

**Sermon for Joint Anglican-Catholic Peace Memorial Service,
Catholic Peace Memorial Cathedral, Hiroshima, Japan, 5 August 2015**

Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, United Methodist Church, Vice-Moderator of the World Council of Churches Central Committee and head of delegation for the WCC Church Leaders Pilgrimage to Japan on the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings

Peacemakers for Life

Deuteronomy 30:15-19, Luke 19:41-42, Matthew 5:9

*Dying, Christ destroyed our death
Rising, Christ restored our life
Christ will come again in glory.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
When we are baptized into Christ Jesus,
we are buried with Christ into death.
Just as Christ was raised by God's glory,
So too are we created to walk in newness of life.*

In this peace memorial service, we have the opportunity to be in touch with the mystery of God's grace. We come to remember and to acknowledge the devastation of the past and to say never again. We come to heed God's call to "choose life" and to receive the gift of God's grace. We come to commit ourselves to become Peacemakers for Life! We come following Jesus, who said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Tonight we offer thanks to God for the lives of those who have journeyed on ahead of us to our eternal home. Remembering them now can be for us a visible sign of God, who is full of mercy and grace.

It was many years ago now when I first learned the story of Sadako Sasaki. My friend had written a little book about her, so that children in North America could learn her story. I know our Japanese colleagues know the story, but let me share it for our visitors from other countries. Sadako was two years old when the atomic bomb struck one mile from her home. Soon she began to experience the devastation of radiation disease. Her response was to set about making a thousand paper cranes, because one crane symbolizes a thousand years of peace and happiness. After her death, her classmates continued making cranes; and today there is a statue of her holding a peace crane in Memorial Park. In response to unspeakable violence, a powerful cry for peace was born. Now when I attend meetings in the western part of the United States, in Hawaii, and other places, people come having folded thousands and thousands of peace cranes. We will sit in meetings folding them. At one meeting, my friend made 7,000 cranes... We pray for peace, and the witness continues.

In the 1990s, when the Sahtu-Dene people of northern Canada finally learned that uranium from their lands had been used in the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they sent a delegation of elders to Japan to apologize. We too have a witness to make. The church

leaders on this World Council of Churches pilgrimage are from seven countries that say they are in favor of a world without nuclear weapons. Yet, year after year, decade after decade, our seven governments stand ready to use nuclear weapons. Seventy years after the destruction here, a total of 40 governments still rely on nuclear weapons.

We are here to affirm the ever-larger majorities of the United Nations General Assembly who reject that policy today, declaring that "It is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances."

It is time to judge armaments and energy use by their effects on people and on God's creation. It is time to confess that our desire for material comfort and convenience insulates us from concern for the source and quantity of the energy we consume. It is time to abandon all support for retaining nuclear weapons. It is time to refuse to accept that the mass destruction of other people can be a legitimate form of protection of ourselves.

When I was in high school and college in the 1960s, I was on the debate team. Year after year we debated the topic of nuclear disarmament. It is hard for me to believe that 50 years later our world is more than ever threatened with nuclear destruction. Nuclear powers are modernizing their weapons instead of abolishing them.

The voices of the atomic bomb sufferers, the *hibakusha*, *pi-pok-ja* (Korean) and test site victims cry out for an exodus out of the nuclear age. My friends in Hawaii are holding a service they are calling, "Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Beyond." They believe that in the Pacific we must tell the stories of the people in the Marshall Islands. There as elsewhere, the *hibakusha* can say that despite their tremendous sufferings, their stories are too little known to the world.

Over the course of 12 years (1946 to 1958), 67 nuclear bombs were exploded in the islands. The biggest bomb was Bravo in 1954. It was 1000 times the strength of the Hiroshima bomb. To this day, many Marshallese cannot return to their homes due to the contamination, and they are suffering from cancer and other radiation illnesses. One facility storing nuclear waste is in danger of being broken open by rising sea levels.

We must listen to all who suffer nuclear harm - those whose bodies are deformed by genetic mutations, whose lands and seas are poisoned by nuclear tests, whose farms and cities are fouled by nuclear accidents, whose work in mines and power plants exposes them to radiation.

In the opening books of the Bible, God's Word guides us toward the divine presence and purpose in creation and warns us not to interfere with creation's goodness. We are constantly reminded in the Bible that all of creation is worthy of wonder, celebration and praise. In Deuteronomy God sets before us life and death, blessings and curses. God implores us, "Now choose life....so that we and our children may live."

My colleague Steve Sidorak, present with us here, shared a story about someone in the parish where Steve served as pastor a number of years ago. The man was a pilot flying a

plane over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 with a photographer whose assignment was to take pictures of the devastation. What he saw changed his life forever. He fought for his sanity as he recalled what he had seen after those bombings. It haunted him until his death. But he managed to claim some peace with himself when he met a few *hibakusha* and offered his anguished apologies to them.

The scriptural passage in Deuteronomy was clear: there are ways of living life that lead, sooner or later, toward death. Equally clear, biblically speaking, was the fact that if anyone wanted life over death, she or he had to "choose life" over death. The danger in the world today is the potential to worship the power we have to destroy creation more than worshipping the God of creation. When we bow down and worship weapons of mass destruction and the source of their power, nuclear energy (whether it be by nuclear bang or ecological whimper), we are choosing death, not life.

So now, as then, choose life so that you and your descendants may live!

God, our generous Creator, has called life into being and endowed creation with life in abundance. To use the energy of the atom in ways that threaten and destroy life is a sinful misuse of God's creation. We are called to live in ways that protect life instead of putting it at risk.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem and said, "Woe to those who neglect justice and the love of God." As he wept, he said, "If you had only on this day recognized the things that make for peace." And on the mount he said to the people, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."

Even now we see an avalanche of stories about violence and suffering and destruction from all around the world and close to home. But the violence of the world is not the starting point of the journey to become peacemakers. The starting point is internal. This is the teaching of all the world's spiritual disciplines: Ghandi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world," and Jesus said, "The kingdom is within you." Making peace for others begins with making peace within. This is an individual, personal truth, and it is our corporate truth, the truth of the Body of Christ. Peacemaking begins within, and the Beatitudes are Jesus' description of this internal spiritual journey: "Blessed are the poor in spirit and those who mourn"—the first step is to empty the self, so that we might be filled up by God and God alone. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and those who are merciful"—as God fills us, we hunger for the right things. And the cycle of mercy yields fruit, "pureness of heart"—we open our eyes to see others as God sees them. This is the integrity of the great commandment, our love for God born out in our love for neighbors. And then "Blessed are the peacemakers"—simply put, being peacemakers is what the pure in heart do. Perhaps making peace is the most advanced form of being merciful. And if what God desires is for all creation to be in right relation with one another and with God, then at the heart of what God is doing, is making peace.

In June a group of missionaries met here. Sharing from Luke 10:1-12, one of the leaders highlighted that God's mission movement has always been linked to hospitality. Jesus sent

disciples and followers to villages to heal the sick and preach about the kingdom, and in each place they were to find one household and stay there for the duration of their ministry. Down through the ages, the success of the mission movement has always depended on mutual hospitality between strangers. Indeed, such hospitality demonstrates the abiding love of God for a humanity that is too often estranged from God and from each other. As our Lord said, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house.'"

And so this evening we remember that we have in faith joined Christ in death and are reborn to live in him alone.

And we remember from a kingdom perspective that the strategies that seem to work well in the present fallen order, like wealth, power, and reputation, are doomed. We live as a people aligned with those who gain no reward from the world as it is.

And we remember that we are a sent people, ambassadors of God's unsearchable reconciliation.

And because we remember these things we may abide in the fearlessness of love. For our God is the Lord of both well-being and calamity. We can trust the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And as we trust wholly in Love, we trust in that which alone will endure, which is God!