I have found it exceedingly difficult to pray for our nation's

present leaders: President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rumsfeld, Attorney General John Ashcroft, presidential advisor Karl Rove, and the others.

Yet, as I am challenged to pray, I wonder if our prayers make any difference. Even apart from the recent medical studies on the power of prayer, I believe we can affirm that our prayers transform the universe in often unobservable, but occasionally surprising ways. Non-local in nature, our prayers can create a healing field of energy around those for whom we pray. While we may not precisely know what is best for our nation in terms of economics and foreign policy, our prayers for the president and other world leaders may be the tipping point toward wise decision-making on their part.

Prayer is utterly democratic in nature and it bursts beyond religious barriers. Prayer and meditation connect us to all living things. Thus prayer is much more than an individual matter, prayer is profoundly social in nature. Further, if we truly pray for certain social outcomes, we must be willing to transform our social order through our own prayerful actions. If we want answers to certain specific prayers, we must be willing to support the social change necessary for universal health care, stable family lives, and superior education for all children. Our current social inequities and insecurity are not accidental, but the result of the choices, attitudes, and values of many people, perhaps even including us. So even as we pray for a peaceful and orderly society, we are also challenged to become very active partners in creating the kind of community for which we are praying. Although he speaks from a tradition distinct from our own, Thich Nhat Hanh speaks our truth as well when he notes that authentic meditation—we might use the word “prayer”—weaves our lives into the tapestry of all life.

Our prayers, then, can transform the world. On a bench at Kirkridge Retreat and Conference Center, a plaque reads, “picket and pray.” Our prayers do shape the future and connect us at the deepest level with those for whom we pray. But, our prayers are incomplete without faithful action.

At first glance and possibly after significant reflection, the gospel reading does not seem to be in line with this sort of intentional prayer and transformational meditation. Luke’s passage does not seem to measure up to the ethical mysticism of Jesus of Nazareth. The protagonist of this parable is hardly moral, in the traditional understanding of the term, and certainly not to be imitated. When alerted to his imminent dismissal, he creatively prepares for his future by reducing the debts of those who may be helpful to him in the future. He will do anything to secure his own and, we suspect, his family’s well-being. Despite its moral ambiguity, the parable challenges us to be resourceful in living out our own faith. It nudges us to be attentive to the minutest of details, to be intentional in the moment-by-moment living of our lives. While we would hopefully not follow the specific behaviors of the manager in this story, we would do well to mirror his persistence. Imagine what great things could be realized if we had both the will and the methodology for transforming the world. In this season of political wrangling, I invite us to ask ourselves what would result if our passions motivated us to work for such transformation. How would our own congregation be different if our commitments and our values propelled us to address the challenges we face with creativity, tenacity, and wisdom?

The gospel story from Luke concludes by noting the importance of small things in the reign of God. “Whoever is faithful in very little is also faithful in much.” Meteorologists note the impact of the butterfly effect. A monarch butterfly, flapping its wings in California, may be a factor in changing the weather from sunlight to storm in New York City. The smallest of actions can transform the world—a few “hanging chads” and the decision of one Supreme Court Justice determined who would be our president and on that narrow thread suspended the future of the planet. This is not just a matter of fair elections and getting out the vote, but of our choosing to follow God’s aim in each moment of experience, our intentionally acting with the awareness that we are interconnected to all beings.

As we look at our nation and our world today, there is much to grieve, much about which we are concerned. Yet, there is also much to celebrate, to honor, and to protect. Our intentional, moment-by-moment actions flowing from our deepest prayers can and will give birth to alternative possibilities for ourselves and our planet. Even when catastrophe is immanent or our nation has taken the wrong course, there is hope for new life when persons commit themselves to prayerful action and meditative transformation.

Every nanosecond, every billionth of a second holds out a profound invitation for us to walk in peace. I have every confidence that we can and we do and we will continue to respond to this invitation with creativity, with tenacity, with wisdom. We are the butterflies whose peaceful flapping here in California will make a difference on the other coast of our great country. Peace in a nanosecond...between now and November 2nd, there are 3,110,400 seconds for us to live peace. That calculates to three quadrillion nanoseconds for our prayers and our peaceful actions to effect the whole. That's a lot of time! We have work to do and time in which to do it, so, whatever you have planned in these next several weeks, please follow the guidance of our scriptures today and do your work with peaceful intention. Follow the guidance of Thich Nhat Hanh—peace in every step. Follow the urging of this meditation—peace in every nanosecond. Since we are interconnected with all living beings, we can and we do make a difference. As Mahatma Gandhi said many years ago, we must be the change we wish to see in our world, nanosecond by nanosecond, step by step.

Amen and Blessed Be.