

THE GREAT MUTUAL BLINDNESS DARKENED THAT SUNLIGHT IN THE PARK—A REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY MEMORIAL ADDRESS AND PRAYER FOR ALL THOSE KILLED IN WAR, INCLUDING THOSE WHO WERE, OR STILL ARE, OUR ENEMIES

Posted on November 10, 2019 by Andrew Brown



Blue skies and sun in the park opposite the church this week

[To see a pdf copy of the order of service please click on this link.](#)

OPENING READING

Matthew 5:38-45

[Jesus said:] ‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse

anyone who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

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READINGS

From *The Gospel in Brief* by Leo Tolstoy, (Harper Perennial, 2011, p. 41)

The fifth commandment. In the previous law it was said: do good to your own people and do harm to the foreigner. But I say to you: love not only your own countrymen, but also the people of other nations. Let others hate you, let them attack you and insult you; but you must praise them and do good to them. If you are only good to your own countrymen, then you are like everyone else who is good to their own countrymen; and it is because of this that wars occur. But you should treat all nations equally, and if you do, you will be the sons [and daughters] of the father. All people are his children, consequently all people should be your brothers [and sisters]. And so, this is the fifth commandment: Keep the same law in regard to other nations that I have asked you to keep amongst yourselves. For the father of all people there is no such thing as different nations, there are no different kingdoms either: all are brothers [and sisters], all are sons [and daughters] of the one father. Don't create differences between people based on nations and kingdoms.

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Jeremiah 6:13-14

For from the least to the greatest of them,

everyone is greedy for unjust gain;

and from prophet to priest,

everyone deals falsely.

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,

saying, ‘Peace, peace’,

when there is no peace.

—o0o—

§217 of the *Philosophical Investigations* by Ludwig Wittgenstein

“How am I able to obey a rule?” – if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the

justification for my following the rule in the way I do.

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."

—o0o—

Words from [George de Benneville](#) (1703-1793)

The Inner Spirit makes us feel that behind every appearance of diversity there is an interdependent unity of all things. Let us, therefore, preach the Universal and Everlasting Gospel of Boundless, Universal Love for the entire human race, without exception, and for each one in particular.

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ADDRESS Part 1

An introduction to the two minutes silence

In recent weeks [[HERE](#) and [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)] I've been exploring various, practical ways we might understand, and then respond to, the ethical demand gestured towards in Jesus' proclamation to love God and neighbour as ourselves, and where the category of neighbour, as our opening reading from the Gospel of Matthew reminded us, also includes putative and actual enemies.

Also, as most of you who attend only the morning service will be unaware, every week in our evening service we hear words by one of our great forebears, the eighteenth-century Anglo-American Universalist and physician [George de Benneville](#), which are clearly a powerful echo of Jesus' proclamation, namely, that that we are called upon 'to preach the Universal and Everlasting Gospel of Boundless, Universal Love for the entire human race, **without exception**, and for each one in particular.'

Those two words, 'without exception', are, of course, vital because they include our enemies and de Benneville was a man who truly practiced what he preached. [In 1777, during the Battle of Germantown, Pennsylvania \(his home town\), he treated wounded from both sides of the war. Following the battle, when the commander of the British forces, Sir William Howe, expressed concern over the burial of two of his officers, de Benneville volunteered space in the family plot for them to be interred. In this act, de Benneville truly showed love to neighbours who were an enemy.](#)

Alas, de Benneville's example has rarely been the norm at any time or in any place, but, in our own age and nation — despite the many other divisions we know that exist among us at present

— it seems that things may, thankfully, be changing. I can say this with a reasonable degree of certainty this morning because [an opinion poll conducted by Populus only last month on behalf of the Peace Pledge Union \(whose white poppy I, and a number of you, are wearing today\) found that, when asked whether they agreed with the statement ‘Remembrance Sunday should involve remembering people of all nationalities who have died in war’, 83% of UK adults agreed. In addition, 85% agreed that ‘Remembrance Sunday should primarily have a message of peace.’ This prompted Geoff Tibbs, the Remembrance Project Manager at the Peace Pledge Union, to say:](#)

‘It is now clear that the British public want a more inclusive Remembrance that carries a message of peace, and this has always been the message of the white poppy. Most people now reject the nationalist narrative of Remembrance that focuses overwhelmingly on the British military.’

And he went on to say that:

‘Politicians and local communities need not be afraid to put peace and inclusivity at the centre of Remembrance events this year. We encourage them to explicitly commemorate people of all nationalities, including civilians.’

Given my own conversations with you over the nineteen years I have been the minister here, and because as a congregation we are a corporate member of the [Unitarian Peace Fellowship](#), I know that I do not need to be afraid to heed even more explicitly than heretofore the Peace Pledge Union’s call in our own, modest, public service of remembrance this morning. One-hundred-and-one years after the end of the so-called ‘war to end wars’ and two-and-a-half thousand years after Jeremiah wept and achingly yearned for a genuine peace, the time has surely come to put peace and inclusivity firmly and finally at the centre of our own Remembrance Sunday service and for us explicitly to commemorate the dead of all nationalities, including civilians.

So, in a few minutes after our second hymn and prayer, I will call upon you to do just this — but only should you wish — by standing with me in silence in the inclusive, loving way that Jesus intended us to do.

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A Prayer for Remembrance Sunday

As in former years, we gather on this November morning gratefully remembering those brave men and women from our own nations, military and civilian, who sacrificed their own lives for the freedom and safety of others.

But, because the Inner Spirit makes us feel that behind every appearance of diversity there is an interdependent unity of all things we recall that, as a people, we have been called to preach the

Universal and Everlasting Gospel of Boundless, Universal Love for the entire human race, without exception, and for each one in particular.

And so we consciously gather together this morning also to remember the people of other nations whose lives have been lost in war and conflict, including those who have been, and still are, in truth or imagination, our enemies.

We would remember, too, not only the dead of war and conflict but also those who remain behind and so we pray that the peaceful spirit of Life and Love will, in time, come to bless all those around the world who mourn, all those whose lives are blighted by their terrible memories of war, all those who carry with them the scars of war for the rest of their lives and those who care for them; all those whose safety is, as we speak, compromised through war and violence, no matter who or where they are in the world.

May forgiveness and reconciliation be found, personally and nationally, that all can learn to live in peace.

PLEASE STAND

And now, in respectful silence, let us bow our heads and remember the dead of all nations killed in war and conflict.

TWO MINUTES SILENCE

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.

And though we may often doubt that our prayers and remembrances can change anything, let us never forget that prayer and remembrance changes people, and people change things. May our time together so change us that we become the hands of holy creativity, justice and peace in this our beautiful, but often bruised and hurting world.

May it be so. Amen.

—o0o—

READING

For the Unknown Enemy by [**William Stafford**](#)

This monument is for the unknown

*good in our enemies. Like a picture
their life began to appear: they
gathered at home in the evening
and sang. Above their fields they saw
a new sky. A holiday came
and they carried the baby to the park
for a party. Sunlight surrounded them.*

*Here we glimpse what our minds long turned
away from. The great mutual
blindness darkened that sunlight in the park,
and the sky that was new, and the holidays.
This monument says that one afternoon
we stood here letting a part of our minds
escape. They came back, but different.
Enemy: one day we glimpsed your life.*

This monument is for you.

—o0o—

ADDRESS Part 2

The great mutual blindness darkened that sunlight in the park—A Remembrance Sunday memorial address and prayer for all those killed in war, including those who were, or still are, our enemies

Like most children growing up in the nineteen-seventies I watched dozens of films on television set during the Second World War in which glorious and good allied soldiers, sailors and pilots vanquished their evil counterparts from the Nazi regime in Germany. Life was easily divided for us into the good and the bad and I unquestioningly belonged, or so I was told and believed, on the side of the good. Consequently, in our games — whether in the playground or in the local

woods and playing-fields — no one never wanted to play the Germans.

Then, one day when I was about fourteen or fifteen I read a book which, unbeknownst to me, was significantly to shape my whole life and my philosophy and theology. It was entitled '[I Flew For The Fuhrer](#)' by [Heinz Knoke](#) who joined the Luftwaffe at the outbreak of the war, rose to the rank of commanding officer, and who was eventually awarded the Knight's (Iron) Cross.

Although a much later re-reading of it and some further, careful research about Knoke revealed to me painful insights into Knoke's own dark, Nazi-influenced politics (especially immediately after the war with the [Sozialistische Reichspartei Deutschlands](#)), what I primarily took from the book on my first, somewhat naïve, reading, remained firmly in place. Namely, that Knoke, as an individual human being, was not a million miles away from the individual human beings who sat in Allied cockpits at the same time. In his book I found not a clichéd description of an unrecognizable enemy but a story about a person whose feelings and concerns were challengingly familiar to me: fear, love, courage, duty, loyalty and a deep concern for the well-being of his family.

In the words you heard earlier by the American poet and conscientious objector and peace campaigner, [William Stafford](#), Knoke's life, like a picture, had appeared to me in which he and his family 'gathered at home in the evening and sang. Above their fields they saw a new sky. A holiday came and they carried the baby to the park for a party. Sunlight surrounded them.'

This new picture of the world profoundly disturbed me because it completely overturned my inherited, socially constructed picture that easy and simple distinctions could be made between the 'enemy' and us, between the 'enemy' and me. Things were suddenly more difficult and nuanced than that.

I was a [Sea Cadet](#) at the time and, quite literally overnight, the Remembrance Sunday parade in which I took part each year at the local [Walton-on-Naze War Memorial](#), became for me a deeply ambiguous and then an increasingly problematic event. The truth was that the proclamation of Jesus I repeatedly heard as a choir-boy in [my local parish church](#) simply was not aligning with the proclamations I heard as I stood smartly to attention along with the great and the good, including those from the churches, in the chilly, east-coast wind.

This disconnect helped drive my developing interest in philosophy and theology, especially ethics, because what I needed and wanted, more than anything, was solid, irrefutable, absolute proof that Jesus was right and prevailing opinion held by the majority of my elders and contemporaries was wrong. I needed this because, following my sudden change of perspective I had left the Sea Cadets and become actively involved with the peace movement by joining [CND](#), and this was taken merely as an, ultimately, inconsequential, passing, teenage rebellion. Not least

of all, this was because in my arguments with former Sea Cadet friends and some rather militaristically inclined family members, I simply didn't have available the definitive philosophical or theological proof I required.

And so I continued to passionately to argue that Jesus was right whilst also continuing to study, study, study.

And now, forty years after those first arguments and studies, I stand before you forced to admit that I've found no metaphysical philosophical or theological argument that has ever succeeded in fully persuading me, in convincing metaphysical philosophical or theological terms that is, that Jesus' proclamation speaks of something that is, indeed, absolutely and eternally true and foundational.

In this sense — and somewhat to my surprise (and even a certain amount of disappointment) — I find I'm in what might seem to be exactly the same situation as my teenage self.

But, in truth, there is a difference, one which was only slowly revealed to me thanks to a long engagement with the philosophical investigations and reflections of [Ludwig Wittgenstein and Tolstoy, whose 'Gospel in Brief' radically changed Wittgenstein's own life and understanding during the First World War.](#)

The change can be summed up as follows. Today, for me the issue is now, not that I haven't yet found a convincing metaphysical philosophical or theological foundational for Jesus' proclamation but that I might still find one in the future, instead it is that I have by now been forced to conclude that **there is no metaphysical philosophical or theological authority or justification for heeding Jesus' proclamation, beyond, over and above (or below), the very human (and humane), this-worldly proclamation itself.**

For me, in so far as there is still meaningfully a way to speak about and experience God, it is to speak and experience a wholly this-worldly, immanent God, one who is known only in and through the ethical encounter with our human (and non-human) neighbours. As the Danish theologian and ethicist [Knud Ejler Løgstrup](#) said, and to whom I re-introduced you last week, it seems to me that 'relation to God is determined wholly at the point of [our] relation to the neighbour' ([The Ethical Demand \[1956\], University of Notre Dame Press, 1977, p. 4](#)).

In connection with the way I have today conducted this Remembrance Day service I can, were I required, certainly offer up to you all kinds of sophisticated philosophical and theological justifications for why heeding Jesus' proclamation is correct and true, and why the proclamations of the great and the good who would still have us remember only our own nation's dead, and certainly not our past or present enemies, is profoundly wrong.

But all the while I would be doing this, in my heart of hearts, I would know that, in the end, I would still simply exhaust all the justifications and reach, once again, a point beyond which no one can go, 'bedrock', as Wittgenstein calls it. Then, once again, I would be at that crucial, existential moment when the only thing left to do is to stop making justifications, turn one's spade and say, "This is simply what I do."

This means that, as an individual and in my official, public capacity as your minister, I am forced to admit the decision today properly to heed in our remembrances Jesus call to love God and our neighbour — including our enemy — as ourselves, is simply what I think I, we, must do. As Luther is reputed to have said, so say I: 'Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders. Gott helfe mir. Amen.' Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.

In saying this my spade is simply turned and I have no further justifications to place before you for turning it thus.

My simple question to you today is, therefore, when it comes to Remembrance Sunday, when and where do you reach bedrock? When and where do you find the only thing left to do is to turn your spade? When and where do you say this is what you must do?

I can only hope it turns, more or less, where mine turns and that you'd do what I have done.

In the end, I find that all I know for sure is one afternoon in the late 1970s I read a book written by someone whom I had been told was irrevocably different from me, my enemy. As I read, I let a part of my mind escape. I came back, but I came back different. That day I glimpsed something of the life of my enemy and everything was changed. The great mutual blindness that had for so long darkened the sunlight in the park lifted, just for a moment, and the sky was new.

But, as you may recall from last week's address, Løgstrup reminded us that Jesus proclamation is an invitation to us **to show love to our neighbour and not indulgence** With this important thought firmly in mind, in the spirit of Jesus, it only remains for me to say this:

Enemy, though there was much about your world-view and politics that, to my dying day, I will find deeply distressing and profoundly evil, and though I remain eternally grateful to my grandparents' generation for having successfully resisted your worst intentions and aims, the monument that is this address is genuinely offered up, in love, for you.

Amen.