

“Shalom”
Sermon by Rev. Dale Starr, guest preacher
Peace United Church of Christ
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I want to share with you a war story. We have a condition --those of us who served in Vietnam. We call it DROS fever. When we went to Vietnam, the quotation was “in country for one year”. If you remember, during the 1960’s, there were all kinds of pictures of little guys running around with helmets on various places on their bodies, and when you got to be under 30 days in your tour, there were just boots and a helmet, especially for those guys who were out in the field. That was something that was important to them because once you became a short timer with less than 30 days from your date to return from overseas service, or DROS, they would throw on their M-16s, their Flak jackets, lock and load their weapons and crawl into a bunker. They would only come out for meals and sleep the last 30 nights because they did not want to have mortar attack the base or whatever and cause them to die within the last 30 days of going home.

I was a Navy person, and when I got to be within 30 days of my DROS date, I walked into the Communications and Intelligence, and it was a big place with solid walls. The Intelligence and Communications guy, who I knew very well, said, “Well, I got to my 30 days and have never been shot at.” He said, “How many times have you been to the sideline?” and I said “We have gone up Highway 1 about once a month with my counterparts”. I kept a bag that had my extra magazines and my M-16. I strapped on my .45 and combat knife and all the other stuff that made me look like a miniature John Wayne.

The reality was, with those guys in the field, that they would stay in the bunker with their arms wrapped around their M-16s because they were afraid, and that was a reality. There was no safety. That war story has sunken into my head. Every time I hear about gun violence anymore I think about that because DROS fever is an automatic emotional response. This has happened especially since the folks in San Diego got murdered.

There are several automatic responses that have come from people who I named as having DROS fever. One suggestion was just don’t let them in and if they get in, send them back. One of the emotional responses is, buy your own gun, and gun sales have gone through the roof. One of the responses has been retaliation against Muslim fellow citizens who have taken the oath of citizenship. Nothing ever works 100%. We will never keep those folks out. All we are doing is causing suffering for those Muslims who are not radicalized. What we need to learn to do is get along in an atmosphere of fear. We need to be able to keep our heads while most everyone else is losing theirs.

My heart goes out to people who just don’t seem to be able to understand those people who are radicalized. They know, because their religion has told them, that if they kill an unbeliever, they will go to heaven. Of course, I don’t believe that, but I do believe very seriously that as a culture we have forgotten the point, the purpose and value of being Christians in today’s world and we all have to commit suicide or murder to receive the blessing of going to heaven. We just changed the atmosphere. The definition of God is “Shalom”—“God speaks”. It is the BMW of all blessings in Scripture that life with God, as Richard Foster shares with us as his definition, is “God’s peace at all times”, beginning when we are baptized and continuing, going on forever. That’s the point.

Modern theologians don’t do very well with trying to define heaven. It is theological gobbledygook. I picked up one of my books about heaven on theology. I went to the chapter on heaven and I read what was there 3 times, but the reality is, and I want to share the definition of heaven, “life with God forever”. That is supposed to give us joy in life whenever we have it and a sense of God with us that

started when Jesus was born. That's the point, purpose and value of being a Christian—that no matter what happens to us, we're going to live with God. That's about as simple as I can give it.

What can we do to ensure that life with God is going to last us? We need to celebrate our diversity. This is more serious than it sounds. The UCC tells us “ad infinitum”, sometimes “ad nauseam”, but we have different people in the United States, different religions and ways of doing things and all of us, whether we come from a Muslim country or we come from a German country, have a history of being discriminated against. At one time, we were the new arrivals. Our families were anyway.

Germans were discriminated against during the war because they were flooding the country, coming in the wake of the revolution of 1848 . Gettysburg was full of German people who had come over and they wanted to be American citizens, so they joined the Union Army in order to make that a reality.

As people are saying now about what is happening in Syria and Iraq, the Muslims are trying to get rid of all non-Muslims in their area. That sameness is emotionally satisfying because it makes Muslims safe. There are people who advocate their not coming into the United States because, let's face it, it's been with us since 1619 if you are a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Where they got that, I have no idea but the point is, it's there—a lot more than we thought.

President Obama was elected President in 2008, and then all of that racism that had gone underground in the 1950s came out. We need to be able to celebrate and understand that God's peace, life with God at all times, begins at baptism and goes on, in Christian tradition, forever. That's what being a Christian is all about. I know it is self congratulations but, doggone it, that's what we believe. As earthly as it is to understand that our purpose and value is wrapped up in Jesus Christ and that our life, as far as Christian theological tradition goes, it goes on forever.

If you read the book “God and the New Physics”, the writer says when Christians hear about the end of the universe and how everything is expanding and then everything is going to contract and everything is going to end up in that single black hole in the universe, we're not going to be there. We're going to be somewhere else. We're going to be living with God. We may be able to observe it, but we're not going to be part of it. It is our motivation and our reality.

Remember the point—God, Shalom, Jesus, even as He talks with his disciples in His last night on earth, as He gets ready to go to that life with God, that is what we are all about. When we are talking about evangelism, we are talking about life with God, not only for us but for everyone. So, let's put away our M-16s. Let's put away our pipe bombs. Let's put away those things that make for conflict between people and realize and celebrate the joy—not only the coming of the new year but our relationship that comes with God through Jesus Christ. Amen.