

## *Theological Education in a Time of War*

### *Opening Convocation Sermon*

Starr King School for the Ministry  
September 4, 2007

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, preaching

Yes, we have gathered to celebrate once again. I give thanks for each of us here, when I look around at your faces – such a welcome sight after a year away on sabbatical – and listen to our voices joined in singing or when I taste the good food so lovingly prepared by continuing students to welcome the new class – I note the devotion that is here. It is tangible to the senses. I give thanks for the energy of heart and spirit embodied in our lives connected through this school to the common work of justice, compassion and peace. We share in this work with many, within and beyond these permeable walls.

I celebrate the growing multi-locality of our work, exemplified this fall by students in parish internships, and fieldwork located from New England to Iraq, and to faculty such as Gabriella Lettini just back from ministerial work in Italy, and Ibrahim Farajajé, soon to return to Istanbul as director of our Luce Project in Multi-religious Understanding. Whether we are present to one another in the flesh or in the spirit – let us sense the goodness that breathes in our con-spiration – our conspiracy –of commitment to all that gives life, offers healing, repairs legacies of injustice, and promulgates hope.

Let us give thanks and breathe deeply for we need this grounding in joy in order to be present to the realities of suffering and injustice in the world. We commence this academic year in a time of wars on many fronts – the war in Iraq, instigated by U.S. imperial ambitions under the guise of “liberating the oppressed,” the ongoing war in Israel and Palestine, the U.S. saber rattling threatening action against Iran, the violence in Darfur. These wars, are connected as we know, to ongoing wars against the bodies of women and children, queer and disabled bodies,

they are connected to the locking up of immigrants in the U.S., to ever morphing forms of racism, economic exploitation, and environmental abuse, and to the multiplication of prisons – slavery’s newest face.

Many assignments will be made this year in courses and field settings and independent studies. But to begin this academic year, I wish to invoke the over-arching assignments the meta-assignments, given to us by the very situation of being a school for the ministry, a theological school, convened in a time of wars.

First, these assignments...we must conceptualize ministry as engagement with transpersonal social forces, as well as care for individual lives.

At the end of his years in the ministry, Theodore Parker, one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest Unitarian ministers, wrote a long letter to his congregation reflecting on his life and work with them. In the letter, he explained that because he cared about the holiness of each soul, and sought to call forth the full unfolding of each person’s divine capacities, his ministry required him to engage the social forces that inhibited, contradicted or oppressed life. Ministry, he said, involved critical engagement with an interlocking set of social forces. He named them this way:

“The organized trading power;” “the organized political power ... commonly controlled by the trading power;” “the organized ecclesiastical power, the various sects which [allege] salvation from God’s wrath and eternal ruin, by the atoning blood of a crucified God;” and “the organized literary power, the endowed colleges, the periodical press.”

Now we would call these social/cultural forces: Economics, Politics, Religion, Education and the Media

As Theodore Parker’s spiritual descendants, we are called to carry on this legacy of ministry that cares for souls by addressing these. Where these transpersonal systems function to hinder justice and oppress lives, there ministry must turn its creative and critical attention. To do so, requires us to interact with vested interests that will prefer we see ministry in private and personal terms, in spirituality separate from politics, in service that palliates rather than confronts the consequences of economic injustice, in banal religious tolerance rather than multi-religious understanding, and in transcendent peace—not peace that would put an end to the lucrative pursuit of earthly wars. Our assignment is to refuse to comply with the pressure to reduce religion and ministry to private individual interests – all ministry is public ministry.

Assignment two: we must tear off the deceitful masks of war that allow violence to continue unchecked, and especially we have an obligation and responsibility to unmask the way religion provides violence with sacred face – calling war holy, and killing or being killed a form of love.

As we all know now, the current U.S. occupation of Iraq began under the pretense that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and under the false suggestion that there were ties between Iraq and those who felled the twin towers on 9/11. Both reasons for going to war, and many subsequent reasons but forth, have been revealed as ‘deceitful masks’ – the term Augustine used when he wrote *The City of God* early in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Augustine wrote *The City of God* to protest the way leaders of the Roman Empire were blaming a growing religion for creating insecurity for the Empire. Then the Empire was Rome and the Religion is Christianity and now the Empire is the U.S. and the Religion is Islam; then the Empire was Rome and the Religion was Christianity. The dynamics of imperialist war remain unchanged. Augustine wrote:

Why allege to me the mere names and words of ‘glory’ and ‘victory?’ Tear off the disguise of wild delusion, and look at the naked deeds: weigh them naked, judge them naked . . . This war was kindled only in order that they ‘might sound in languid ears the cry of . . . victory.’ This vice of restless ambition was the sole motive. This lust of sovereignty disturbs and consumes the human race... Away then with these deceitful masks, these deluding whitewashes, that things may be truthfully seen and scrutinized. Let no man tell me that this and the other was a ‘great’ man, because he fought and conquered so and so... I think it were better to take the consequences of any sloth, than to seek the glory won by such arms. (*City of God*, III. 14)

Recently Jack Forbes, Native American scholar and activist and fellow traveler among Unitarian Universalists, in an article in *Street Spirit*, wrote of the current war:

“War and empire are very pernicious since they feed the profit lust of countless industries, from oil to aircraft makers, from makers of uniforms to makers of armored vehicles, from merchant shipping to manufacturers of military food kits, from the prosthetic industry to the makers of coffins. In short, the Iraq disaster may be a failure

from one perspective, but an immense success from the viewpoint of the war profiteers; and let's face it, with most of the U.S. domestic manufacturing gone to China, war is now perhaps our major industry.”

Masks hide the truth, the sorrow, the harm, and the folly of war. Global peace movements tried to stop U.S. pre-emptive war in the gulf or reverse its course to little avail. One problem that peace movements face is the cultural weight of religiously-sanctified violence, and the repeated re-inscribing of images of execution and torture as acts that embody love, bravery, and justice.

In the spring of 2004, while the U.S. bombed Iraq and the war's casualty toll climbed, images of the lacerated body of Christ filled the film screens of America. In Technicolor, Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* reproduced medieval Christianity's images of Jesus' torture and execution, presenting violence as divinely sanctioned, necessary for salvation, and an occasion for gratitude and awe. Gibson's film arrived just in time to bathe the conscience of a nation at war in the bloody assertion that Christ's sacrificial death revealed God's love. Cadets at the U.S. Air force Academy in Colorado Springs who were shown the film were exposed to a theology not unlike what the 12th century crusaders heard from Peter the Hermit when he 'preached the cross' in the towns and cities of Europe, inviting recruits to serve Christ by offering themselves to kill or be killed in Jesus' name. Cadets were enjoined to be part of Team Jesus, encouraged by the close involvement at the academy of evangelical Christian organizations headquartered in Colorado Springs, such as Focus on the Family and the Officers' Christian Fellowship.<sup>1</sup> In the movie, as in medieval art, Jesus' Mother Mary displayed the ideal response—her assigned role within the patriarchal family: she suffers silently with him but raises no outcry to stop or protest the forward motion of the Father's divine will.

Not all mothers have conformed to this script. In the summer of 2005, Celeste Zappala and her son Dante stood with many others on a dusty roadside outside Crawford, Texas. They had come to ask the vacationing President of the United States what justified the deaths of their family members in the Iraq War. Celeste was there because she'd made a promise at her son's graveside, that she would not be silent about the lies that had sent him to war and caused his death. Celeste Zappala transgressed the mother's culturally assigned role when she and Cindy Sheehan founded Gold Star Mothers for Peace and began publicly protesting the deaths of their sons in Iraq. Their non-compliant grief has called into question the unfettered performance of U.S. war. Such an outcry against violence harks back to pre-medieval Christian art. Long before

Christian iconography turned its focus on the execution of Jesus, early Christian mosaics depicted the outraged grief of mothers whose babies were killed by Herod. In the 5th century basilica of Maria Maggiore in Rome, the arch mosaic includes a depiction of the slaughter of the innocents, the story told in Luke of Herod's massacre of all boys under two years of age in his effort to find and kill the Christ child. The mosaic shows mothers with wild, unbound hair—a sign of grief—gathered before Herod's throne. They hold their sons in their arms, a crowd of women mourners facing a violent tyrant. These mothers, like the 20<sup>th</sup> century mothers of the disappeared in Latin America, the contemporary women in black, and the Gold Starr mothers for peace, protest imperial violence with unbounded outrage, grief channeled into protest and confrontation. Such non-compliant protest is also visible in the works of Kathe Kollowitz that surround us in the chapel today. In early twentieth century Germany, at a time when “women artists” were expected to depict sweet scenes of domestic life, Kollowitz used graphic art to unmask the realities of war and poverty. In the lithographs and charcoal drawings you can see here today, she presents the grief of mothers, the terror of children, and the sorrow of the battlefield. “Death seizes the children” is her title for one of these. She lost a son in WWI and a grandson in WWII, persecuted by the Nazi's she persisted in using art to make visible that which the powers that which the principalities and powers preferred would remain out of sight.

We are to do the same with the arts of ministry – with preaching, prayer, and prophecy – our assignment is to unmask deception and reveal silenced truths.

Third Assignment: we must remember all the dead, and weep with those who weep.

Celeste Zappala's son was a young father when his National Guard unit was sent to Iraq. He'd joined the Guard to contribute to his community and to help pay for his student loans. As a child growing up, he was “big and loud and wonderful,” his mother said. “He loved music. He loved entertaining people. He did magic tricks...He was the big brother. He protected [his brothers] from when they were little. He was not always such a good student, but his teachers knew that he had a lot of heart and a lot of sweetness.” On April 26, 2004—just seven weeks after he was deployed—Sherwood Baker was one of two soldiers killed in an explosion in Baghdad. Celeste Zappala recounts how she received the news:

“I had come home from work and I was preparing dinner in the kitchen. The front door was open. It was raining and I didn't have the porch light on. Our dog started barking

and lunging for the door. I went to the porch and saw a man standing there with a notebook. At first I thought he must be selling magazines. I couldn't see because the light was off. Then I began to see the medals. I thought, maybe he's here because the election is tomorrow. He must want to tell me something. It all began to make sense, why he was there. He said, are you Sherwood's mother? Are you Sherwood's mother? And I just started to scream and scream and scream."

I share this one story to remind you that every death in Iraq because of this immoral war – the death of every Iraqi as well as every U.S. soldier – tears the heart of a mother, a father, of siblings and friends, with outrage and grief. Let us not ever forget the waste of war; its evil rendering of the fabric of human love, community, cultures and connections. Let us remain keenly attuned to reality—to the reality of Celeste Zapalla's body when she began to scream. Let us make space to mourn – to recall the names – and to remember all families and communities and cultures shattered by war.

Beginning with this chapel service, I ask us for as long as the Iraq war lasts, to include in every service a white votive candle to remember those who have died. In many cultures, white is the color of death, the color of the extinction of the spirit, the color of grief. Today, Ibrahim will light this votive candle for us.

Ministry accompanies those who mourn, it bears grief, and it holds the connections that war and injustice sever. Even if the only thread left is the tattered line of loss, we must hold this thread. We must not let go until the tears have watered our numbed hearts and minds and nourished our passion to resist injustice and work for peace. From the threads of sorrow, we are to weave and re-weave community.

Fourth and final assignment for now: We must center our hearts and minds in love for life, daring to bring the colors of life and the energies of passionate caring into sites of devastation within, among, and around us.

If ministry were only prophetic outrage, we would burn out trying to re-kindle the cold sparks of compassion and deadened love in the hearts of those who are addicted to the greed of war and even to the hearts of ourselves. But ministry begins in and returns to joy. Our energy to oppose war, speak truth to power, use our arts to unmask deceit, and minister with tender compassion, finds its deepest wellspring not in our anger but in our joy. Our deepest wellspring

is in the yes we say to life — let our anger spring from that yes, be rooted in that yes – in our love for life.

So, I ask us today to also begin another practice each time we gather for worship: To light a red votive candle to remind us that love for life is the beating heart at the center of all ministry and religious leadership.

For us, Glory is in the face of our beloved. It is in the stream of life that runs through all our lives; it is in the pleasure we take in the blessing of existence, in the goodness we trust like a pulse always sounding, in the intricacies of earth’s rhythms of life – tides, moons, seasons, growth, decay, renewal, the passing of life, the birth of life, the endless abiding trustworthy presence of the love that holds us all.

Tagore wrote, “the same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures...I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life and my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.”

Let red stand for life – and recall us through all our study and learning together this year – that we are here because life gave us birth, life gives us joy, life blesses us with its ever-refreshing wellsprings of grace and beauty. We are here because of life; we are here on behalf of life.

---

<sup>i</sup> Captain Melinda Morton, a Lutheran minister and Air Force academy chaplain, objected to this proselytizing and was fired. She stepped forward to object when fliers promoting the showing of *The Passion of the Christ* were placed at every seat in the Air Force Academy dining hall, with the tagline, “This is an officially sponsored USAFA event.” Morton said she had decided to step forward without authorization because, “It’s the Constitution, not just a nice rule we can follow or not follow. We all raised our hands and said we’d follow it, and that includes the First Amendment, that includes not using your power to advance your religious agenda.” These events were widely reported in the U.S. press.