

“Division and Armistice”
 Proper 27B (November 11, 2018)
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on *someone's* shoulder, and let it matter. Amen.<<

There is an old ladder resting on a ledge at one of the most significant churches in Christianity.¹ The ladder is known as the “immovable ladder.” It’s been resting on the wall of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem for centuries, because rival church denominations can’t agree on what to do with it. The ladder is a mystery: no one knows how it got there or who put it there. Possibly it was left behind by some worker after a long day. There are textual references to the ladder, and even drawings of it, that date back to the early 1700s. The first photographs of the ladder date back to the 1850s. In the early 1850s, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire issued an edict that partitioned the church into a shared space between Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic churches. Three other churches, the Coptic, Syrian, and Ethiopian Orthodox Church, were also given rights to use some parts of the building. The Sultan’s edict was a compromise agreement called the “Status Quo agreement.” And it meant that the ladder would become, in effect, “immovable,” because to be moved, all six church groups would have to agree to move it. Since they can’t agree, the ladder hasn’t moved.

The church the ladder rests on is considered to be a holy site where the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ took place. When the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the 4th century, he asked his mother Helena to search for the burial place of Jesus in Jerusalem. Helena is said to have found the burial site, as well as the “True Cross” on which Jesus was crucified. Constantine then ordered a church to be built on the site. The church was completed around 335. Pilgrims have been traveling to the site since the 4th century, even though the church itself has been through many changes. It was burned by the Persians in 614, and then restored a decade later. The Islamic caliph in the 11th century destroyed it, but the church was later rebuilt by Crusaders. The Sultan’s “Status Quo” edict in the 19th century has preserved the site from destruction, but not from violence. As recently as 2002, a Coptic Christian monk moved his chair into Ethiopian Orthodox space; eleven people had to be hospitalized after a fistfight ensued. In 2008, fistfights broke out between Armenian and Greek monks in the church and riot police had to be called in. Though the ladder is said to be “immovable,” it has in fact been moved. Twice in the 20th century, the ladder was taken by pranksters, but returned to its spot after police found it. And in 2009, all six churches agreed to move the ladder temporarily, in order to accommodate scaffolding for renovations on the church. Because of the tensions, a Muslim family has historically been entrusted with keeping the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The keys are handed down generation to generation; and, every morning, a member of the family opens the church doors so representatives from the six denominations can enter. Commenting on the immovable ladder, Reverend Quinn Caldwell called it a ladder that “connects nothing, serves no purpose, [and] helps no one. But,” he said, “it’s hard to look at it without being reminded forcefully of how weird humans are”

¹ This sentence and much of what follows is drawn from <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/05/30/immovable-ladder/>

Weird, yes. But I think the immovable ladder is also a symbol of division - a small example of the “us” vs. “them” ideology that divides so much of humanity, lurking behind atrocities and world wars, colonization and slavery, mass shootings, hate, and fistfighting monks. Professor of clinical psychology, Richard Friedman, has written recently about how “us” vs. “them” ideology impacts the brain. “We know,” he writes, “that repeated exposure to hate speech can increase prejudice, ... in part because it normalizes what is usually socially condemned behavior.”² Those politicians, he continues, “who stoke anger and fear in their supporters provoke a surge of stress hormones, like cortisol and norepinephrine, and engage the amygdala, the brain center for threat.” In one study, writes Friedman, “threatening language [was shown to] directly activate the amygdala.” Another study demonstrated that when one group feels threatened, “it makes it much easier to think about people in another group as less than human and to have little empathy for them.” “Using brain M.R.I.,” writes Friedman, “researchers [have shown] that images of members of dehumanized groups ... activated the [brain’s] insula, a region implicated in feelings of disgust.”

A different study conducted by Princeton psychologist Susan Fiske demonstrated how “us” vs. “them” ideology engages the pleasure centers of the brain.³ Her research found that the success of “us” *and* the failures of “them” caused the same feelings of pleasure, and these feelings increased the likelihood of wanting to harm a member of the “them” group. Fiske’s study is notable because the data are drawn from baseball fans, specifically, brain scans of Red Sox and Yankees fans. Part of the study included showing fans of the two teams images of their own team’s success and the other’s failure, scanning their brain’s, and then asking participants to gauge the likelihood that they would want to do harm to their rivals. Fans of both teams averaged an 8 out of 10 - 10 being extremely likely - that they would heckle or verbally abuse their rivals. Some participants were even willing to engage in physical violence against their rivals. As a baseball fan, I only root for two teams: the Yankees and anyone who plays the Red Sox, so I take great exception to Fiske’s study. Still, though, her findings are stunning: our brains feel pleasure when “us” - when “we” win, and when “them” - when “they” lose. And those feelings can lead to wanting to harm “them,” whether the “them” is a rival baseball fan, an enemy in war, a member of a different people-group, or a another monk who won’t cooperate to move a ladder.

This week *The New York Times* released unpublished photographs of Armistice Day one hundred years ago.⁴ WWI was to be the war to end all wars, and journalists captured crowds celebrating in Paris and New York, parades in London, Paris boys climbing on a German canon, even a British Officer standing atop a moving taxi shouting for joy with his arms raised. But it was photographs published in a piece by Allen Cowell on Friday that really caught my eye.⁵ Pictures of bombed out churches in Belgium; of British soldiers slogging through knee-deep mud to carry a wounded comrade to safety; of soldiers sleeping peacefully in a trench before the Battle of the Somme; of Irish soldiers wearing gas masks; of French refugees fleeing the violence; and one photo in particular has stuck with me this week: taken in the summer of 1918, it’s of two soldiers, one German and one British, both recovering

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/31/opinion/caravan-hate-speech-bowers-sayoc.html?smid=tw-nytopinion&smtyp=cur>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3833634/>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/09/world/europe/armistice-day-100th-anniversary-photos.html?&moduleDetail=section-news-0&action=click&contentCollection=Europe®ion=Footer&module=MoreInSection&version=WhatsNext&contentID=WhatsNext&pgtype=article>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/09/world/europe/wwi-armistice-100-years.html?action=click&module=Editors%20Picks&pgtype=Homepage>

from wounds that were mended in a British field hospital in northern France. The German soldier is peacefully lighting the cigarette of the British soldier. It's a moment of humanity in the midst of the inhumanity of war.

Such an image engages a different part of our brain - engages certain cells within our brains, called "mirror neurons." First discovered in the early 1990s by a team of Italian researchers studying monkeys,⁶ mirror neurons, writes Douglas Abrams, "allow us to ... experience th[e] internal states [of others], and therefore ... play an important role in empathy."⁷ These neurons, as psychiatrist Daniel Siegel says, "reach out and soothe the more reactive emotional structures of the brain." They can override the feelings of pleasure when "them" - when "they" - lose. Yes, images of compassion and empathy can engage our mirror neurons: enemy soldiers sharing a moment of humanity; or, a simple act of charity, like that of Joey Resto, who noticed a homeless man shivering on a New York subway, walked over, took off his shirt, and helped the man put it on. The video of this compassionate act went viral when it happened two years ago, and, it's going viral again after a tense election day, and after yet another mass shooting.⁸

Images. The power of compassionate, empathetic images to teach us to, as Jesus once said, "go and do likewise." Images. Like the images in today's scripture readings - images of peace to engage our mirror neurons. Images, like that in the Letter of James, which uses harvest language to say that those who live in peace - those who strive to make peace - are sowing seeds that will yield a harvest of justice. Images - peaceful images - like the image of peace in the Letter to the Colossians, which uses clothing language when it says: "clothe yourselves in love, which binds us all together, and brings us all together in harmony." Images. Images of peace. Like that great, imaginative prophecy of the Hebrew prophet Micah in today's Old Testament reading - one of scripture's most powerful images of peace. Peace, and also, an ecumenical spirit. Micah, whose name in Hebrew is a question: *mi-cah* - "who is like Yahweh?"; "who is like God?" - this prophet with a question for a name sings of a day when all nations will learn the ways of God - learn the ways of peace and justice and love. Micah sings - even celebrates - the fact, as he says, "that all nations have their own gods." It's not a statement of disgust; it's not a call for these nations to convert; it's a call to the nations to see themselves as a diverse family. It's one of scripture's most ecumenical images. And it's precisely because these nations can enjoy such an eternal armistice, each with its own religion, each with its own individual identity, sharing a common table of humanity - it's because of this image of peace among nations and religions that the prophet can sing of hammering weapons of war into farming tools. "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation," sings Micah. It's more than just "not fighting" anymore. The Hebrew grammar connotes support. Nations will not do anything that even supports war anymore - entire military industrial complexes will be transformed. Swords will be hammered into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. The English translation softens the Hebrew in this text. It's more like: swords will be smashed into pieces and then refashioned into farming tools. In our tradition, we see Jesus living such a vision of peace, which is why some have called his movement that became early Christianity, the "peace party" in Jerusalem.⁹

⁶ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror.aspx>

⁷ His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 179.

⁸ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3395890/It-just-came-heart-Good-Samaritan-gave-shirt-homeless-passenger-subway-says-simply-natural-reaction.html>

⁹ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 137.

To read - to meditate on such a vision, such an image as Micah's - what Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann calls Micah's "bold and daring act of imagination" - to meditate on such a vision, which contains both religious uniqueness and an appreciation of difference¹⁰ - to study the example of Jesus and his peace party - can engage our mirror neurons, so that the sword of "us" vs. "them" ideology gets smashed into pieces, and gets refashioned into the plowshare of only "us." Micah's prophetic call - the example of Jesus is a call - to live in such a way that this vision can become a reality now.

...There are people who are trying. People like Michael Martin of Colorado Springs, Colorado.¹¹ Martin is a Mennonite; he's also a blacksmith. "A former youth pastor, he was inspired to learn blacksmithing after the [shooting at] Sandy Hook Elementary School ... in 2012 Three months later, ... Martin started Raw Tools, a nonprofit organization dedicated to converting the 'swords' of contemporary America - handguns, assault weapons and semiautomatic rifles - into garden tools, ... forging a new kind of public ritual for processing grief," according to journalist Patricia Leah Brown. Victims of gun violence have learned the art of blacksmithing from Martin. And they testify that "step[ping] up to [Martin's] anvil to hammer the magazine of an AR-15 [into] a hoe to coax new growth from the soil ... [is] transformational." They can "feel the tension [in their bodies] releasing." "The weapons [Michael] Martin disarms," writes Patricia Leah Brown, "are typically unwanted firearms donated by individuals, sometimes after the suicide of a loved one. Many also come through police department buyback programs" "The resulting implements - dandelion diggers and spades from handguns, double-sided hoes from thick-barreled assault rifles - [are] used to grow vegetables [in area] high schools and at community gardens" One person commented, "You're taking a weapon of death and turning it into the complete opposite, which is life[Y]ou go from a rifle or a handgun to carrots." As a Mennonite, "Martin comes from a long tradition of nonviolence, and considers his work a form of conscientious objection ('raw' [the name of his nonprofit organization] is 'war' spelled backward). The first gun he converted into a garden tool came from a friend in Colorado Springs who wanted to get rid of an AK-47 he had bought for protection after the Sept. 11 attacks. Since then, Raw Tools has transformed several hundred guns, with help from a 'disarming network' of volunteer blacksmiths around the country." "Our work," [Martin] said, "is about a cultural shift, to get communities and neighborhoods to rethink the tools they use to keep themselves safe." "Martin does not pretend that garden tools are the solution to the nation's gun problem. But [he does believe that] symbols can be powerful, and [that] public rituals can heal." "For those who have survived violence or lost loved ones, turning a weapon into a productive tool 'can mark a time in one's life when violence is behind them and creation in front of them,' he said. Martin's efforts "represent a drop in the bucket compared with the more than 300 million guns that are out there." But he's fond of quoting a phrase by "James Curry, a retired Episcopal bishop" who said, "Buckets get filled by drops."

...The purpose of such images - whether of blacksmiths transforming guns or of ancient prophets imagining peace or of clothing a homeless man or of enemy soldiers sharing a moment of humanity - the purpose is to change how we think, and to open us to what's possible. Amen.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 501-502.

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/opinion/gun-violence-america.html>