

Sermon: The Peace Angel of the Church**Scripture: Ephesians 6:13-17****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: August 16, 2009**

I've found it fascinating to dig a bit into Rev. Hall's ministry with this church during the time of the Great Depression. Through his annual reports and over 200 sermons that his son poured through in preparation for this service, there wasn't evidence of a focus upon how to make it through the Depression – it could be there somewhere and his willingness to take a significant pay cut that lasted for upwards to 10 years suggests it was indeed an issue not ignored or avoided – but what surfaced more readily, interestingly enough, in his writings was a focus on peace and justice. Let me read to you a couple of paragraphs that Jeanie found in his annual reports that I think are just powerful statements:

The first is this from 1934:

“We must convince our children they are citizens not only of the US but of the world. This will include missionary education and stress on racial friendship; it will also include internationalism to combat the new religion of nationalism, the social evil of our day which has so many possibilities of world destruction in it; it will include education for peace and against the social evil of our day – war!”

And then this from the following year, 1935:

“It will be pertinent to speak here of the study groups which have been held. They are part of the great adult education movement which is growing all over the world. During the fall weeks preceding Armistice Day, we held a study group which considered the vital subject of Peace and the various ways to preserve peace and avoid war.”

And then this statement he took from a NY Times editorial and put in a Christmas letter that he wrote in 1937:

“Fear and sorrow and the hate that is born of them bestride the earth. They hold their lines, advance their armies... But we know on Christmas morning that their strategy is doomed to fail... Ever the truth will force its way through the dust of battle. We are of one body and one flesh, black, yellow, white, whose prayers go up to one God under different names. It is our flesh that is torn when the shell explodes, that is pierced by the thrusting bayonet. Our hate recoils upon us and destroys us. It is only our love that survives and is immortal.”

It was later in 1942 that Rev. Hall also gave a powerful sermon, his son remembers vividly, against the internment of the Japanese as our government began

rounding up over 100,000 people within the US to move them to what they called relocation camps. Avery spoke of not only remembering the forceful challenge that his father made to this practice from the pulpit but also the response he got. While it sounds like many in the congregation were supportive of his stance, there were also those that labeled him a communist for it and even those who left the church as a result. Just as there were those who left the church later when the minister during the Vietnam War era held a meeting about supporting conscientious objectors to the war.

I find this fascinating. To look back over the history of the church you realize that the issue of peace and nonviolence, the practice of confronting our own country's blind dependence and insistence upon the use of force to accomplish its goals despite the blatant contradiction to the teachings of our faith, something that has been a part of our ministry and study together as pastor and congregation, is in fact a part of the spirit of this church. The Book of Revelation speaks of the angels of particular congregations in the life of the early church, a particular spiritual reality or personality that marked a given community which is something more and different from the spirituality of any one individual. And so what seems obvious in looking back over our history as a congregation is that the angel or charism or personality of this particular congregation has always had at least some emphasis on peacemaking. I have to say I kind of thought that was my thing. I kind of thought that I was encouraging this congregation to hold nonviolence and peacemaking up as an emphasis in our ministry together. I thought that the issue of peace and justice, a just peace, was the thrust of Sam and Paula and Sally and certain others of our community who have formed CASA. But what I've realized is that it really doesn't matter who is here in the pulpit and it doesn't matter who is out there in the pews over the years. This will always be a part of how this church expresses itself and lives its mission and ministry in the world – centered or at least involved with the theme of peacemaking and justice seeking on a more global level.

Maybe that is because Charlotte has never been a poor town or a town of great diversity and so the immediate local needs of people and issues of poverty and race relations for instance have never been in the face of the congregation which has maybe then opened the door to a wider more global sense of what the world needs and how we might respond to it. Or maybe there really is a call from God to this congregation to be a voice for peacemaking and nonviolence in the world. Either way, what is evident from

looking over the history is that it's a part of the angel of this congregation. You replace me or Sally Kerschner leaves and there will necessarily be others who will step in to be the voices pressing us to be a witness for peace in this world, however small a voice we might have up here on Church Hill. Maybe we need to hold an awareness of that in our consciousness and prayers and see what the Spirit might do with us here in 2009 as we prepare in the upcoming month to host a Pakistani woman in our worship on September 13 and perform the Mass for Peace on September 20th and engage in some action around the global warming crisis in October.

But its also, I think, worth considering how much of hat has come before us impacts and often unconsciously impacts our present. In our culture, I think we have a bankrupt sense of how much who we are now and what we do now is influenced or determined by who came before us and what happened to them and what they did. The illusion is that we are free and autonomous individuals who make what we can of our lives. More the reality, I'd say, is that our life is a point within a vast web of interconnecting relationships and events, movements and energies, and that we are only barely conscious of all that goes into who we have become and why we make the decisions we make and have the issues we have and are called to where we are called.

Our savior and Lord, Jesus himself, was not heavenly being sent to earth but central to his redemptive work was the fact that he came out of a particular genealogical line and a particular people and history and point on the map and it wasn't a transcendence of his particularity but an embracing of it, a fulfilling of his Jewishness, of his maleness, of his middle easternness that was the pathway to a remarkable universalism that has almost every type of people in the world be they Chinese of African or American or Russian, male or female, relating through this very particular man to the God of their lives. I don't think it would have worked that way had Jesus claimed to transcend his particular-ness to be an everyman sort of figure. God called him and calls each of us into life in a particular moment in time to a particular people and a particular set of gifts and a particular way of understanding the world that has been formed in all that has come before us. May our consciousness of the past relax us into faithful living of the moment and inspire our response to God's call for our future. Amen.