

Matthew 25:1-13
Remembrance Sunday - Sunday, November 8, 2020
Parkminster United Church
Rev. Heather Power

Paper Lanterns is a documentary film about Shigeaki Mori, a survivor of the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima. Mori was eight years old when the bomb fell on his home city. In the film, he describes the mushroom cloud, and a darkness so total he could not see the fingers he held up to his face. He describes running through the ruined streets after the blast, tripping over the countless bodies that littered his path.

An amateur historian, Mori spent his early adulthood documenting the events of that terrible day. In the course of his research, he discovered the virtually unknown fact that twelve American Prisoners of War had died in the blast alongside the 140,000 Japanese victims — and that's when his interest became a passion. He didn't have any personal connection to the United States, but those twelve airmen broke Mori's heart. At a time when he had every reason to fear and hate Americans, Mori saw the twelve young men, not as enemies, but as boys alone and forgotten in a doomed city, fellow victims deserving of the same dignity and compassion as their Japanese counterparts.

For the next forty-two years, Mori painstakingly researched those twelve men, learning their stories, seeking out their final resting places, tracking down their relatives in the U.S to offer solace and closure, and working to have their names registered at the Hiroshima Peace Museum. The research was slow, hard, frustrating, and costly. It involved combing through thousands of war-time drawings and documents, cold-calling people in the U.S in the hopes of finding the relatives of the deceased, wrestling through the red tape of bureaucracy, and working extra jobs on the side to fund a ceremonial plaque to honor the POWs. All this, while facing the bewilderment and contempt of others, who couldn't understand the compassion that drove him.

Speaking about the film, Mori has described the challenges and joys of his work. All those years after the bomb fell, he still broke down weeping as he described the twelve soldiers who had captured his heart.

This Remembrance Sunday is a day in which we hold in our hearts and honour those who serve and have served and those who gave their lives. With heavy hearts we remember, we grieve, and pray to God that in doing so, we may be moved to do all that we can to work for the service of peace and justice in our world. And hearing Mori's story beckons us to deeper wonder: What makes compassion possible in the midst of the horrors of war? What makes it impossible? What truly counts as sacred, and how do we honour the sacred in the midst of desecration? When callousness, apathy, and fear threaten our hearts, how do we return to love? When I watch or read stories like that of *Paper Lanterns*, I once again realize that it is impossible to appreciate fully what those who served and lived in times of war went through. It leaves me feeling, on the one hand, immensely grateful as a citizen of a free country, and on

the other hand, discouraged at the human race's inability to find a different way of establishing peace. It has always been this way. Jesus preached about the way of peace known as the Kin-dom or Realm of God, based on a radical trust in God, not money or power. This trust issued in a natural inclination to share with all, a collapsing of economic, religious, and political hierarchies, and a desire to serve others. But he preached this message of the Kindom into a context of the Roman Empire, who enforced a peace based on the threat of violence and overwhelming imperial power. The concern here was not with justice for all, but preserving the privilege of the elite and maintaining the status quo. Given all that is happening in the world right now – this is as much relevant for us today.

Two different visions of peace. His followers wondered when Jesus' vision of peace would be realized on earth? When would God's realm come and replace Caesar's? In response to his followers' questions, Jesus told various parables which emphasized the paradox of a realm, which had already arrived in his own words and actions, but which was yet to be fully realized. The parable is based in an existential reality. The realm of God is delayed. And the question was then, as it is today for us, how then shall we live with this delay? How do we not despair at this delay? Theologian Debie Thomas considers it this way: "the coming of God's [kindom] in all of its healing, justice-making fullness is the yardstick against which we must measure all of our own healing, justice-making efforts. The wedding feast is our ideal, our goal, our destination. Without it, we have no standard. No accountability. Nothing to lean into, nothing to work towards, nothing to anticipate as we labour in God's name."

The wise ones in the parable, representing the path of wisdom, carry an extra flask of oil. They are prepared for the delay. You need oil reserves, Jesus tells us. Now obviously we shouldn't take this parable literally – the oil Jesus is talking about is spiritual oil needed to tend the flame of peace while we wait.

I have often wondered how those young soldiers were able to tend the flame when at times they must have wondered if there was enough oil left to keep going.

And how do we keep our spiritual oil reserves up so we can keep the flame burning?

Memory is a reservoir from which we can draw lessons in search of the path of wisdom. This morning we remember and we give thanks for those who gave their lives so that we might get opportunities to seek justice and to walk a different path to peace.

Barb Leask Wynne shared a powerful story with me this week that reminds us of the importance of both remembering and the responsibilities that we have because of the sacrifices of others before us:

In September of 2005, on the first day of school, Martha Cothren, a History teacher at Valley Heights High School in Port Rowan, Ontario, did something not to be forgotten. With the permission of the school superintendent, the principal and the building supervisor, she

removed all of the desks in her classroom. When the first period kids entered the room, they discovered that there were no desks. 'Ms. Cothren, where are our desks?'

She replied, 'You can't have a desk until you tell me how you earn the right to sit at a desk.'

They thought, 'Well, maybe it's our grades.' 'No,' she said.

'Maybe it's our behaviour.' She told them, 'No, it's not your behaviour. '

And so, they came and went, the first period, second period, third period. Still no desks in the classroom. Kids called their parents to tell them what was happening and by early afternoon television news crews had started gathering at the school to report about this teacher who had taken all the desks out of her room.

The final period of the day came and as the puzzled students found seats on the floor of the desk-less classroom, Martha Cothren said, 'Throughout the day no one has been able to tell me just what you have done to earn the right to sit at the desks that are ordinarily found in this classroom. Now I am going to tell you.'

At this point, she went over to the door and opened it. Twenty-seven (27) Veterans, all in uniform, walked into that classroom, each one carrying a school desk. They began placing the desks in rows, and then they would walk over and stand alongside the wall. By the time the last soldier had set the final desk in place those kids started to understand, perhaps for the first time in their lives, just how the right to sit at those desks had been earned.

Martha said, 'You didn't earn the right to sit at these desks. These heroes did it for you. They placed the desks here for you. They went halfway around the world, giving up their education and interrupting their careers and families so you could have the freedom you have. Now, it's up to you to sit in them. It is your responsibility to learn, to be good students, to be good citizens. They paid the price so that you could have the freedom to get an education. Don't ever forget it.'

This is a true story. And this teacher was awarded Veterans of Foreign Wars Teacher of the Year in 2006. She is also the daughter of a WWII POW.

To remember is to hear the cries of young people from their graves, imploring us to never let this happen again. It's a cry to finally embrace the path of wisdom, the way of peace made known by Jesus Christ. We have tried Caesar's way of peace; yet still we pin our hopes to economic imperialism through threat of force. The reserves of oil Jesus is referring to is the spiritual oil of memory. And memory is shaped by allowing, not just the triumphs, but the tragedies and travesties of history to break our hearts and break through our collective foolishness so we might learn the lessons of history. This morning we remember. Our memory invites us to honour those who paid the price for lessons unlearned. We honour them by keeping Christ's light burning, by working for justice, by advocating an equal distribution of the

world's wealth, by learning and unlearning the systems that perpetuate racism and prejudice, by eliminating patiently, persistently, the causes of war. The wise carry with them a healthy and extra supply of memory. By holding space to remember, we gain the gift of a broader perspective and a deeper understanding of how the past shapes our current experiences and how both add to the collective memory for future generations to draw on. (*Inspired by thoughts by CJ Shelton*)

We also need to be prepared to keep the light of Christ burning by carrying an extra supply of the oil of hope. We hold fast to our faith that the way of non-coercive love will prevail because this is God's dream for humanity. Every once in awhile we have glimpses of this transcendent vision here and now.

The 2008 film, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* chronicles the remarkable story of the Liberian women who came together to end a bloody civil war and bring peace to their shattered country.

Thousands of women - ordinary mothers, grandmothers, aunts and daughters, both Christian and Muslim - came together to pray for peace and then staged a silent protest outside of the Presidential Palace. Armed only with white T-shirts and the courage of their convictions, they demanded a resolution to the country's civil war. Their actions were a critical element in bringing about an agreement during the stalled peace talks.

A story of sacrifice, unity and transcendence, the film remembers and honors the strength and perseverance of the women of Liberia. It is a compelling testimony of how grassroots activism can alter the history of nations. After the peace accords in 2003, they led the nation in disarmament, then in voter registration and campaigning.
(<https://www.forkfilms.com/pray-the-devil-back-to-hell/>)

In the midst of violence, oppression, and war there are always stories of hope. There is always a chance to catch a glimpse of God's realm. So today, let us give thanks for being able to remember and for being given the gift of freedom that countless people gave their lives for. This is a freedom worthy of their sacrifice, a flame worth tending. We take up the torch passed to us, and commit to walk the path of wisdom, the path of justice, the path of peace.

It might not seem like it, but the bridal party is only delayed. Supplied by the oil of memory and hope, we take the torch. It is ours to hold high. We will remember them. Thanks be to God. Amen.