Hiroshima Remembered

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Genesis 18:20-32

32Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.”

Genesis 18:32

Last year, on a rainy, gray and cold day, Jayne and I got off a bus along with other tour members and made a mad dash through the falling rain into the exhibit area at the Hiroshima Peace Garden. An almost reverential aura seemed to pervade this tranquil space. As memorials go, it was neither exciting or spectacular. In the typical Japanese fashion, it was understated. Nevertheless, I almost felt like I was on hallowed ground. Mostly pictures and personal remembrances, it showed us a grim reality of what one nation is capable of doing to another. Pieces of clothing and other artifacts helped us imagine the horror of that day. I will never forget the experience.

On Tuesday, we will remember once again that fateful day seventy-four years ago. I have had us read once again the story of Abraham’s plea to God, asking God to keep from destroying Sodom and Gomorrah if there are but a few righteous ones there. I think of Hiroshima when I read the old story of Sodom and Gomorrah, not because the people in Hiroshima were evil or deserving of what happened to them, far from it, but because it’s the only whole city in all of history that was destroyed all at once on a single day.  Rather than the hand of God sweeping the city aside, it was our hands, the hands of human beings. And I am sure many of you remember this, but those of you who were not alive during the 40’s may not know just how Americans characterized the Japanese, our enemy.

When I was in grad school, one of the work study jobs I had was to help another grad student do her research. I had to go through old hard copies of Life magazine. It was probably the most boring jobs I have ever had. But during the course of doing the research I came across an interesting article, one having nothing to do with what I was supposed to be looking for. “Wipe the Jap off the Map” was a popular poster during the war. When they started choosing target cities for the atomic bomb, they had Kyoto on the list for a while until Henry Stimpson, the Secretary of War at the time, pointed out that it was a famous historical city and to destroy it would be like destroying, say, Venice.  But no one on the target committee knew anything about Japan, so this news came as a surprise to them. The magazine in that summer issue of Life showed a Japanese soldier being burned out of his cave on the island of Borneo by an American with a flamethrower. The headline read “A Jap Burns.”  In six photographs, a barely discernible human being on fire is shown running until he falls. The captions read like this one: “The Jap who wouldn’t quit ducks out enveloped in flames.” The accompanying story ends: “But so long as the Jap refuses to come out of his holes and keeps killing, this is the only way.”

Author Nora Gallagher remembers an encounter she had with her hair stylist, a Japanese national named Tomo. The movie *Letters from Iwo Jima*, Clint Eastwood’s film from the Japanese point of view, had recently come out. I had not seen it, she recalls, but I had a conversation about it with Tomo. He is about 28 and he is from Japan. He works at a fashionable downtown salon. He is by far the most polite person I have ever met. We have never talked about WW2, although I mentioned to him once that I had written a novel called *Changing Light*about the building of the atom bomb. He didn’t seem very interested. I thought, he’s young and it was a long time ago. But this spring when he cut my hair, he mentioned he had seen *Letters from Iwo Jima*. I said I had heard it was a great movie. Oh, yes, he said, and then he hesitated. It is the first movie, he finally said, that tells the story from the Japanese point of view. Yes, I said. Then he hesitated again and said: "And when I saw it, I cry."

           I looked up, Gallagher recalls. He was behind me, so I could see his eyes in the mirror: He could only see my eyes the same way. So this very human moment was seen by both of us, only in a mirror.

           "And what about the bomb," I asked. "Tomo, what do you say about Hiroshima?"

           He again hesitated and then he said very softly: “It was a war crime.”

I hesitated, if but for a brief moment, in taking on the task of preaching this sermon. I have been accused of being a “bleeding heart liberal;” guilty as charged. But this is not a sermon from the perspective of liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, right or left, or any other group to which you may choose to assign me. It is about who we are as a community that is together to follow Jesus, as best as we can, with God’s help and guidance. It is about the call of Jesus to be peacemakers, if we are to be called children of God. It is about what happened to us as a nation on August 6, 1945. It is about the worth of each and every human life in the eyes of God.

The Japanese were defenseless against the devastation wreaked from the Enola Gay on that fateful day.  Robert McNamara, the former Secretary of Defense, hardly a bleeding heart like me, says in the documentary *The Fog of War* that had the United States lost the war, we would have almost certainly been tried for war crimes.

           Hiroshima had a population of 400,000. 100,000 were killed on August 6, many of them the most vulnerable: the elderly, children and infants, the majority civilians.  By the end of 1945, 140,000 were dead. The five-year death toll was 200,000. The death rate was 54%, compared to fire bombing, which was ten percent. The ratio of civilian deaths to military deaths was 6-1.

           Another way to look at Hiroshima is by visiting the two museums. The museum in Los Alamos is dedicated to the technological: models of the two bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and photos of the labs. It's a very distant and detached view, a view, as a friend said, from above the bomb. It is clinical and almost antiseptic.

The Peace Garden at Hiroshima that I briefly described at the beginning of this sermon provides a much more human point of view. It is visceral, heart-wrenching and pulls no punches in describing what that lethal weapon did. It is deeply personal. No detachment here. Whereas the Los Alamos exhibit is the view from above the bomb, the Peace Garden is from the perspective of the ones who experienced it.

Several days after the bomb was dropped, reporters asked Mahatma Gandhi for his reaction; he replied, the atom bomb “resulted for the time being in destroying the soul of Japan. What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see.”

           The soul of the destroying nation—now there’s a phrase. And that, if you will, is the heart of this sermon. What happened to us as a nation on August 6, 1945.

           What happened to us as a nation on August 6, 1945? How did Hiroshima erode our sense of morality, what we permit ourselves as a nation to do? How did it affect our fragile sense of what is permissible for one human being to do to another?  Did the use of a weapon designed to ruthlessly annihilate whole cities contribute to where we find ourselves today? Finally, what is the line of connection from Hiroshima to Vietnam, from Hiroshima to Iraq, and on to Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib?

           The value of one single, particular human life guards against the vilification of a whole nation, a group, a race, a tribe. It helps us to look beyond the stereotypes and name calling – Japs, the N word, terrorist, to see people as people. It forces each of us to confront the part of us that wants to reduce the value of another in order to destroy them.  If we make them “Japs,” then killing them is not the same as killing a fellow human being. But of course that isn’t true. And that is why my haircutter cried when he saw *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Because even though they were the losers and our "enemy," the movie humanizes the Japanese.

           The soul of the United States is very much in jeopardy as we continue to launch wars designed to destroy others while risking comparatively little damage to ourselves. The view from above the bombs. One-sided war is now the norm: we go about our daily lives while somewhere, off in the corner, people are bleeding and suffering and dying, below the bombs. But each one of us can be an Abraham, the possessor of a lone, particular and deeply human voice. We have the power to speak, to penetrate the shadows and the fog. No, as followers of Jesus, we have the **obligation,** the **call** to say never again. Never again Our lives begin to end on the day that we are silent about things that matter.  Why are we so silent?