CAPITAL UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION

ORDER OF SERVICE – Sunday July 20th 2014

Welcome: Board Member Rita

Prelude: Kim Cousineau

Opening Words & Lighting the Chalice: “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae

Hymn: #16 - “Tis a Gift to Be Simple”

Story for all Ages: Christmas 1914 on the Front Line

Recessional “Go Now in Peace” Peter

Joys and Concerns:

“Pebbles Fall, ripples grow, returning, returning, in community”

Meditation: on peace

Offering: with a portion to Capital Connects: the Dogwood Initiative

Music: Kim

Acceptance: #402 "From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, and from this we live"

Hymn: #101 - “Abide with Me”

**Homily: “Faith in Time of War” - Peter**

Hymn: #38 - “Morning Has Broken”

Closing Words & Extinguishing the Chalice: Peter

Linking Song #123 - “Spirit of Life”

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In Flanders Fields, by Canadian physician Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae. He was inspired to write it on May 3, 1915, after presiding over the funeral of friend and fellow soldier Alexis Helmer, who died in the Second Battle of Ypres. Note that this poem is not about god or the resurrection.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row,

 That mark our place; and in the sky / The larks, still bravely singing, fly

Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago / We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

 Loved and were loved, and now we lie / In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe: / To you from failing hands we throw

 The torch; be yours to hold it high. / If ye break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders fields.

Homily text:

I love the hymn ‘Abide with Me’. In Canada we sing it at Remembrance Day, and we sang it at every military funeral I attended during my twenty-one years in the Air Force. Like many hymns, you can take the words or leave them… it’s the melody that matters, and the fact that we are singing together.

Next week Canadians will mark 100 years since ‘we’ joined the Great War between Britain and Germany. We might hear that Canadians “rushed to volunteer” and “rushed to war” after hearing reports of Germany atrocities against the innocent people of “Little Belgium.” Like all historical stories, this is true and not true.

In grade school you likely learned how the Greek gods meddled in human wars. You have likely learned about holy wars, like the Crusades when European Catholics invaded the Holy Land to kill the Muslims and put the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem under Christian control. You have likely heard about the partition of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which was done in a way that appears as a holy war. You have heard about the residential school system in Canada, which was partly designed to shape First Nations people by pushing out the ‘savage’ and inserting the Christian god in a kind of moral war. But are gods involved in wars?

You may also have heard the saying “There are no atheists in foxholes” [US Army 1942], which implies that all soldiers who are under fire have religion or at least a belief in god. But I can tell you that this is not always true. [American novelist James Morrow has been quoted as saying "'There are no atheists in foxholes' isn't an argument against atheism, it's an argument against foxholes," as the mental state, or decisions, of an extremely frightened and desperate person can hardly be imagined to be *more* rational than those of a person in a calm state.]

Today I want to talk about the First World War, the colossal struggle that killed millions of people and flattened a lot of real estate in Belgium and France between 1914 and 1918. And I want to talk about the role of faith in wartime. In the forum after coffee today, I’ll be happy to develop these ideas further.

First, a few words about Canada in 1913 and 1914, before the war.

Population: mostly rural and aside from Quebec overwhelmingly English, Scottish and Irish. Immigration: only a few thousand Ukrainians; mostly British. Economy: depressed. Jobs: few.

The big news in the Victoria newspapers on this date 100 years ago: sending Sikh immigrants back to India, to keep British Columbia white and British. Events in Europe were important but not vital.

Canada’s foreign policy was entirely dependent on Great Britain. In fact – and this is important – Canada did not independently declare war in 1914. Westminster declared war for us and we were compelled to assist our imperial masters.

Patrick Dunae wrote about ‘remittance men’ in BC… *Gentlemen emigrants: from the British public schools to the Canadian frontier.* [Vancouver : Douglas & McIntyre, 1981]. These ‘second sons’ brought money and spirit to Canada but most of them remained British. In 1913 in B.C., many of them were establishing farms and businesses. If you are interested in BC history I encourage you to read Dunae’s book, which is available at the library. These remittance men will come up in my story in a few minutes.

University of Toronto historian J.M. Bliss [University of Toronto BA, MA, and Ph.D.] wrote in 1968 in the *Canadian Historical Review* about “The Methodist Church in World War I.” The Methodist Church, a forerunner of the United Church of Canada, were mostly pacifist but during the Boer War in 1902 the Methodist annual gathering was pro-war because the British cause was just and the war’s aims were freedom and honest government. In August 1914, historian Bliss discovered, the Methodists were anti-war and some sermons cast doubt on the propaganda reports of German atrocities in Belgium; Methodists felt that the German people were as Christian and moral as British people, and would not have slaughtered Catholic nuns and innocent children. But by September 1914 the Methodists had changed their tune and were whole-hearted in favour of war against Germany. Hundreds of Methodist ministers went to war, as ministers, to support the soldiers in that righteous battle. I’ll come back to those ministers in a few minutes.

Earlier this summer, conservative public intellectual George Weigel, wrote that the collapse in the restraining power of religion helped to push the world into the era of total war. In an article in the journal *First Things*, Weigel lists the secular ideas that were supplanting religion before 1914. They include racial theories based on the superiority of the Slavic or Teutonic peoples, and their incompatibility with each other; Friedrich Nietszche's glorification of destruction and power; distorted forms of Darwinism which saw the survival of the fittest as a prescription for an endless arms race. He thinks that religion itself was corrupted by secular nationalism, to the point where many of Europe's clergy saw nothing but merit in killing fellow Christians of a different nation.

On August 4, 1914 when Great Britain declared war on Germany [to defend Belgium], thousands of men in Canada rallied to the old flag and volunteered for service. The first to join were the remittance men that Patrick Dunae wrote about: many of them had belonged to regiments in England before they had come to Canada, and they longed for home. I said a few minutes ago that the economy was slack in 1913-1914, so many of the British immigrants who saw a limited future in Canada volunteered for war service and a free trip to the old country. In February 1915 the *Montreal Star* newspaper started publishing a daily ‘roll of honour’ which listed the names and birthplaces of ‘Canadian’ volunteers; many commentators were surprised that most were born in the United Kingdom, and some Canadians were thereafter ashamed that so few Canadians were participating in ‘Canada’s war effort abroad’. [source: historian Matthew Bray, in *Canadian Historical Review*, LXI, 2, 1980]

Canada in 1914 was overwhelmingly Christian. Roman Catholics and Protestants filled the land. Church attendance was simply part of life. Victoria’s synagogue was in a slump but I suspect that Vancouver’s Jews were attending Sabbath services in good numbers. Was the 1914 war a ‘holy war’? Not at all, from my reading. Every writer knew that the German people were also Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, in proportions similar to Canada. Therefore it could not be a holy war. Was god on any particular side? From all accounts, the gods were on the side of industrial-level killing and senseless death.

Earlier I mentioned the Methodist ministers, hundreds of whom travelled to Europe to tend to the soldiers. In Bliss’s 1968 history essay he notes that a dramatic proportion of the ministers lost their faith in Belgium and France. They were despondent in the face of the maimings and killings which neither they nor their dogma could interpret. Few deaths are ever honourable, and most of the deaths on the Western Front were caused by artillery fired from far away… Death by artillery [or later by aerial bombardment] is among the least heroic ways to die. I must point out that Bliss writes that some clergy returned to Canada with their faith renewed, but many never again stood in a pulpit.

Church attendance in Canada is quite low indeed… we all know that. Church attendance did not start to decline in the 1960s, as some people say. Church attendance, and indeed faith in a god who helps the believers, began to decline in the mud of Belgium and France in 1914-1918.

Faith in time of war is a hard topic to pin down. As most of us know, faith and belief are individual… church attendance does not necessarily equal ‘belief’… For the next four years we will see and hear commemorations of the First World War, which began for Canada one hundred years ago next week. I want you to be wary of any talk of god’s role or religion’s role in that conflict. As we Unitarian-Universalists would not want to be labelled with a particular brand of belief or faith, so let us not accept the branding of those who are long-dead and cannot speak for themselves.

"Morning Has Broken" is a Christian hymn first published in 1931. It has words by English author Eleanor Farjeon and is set to a traditional Scottish Gaelic tune. In *Songs of Praise Discussed*, the editor, Percy Dearmer, explains that as there was need for a hymn to give thanks for each day, English poet and children's author Eleanor Farjeon had been "asked to make a poem to fit the lovely Scottish tune". Let us now rise and sing hymn 38, Morning Has Broken, and be thankful that Canada is not involved in any great wars at this moment.

Material not used:

[One American perspective is in “Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War,” by Jonathan Ebel, a professor of religion at the University of Illinois, examines the pivotal role that religious faith – Christianity, in particular – played in the war effort and people’s interpretations of their wartime experiences, giving birth to a religion-based nationalism that continues to loom large in American discourse. In letters, diaries and other documents many people revealed that they found the war to be profoundly religiously meaningful, despite its unimaginable horrors of death and destruction. In the early 1900s, Christianity was being masculinized by characterizations of Christ as an active, often militant man, and Protestant leaders encouraged men to live lives of “Christian action” by becoming warriors against evil. Religious faith lent transcendent meanings and purpose to death and suffering, elevated those who died in combat to the level of heroes and martyrs and promised them eternal salvation. After the war, the American Legion - which was founded by Theodore Roosevelt III to “keep alive the spirit of the Great War” – vigorously promoted religion-infused beliefs about the redemptive power of struggle and war, perceptions of America as a nation with divine status and images of military veterans and war dead as saints, martyrs and imitators of Christ. During a postwar period fraught with race riots, labor protests and violence, the American Legion appealed to Americans to subordinate their religious differences to the needs of the country and band together in an ongoing fight for survival against demonic enemies such as the Ku Klux Klan, pacifists and communists which the Legion believed were poised to destroy the country and all the values that people had fought for. In effect, the American Legion gave birth to and manifested an “alternate religion of nationalism that gives place to religious traditions, but only to the extent that they fit within the needs of the nation,” Ebel said.]

[“Private Sorrow Becomes Public Property”: Canadian Anglican Sermons and the Second Battle of Ypres, May 1915” by Melissa Davidson, McGill University, in Historical Papers 2011: *Canadian Society of Church History.* <http://churchhistcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/2011-11-davidson-article.pdf>

Speaking at Montreal’s St. Matthias’ church on that tense Sunday, 25 April 1915, John Cragg Farthing, Bishop of Montreal, said,

This is a time of crisis, not only in the Empire, the physical struggle taking place in Europe, but also in the church. We are all suffering in the present war, but what is pressing upon my mind . . . is the question, “What if this suffering should be in vain? What if people turn a deaf ear to God, and when the war is over go back to worldliness . . . and unrighteousness?”

While Farthing’s main subject was allegations of graft and war-profiteering coming out of Ottawa, his question ‘What if this suffering should be in vain?’ was asked at precisely the time when many were waiting anxiously, knowing that there had been a battle but not yet knowing the number of dead and wounded. Farthing’s answer, that the suffering would bear fruit if people were to remain righteous and turned toward God – the “deepening of national life” that was spoken of by Cody – is a dominant theme in sermons from this early period of the war. Britain, and through it the Empire, was engaged in a righteous war, a war that needed to be waged by a righteous people.

[snip]

The lack of systematic attention paid to clerical rhetoric during this period has led to several serious misrepresentations in the historical record. As is hopefully clear from even this brief survey, the conflict was not one between “good” and “evil” nor was it portrayed as a “just war,” both of which are common assumptions regarding the views of the churches. The Great War was, however, a righteous war that could be justified, not only on the basis of international law, but because it was seen as a fight to preserve all that was good about British civilization. The themes apparent in this small group of sermons are in many ways characteristic of the earliest period of war preaching. The level of thematic agreement amongst the various clergymen speaking about the battle is high. Perhaps more important to note, however, is that an even higher degree of thematic agreement is present if the sermons from the first year of the war, rather than from a period lasting little less than a month, are taken as a whole. For a church with an established prayer book, whose words were repeated throughout Anglican Canada, this strong agreement demonstrates an appeal to a shared linguistic heritage. But it also speaks to a shared mindset about Canada, its relation to the Empire, and the duty of Canadians with regard to the struggle overseas.]