

CHURCH SERVICE

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BARBARA A. MEYERS

OPENING WORDS

We live in a great circle- a circle of time, a circle of seasons, an ever-expanding circle of community that eventually encompasses all that lives on this planet and then extends the farthest reaches of the cosmos. I invite all to honor this circle as we meet and to carry this circle with you as you go out into the world.

I call in the powers of the East – the home of Spring, the place of the sunrise, the place of inspiration and new beginnings, and the home of Eagle. Then I call in the powers of the South – the place of summer, the place of midday, the place of innocence and trust, the home of childhood, and the home of little Mouse. Next, I invite the powers of the West – the place of Fall, the place of the sunset, the place of the darkness and looking within, the home of adolescence, and the home of Bear. Lastly I invite the powers of the North – the home of Winter, the place of the night, the home of adulthood and bringing our gifts into community, the home of the ancestors and those yet to be born, and the home of Snowy Owl. May this Circle of Life hold us in sacred time and space as we gather this morning.

WORDS FOR REFLECTION

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? Henry David Thoreau

SERMON

FINDING AND HOLDING THE CENTER

Everywhere I look in the world, I see chaos and increasing levels of polarization. I see evil. Where will this take us? How will it end? The news cycle moves quickly and now we are caught up in the primaries and court cases. Yet I am still back in October, October 7th to be exact and the brutal attacks on Israeli settlements and the musical event. All of us were shocked by the barbarity. Though the barbarity continues we have turned our eyes elsewhere. Yet, I want to return to October 7th and all that surrounds it because I think there is something for all of us to learn.

I had just returned from a spiritual trip to Egypt – a journey about crossing timelines and building bridges between this three-dimensional world and higher levels of consciousness. It would have been easy to be drawn into focus on the acts of evil, to choose sides, to be enraged with barbarous acts. But I am older now, have been witness to much barbarity in the world, and seen few solutions that make people's lives less difficult. I remember how our leaders responded to 9/11, how a country without any direct responsibility for 9/11 was taken to war, how Muslims were denounced without our leaders ever asking how our decisions might have contributed. So, instead of reacting to what is happening in the Middle East, I wondered how I wanted to respond, how I might apply what I learned on my spiritual journey, and what I might remember from past experiences that might inform my responses.

I went first to history. The State of Israel was created in 1947-48 following World War II and the world's reaction to the Holocaust. Israel was created by taking land and homes from the Palestinians. The Palestinians were promised a State but in the interim they were moved to refugee camps. They still live in these camps though buildings have replaced the tents. Their comings and goings are completely controlled by the Israeli police and military. Over the years Israeli settlers have

encroached on Palestinian areas. The world has failed to make a Palestinian State a reality.

Sitting with this, I am reminded that this is a very human, existential issue. – having a homeland and living in freedom and peace. Only when I see Israelis and Palestinians as everyday human beings attempting to build connections, raise children, earn money to support their families, and trying to live lives of peace and tranquility, can I hold the Center and not take sides, nor point fingers, nor blame. Then I am free to ask, “How can such barbaric evil exist in the world? If we are born whole and loving, what happens to make people choose evil? What causes us to turn our backs on other human beings – men, women, and children who are suffering? How do I contribute to what is happening around me? How does my country contribute?”

These are difficult questions and answers are not out there but right here, right here for you and me.

First, I am reminded how personal interactions help us to have understanding and compassion. Twenty years or so ago, I did a four-day Vision Quest in the upper reaches of Death Vally. One of the participants was a young man, BZ Goldberg. BZ is a Jew who grew up in Jerusalem. When we met, he was a film maker and his first film, PROMISES, was up for an Academy Award as a documentary. The film meets Jewish and Palestinian children who live within minutes from one another but have never met. The children talk about their lives and their views of the other, Jew or Palestinian. And we are introduced as well to these children and their families.

One day with permission, BZ takes two Jewish boys across the checkpoint to spend the day with the Palestinian children and their families in a refugee camp. They talked, they played together, they ate together, they asked questions of one another. The most poignant

scenes occurred when one of the Palestinian boys began to cry having realized that the day was coming to an end, BZ would be returning to the United States, and this one opportunity at human connection would be lost. Coming face to face with this loss of connection left the children and BZ tearful. What was clear to these children who had no power was that resolution depended upon meeting one another, talking with one another, and facing their fears of the other that had been inculcated in their education and in their society.

The conclusion seems simple – If we are courageous, if we are curious without judgment, if we listen deeply, we find the essential humanity that lives within us all. It is in holding the center that we can find our essential humanity. I know there are several Palestinian and Jewish organizations working for peace and a resolution to the question of Palestinian statehood. Many of the members of these groups are family members who have lost loved ones during these years of conflict. In the pain of their losses, they have found common ground.

Unfortunately, we do not hear of their efforts for leaders on both sides often label them as traitors and marginalize them. These organizations work for the best within us all despite efforts to silence them. We need to seek them out and support them both personally and politically.

It is not easy to hold the center, to not take sides, to not respond with rage when listening to or watching media reports. But we must hold the center. War crimes, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid occur because we do not hold the center, cannot see the humanity in the other, and are unwilling to hold our own leaders to standards of respect and decency. I want to share another story that helps to illustrate this.

Soon after October 7th and the world's response, I received this text from a Muslim client:

“In this white/supremacist/fascist world we live in, it will be soon criminalized to say the word: Palestine.

At the same time, 4000 Tons of explosives dropped to kill 500 kids (among many others)...they need 8 tons of bombs to kill a Palestinian child.

Live with this humanity. Live with the fact that Palestine is occupied. Enjoy apartheid, ethnic cleansing, war crimes. I bet you (“humanity”) are watching and enjoying with sadistic eyes.”

She further texted that an Arab father of a teenage daughter wants to post this on Facebook and asked, “What do you think?”

I invite you to take a few moments to decide what you would have said in response to this invitation. It took me a few moments to organize my thoughts. This is how I responded:

“I know for certain that not all humanity sees it this way. It might be more helpful if this father were to ask, “Who longs for a world in which the innocent are not bombed and killed? Who might join me in speaking out against ethnic cleansing and apartheid?” I continued, we need people to come to the Center and to not add to the polarity. I know that is difficult to do when you are witness to such barbarity but there are many people on both sides of a divide, created by world leaders, who continue to work for peace and an ethical resolution.”

She thanked me for my response saying she found it tremendously helpful. I thanked her and added this thought:

“I have understood for a long time that in the end, we are all fodder for political leaders, but I will not allow that knowing to stop me from working for a more just and humane world.”

It is very challenging to step back and not choose sides. I work hard at taking a witness position that asks me to step back from the fray and take a more measured position, seeing both sides without taking sides, and holding to the belief that war has never settled anything. We can think that eradicating the other will put an end to it all yet we have learned repeatedly that the ancestors remember and will fight on. How does this solve anything? And I am drawn to remember that my ancestry is German. I know that there have been times when my ancestors over the centuries have been both victims and victimizers. It is the same for your ancestry regardless. Carrying on some code of retribution only keeps the war alive. To what end?

One last story that may help answer questions that I raised earlier. A few years back, I had a challenging professional-personal experience. I was in a week-long play therapy training. One afternoon, each of the 10 participants was instructed to assume a character of one's choosing, dress up in that character, and attend a two-hour party in character. As I recall, I was in a dark place. I dressed up as an old Palestinian woman wearing a babushka around my head, dressing in a simple dress, wearing sandals, and carrying a walking stick. But that was not all – there was a string around my neck holding the front door key to my house from which I was driven when land was taken to make Israel. In my left hand I carried a small altar holding a candle and memorabilia honoring my husband who had been killed in the first Intifada and honoring my son who was jailed in Israel during the second Intifada. As I roamed the party and met others in character, I told my story. People listened but walked away without saying anything. I found myself hurt and despairing. I did not understand. Then the last person I met responded differently. She said she understood, could feel my pain, and wished she could help but did not know how to help. Her simple, compassionate words brought me to tears.

This was and remains such an important teaching. Unless we are willing to sit with our own pain, we cannot have compassion for another's pain. It is that simple. At the party, people walked away because my pain triggered feelings within them that were unresolved and that they chose to avoid. They could not hold space for my pain. The last person obviously could hold my pain. Sometimes that is all we can do and it is enough.

This is our work. This brings us to a higher level of consciousness. We all carry pain – pain generated in our own lives, unresolved pain of family members, and the soul wound pain of our ancestors. If we have the courage to face and work through the pain, then we can be compassionate in the face of others' pain. Look around the world. Look around the earth. Fear causes us to do one of two things: turn our backs and hide or choose sides and point fingers. Neither serves the human world nor the earth. We need to go towards the pain. Evil exists in the world and we have other choices if we are willing to do our work.

This is a profound teaching that answers the questions I raised earlier – we need to sit with and work through our own pain so that we can hear another's. If we run from ours then we run from another's and we just get caught up in listening on the surface and taking sides, pointing fingers, and joining the war. In war, everyone loses.

Once we can sit with pain, we can then listen deeply. There are always stories but we must listen deeply to the threads weaving the stories – listening for the basic human needs to live in a place free of a police state, free of fear, free to earn a realistic wage, free to raise a family - basic desires that we all share. Then, too, we must hold our own center and challenge other's beliefs that keep war going, keep us divided. We need to speak our truths when holding the center and that is not easy

in the face of hatred, rage, and the desire to punish. It takes courage to hold the center when those around you may want you to choose a side and label others are evil. When more people can hold to the center in disputes, the greater the chance that we can reach a tipping point that will pull more people to the center. It is in the center that we will find resolution and peace. I look to Northern Ireland and to South Africa as beacons that could help us all to reach for something better. I invite you to join me in the center.

CLOSING WORDS

I offer these words from Wendell Barry:

Oversimplified moral certainties – always requiring hostility,
always potentially violent – isolate us from mercy, pity, peace, and
love and leave us lonely and dangerous.

We can choose the path of moral certainties – right or wrong, black or white. Too many before us and around us have chosen that path. We have other choices. I invite each of us to reach for the Center – a place without judgment, a place of holding the essential humanity of each, a place of courage, and a place of seeking common ground. Go in Peace. The Circle is Released.