

“Holy Remembering”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Text: John 6:35, 41-51

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

~ John 6:51

Prayer

Living God,

Empty us now of all that keeps us from listening to your Word proclaimed.

May this time of reflection

Inspire us, startle us, and empower us to love

As Christ loved and gave his life for all of us. Amen.

In the summer of 1945, Father George Zabelka served as a military chaplain with the U.S. Army Air Force unit stationed on Tinian Island in the South Pacific. He had asked to be as close to the battlefield as possible. Zabelka shared the prevailing sentiment of the time that, as a Roman Catholic, it was his Christian duty to serve God and country. As a priest, Zabelka wanted to be where the men who were fighting and dying everyday needed the spiritual guidance and shelter of the Church. As a military chaplain, he understood that his mission was **“to keep [the boys], *wherever they were, close to the mind and heart of Christ.*”**¹ And to fulfill that mission, Zabelka celebrated the Mass daily, gave the sacraments to Catholic airmen, heard their confessions, counseled the men, and, in his own words, “[tried] **to see that the boys conducted themselves according to the teachings of the Catholic Church and Christ on war.**”² In August of 1945, Fr. Zabelka also gave a special blessing to the crews that dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A few days after the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9th, Fr. Zabelka listened to the anguished confession of an airman who had flown a low-level reconnaissance flight over the city shortly after the atomic blast. The man, who was in deep mental distress, spoke of thousands of scorched bodies of men, women and children and described the survivors as the shadowy forms of people, walking aimlessly in shock – flesh seared, melted and falling off their bodies.³ The crewman’s shocking recount of the nuclear horror unleashed upon the civilian population of Japan did nothing to shake Zabelka’s conviction on the moral rightness of the detonation of the atomic bombs. Decades after the mushroom clouds that made birds burst into flame mid-air, Fr. Zabelka told Catholic theologian and pacifist Emmanuel Charles McCarthy that the whole structure of the secular, military and religious society told him either implicitly or explicitly that the atomic bombs were necessary to end

the war and he believed it.⁴ He knew the bombs by name “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” and he believed the destruction they caused was justified.

Then Fr. Zabelka went to ground zero himself. He saw first-hand the devastation in Nagasaki. He walked on the rubble of the Urakami Cathedral, which at the time had been one of the largest in Asia. Zabelka realized he had blessed the bomb that obliterated hundreds of Catholics in the largest Roman Catholic community on Japanese soil. He visited the survivors and witnessed their pain and suffering. As a man of faith and a priest, Zabelka began to lament his complicity in the use of the single most destructive weapon humankind had ever deployed in war. He went through a crisis of faith, which he described to a European reporter in these words, ***“I’m a practical man and those words of Jesus— ‘Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you... Turn the other cheek when someone strikes you...’ — were completely impractical. Impractical and unworkable. I couldn’t understand it. In many ways I still don’t. Yet Jesus took this course of suffering and nonviolence. His words were so clear, and there is the example of His life and death. For me, the issue was very simple. Either Jesus was God or not. If not, then His words could be dismissed as idealism. But if He was God, then what He said He meant. He wasn’t kidding. He could not be dismissed as an idealist who didn’t understand human reality. So, either I accept what He says as coming from God or else I forget about the whole business.... Forget about Christianity. My crisis was a practical one. My choice was made on the basis of faith.”***⁵ Fr. Zabelka chose Christ’s non-violent way and, years later, at a demonstration near the Pantex nuclear weapons assembly plant in Texas, he said, ***“As a U.S. Army chaplain, I saw on August 6th when the Enola Gay took off for Hiroshima and on August 9th when Boxcar took off for Nagasaki and I said nothing. I knew hundreds of thousands of [civilians] were vaporized, incinerated and I said nothing. I was silent. Today, we have megatonnage that dwarf our imagination just waiting for that fatal command... We, all of us, must no longer be silent.”***⁶

We must not be silent.

Fr. Zabelka’s faith journey from complicit silence to vocal protest against nuclear weapons and war has been on my mind since António Guterres – the UN Secretary General – said in his opening remarks at the Conference on the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons last Monday that we are living ***“at a time of nuclear danger not seen since the heights of the Cold War.”***⁷ I had just participated in an hour-long webinar on “Clergy Financial Well-Being in Retirement” when a notification popped up on my computer screen, alerting me to Guterres’ speech at the United Nations. The excitement of planning for the next 15 years of my ministry was dampened by the General Secretary’s somber words. Amid rising global tensions, Mr. Guterres warned ***“humanity is just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation.”***⁸ Seventy-seven years after the atomic bombs decimated thousands of human and non-human lives in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, strained geopolitical relations between the U.S., NATO and Russia and the U.S. and China have put the whole planet under the dark clouds of nuclear

war once again. Guterres noted that “***Competition is trumping co-operation and collaboration. Distrust has replaced dialogue and disunity has replaced disarmament... We have been extraordinarily lucky so far. But luck is not a strategy. Nor is it a shield from geopolitical tensions boiling over into nuclear conflict.***”⁹

You and I cannot be silent. As citizens of the only nation that detonated two atomic bombs over densely populated cities, we must oppose the logic of war and work for a world without nuclear weapons. The atomic blasts over Japan ushered in the “Nuclear Age” in human history and, since those two horrendous days in August of ‘45, the world has been living with the perverse philosophy of nuclear deterrence, otherwise defined as the mad strategy of “***the one who shoots first dies last.***”¹⁰ There are nine countries – and soon Iran may join this exclusive club – that have their nuclear arsenals ready to be used at any given time. Collectively, they possess 13,080 nuclear warheads. Ninety percent of these deadly weapons are owned by Russia and the U.S..¹¹ Last June, Vladimir Putin reiterated that Moscow would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons if Russia’s existence were threatened. We eat, drink, work, sleep, worship, live, go on vacations and plan for retirement with the nuclear “Sword of Damocles” hanging over our heads by only a thin thread.

We must not be silent. “***The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good [men and women] do nothing.***”¹² What pained Fr. Zabelka most was the memory of his silence and inaction. In 1945, he never spoke one single word, never preached one single sermon, he never said to one single airman that the mass destruction of life by the atomic bombs violates everything Christ taught his disciples. He said nothing. He did nothing. Later in life, Zabelka confessed that, on Tinian Island, he failed as a Christian and a priest. So he spent the rest of his life speaking up, showing up, protesting, marching, demonstrating, preaching against nuclear weapons and challenging the Church in America to keep remembering Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Fr. Zabelka said that “***a sin left unnamed will be repeated in the future, and that is why it’s worth going through the pain of remembering***”¹³ 8:15 A.M. on August 6th, 1945 – the exact moment the first atomic bomb flashed in the sky above Hiroshima.

History is not just something that happened in the past. History is also what is remembered of the past. How people live in the present and plan the future has a great deal to do with the way they perceive and interpret the past. Our remembering of the atomic blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki is not about assigning blame and guilt unfairly. It is not pointless revisionism. It is not an attempt to reopen old wounds. It’s a holy remembering. It is holy in the most biblical sense of the word because rather than allowing our remembering to be informed by the cultural, political, military and religious scaffolding of our society, we turn to the teachings and life of Jesus Christ. We bring our faith in the Christ of the Gospels who gave his own body for the life of the world into our remembering. We open our hearts and minds to the non-violent teachings of Jesus and ask ourselves how Jesus’ ministry of love and compassion can prepare you and me to say something

and do something now, today, in the present that can save the future from ever seeing the devastation of a nuclear bomb again.

Fr. George Zabelka's holy remembering led him to an intentional period of soul-searching and prayer that transformed his life. He talked about it as a conversion. Zabelka became a Christian pacifist. He found a new purpose. He decided to do something that was so controversial and offensive to the Church and society of his time that not a single Catholic publication in the late '70s was interested in publishing the story of his conversion. Even after his story became internationally known in the 1980s and a documentary aired in Britain, no American TV network, either Catholic or secular, was interested in televising it. Still, Zabelka made a holy vow that he would never again be silent or passive in the face of the evil of nuclear weapons. In 1984, before he returned to Japan on a spiritual pilgrimage Fr. Zabelka spoke about his newly discovered life mission. ***"I want to expose the lie of 'Christian' war. the lie I fell for and blessed. I want to expose the lie of killing as a Christian social method, the lie of disposable people, the lie of Christian liturgy in the service of the homicidal gods of nationalism and militarism, the lie of nuclear security. I want to expose it by looking into the faces of the hibakusha [the survivors of the atomic blasts] and saying, 'Brother, forgive me for bringing you death instead of the fullness of life. Sister, pardon me for bringing you misery instead of mercy.'"***¹⁴

Last week, I was on my morning walk and, as I often do, I was listening to an episode of *"On Being."* Krista Tippett was interviewing Vietnamese American poet and writer Ocean Vuong. At some point, Ocean said something that made me stop to replay his words a couple of times. ***"I think all religions,"*** he said, ***"outside of all of the orthodoxy and the rigor of ceremonies, at the center of it is trying to remind us that we will die, and how do we live a life worthwhile of our breath?"***¹⁵

This is unquestionably one of the most important questions at the very heart of the Christian faith, "How do we live a life worthy of the breath of life God so generously gives to each one of us?"

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus answered that question. He said that his mission and purpose were to give his own life to humankind as life-saving, eye-opening, heart-enlarging, and mind-transforming spiritual nourishment. For Jesus, to live a life worthwhile of his breath meant that he was willing to work and die but never to kill for peace. He was willing to love his enemies and pray for those who persecuted him and do good to those who hated him and choose forgiveness and reconciliation over estrangement and retaliation. When Jesus made the weird claim that he would offer his own flesh as living bread for the life of the world, he was saying in no uncertain terms that he carried in his very human body the invisible and yet world-changing gift of a life that is worth living.

The people around Jesus on that day were understandably offended, disgusted, scandalized, and even angry that Jesus was re-interpreting their religious tradition,

national myths and remembering of their past. Here he was, this young man, the son of Joseph, the child of Mary, from the backwater town of Nazareth, telling everyone that God sent him into human history as the bread of eternal life. To the ears of his first listeners, it sounded as if Jesus were saying that he was giving the world something even more nourishing than the manna, which in their remembrance of the past was a palpable sign of God's saving presence among their ancestors. But Jesus was provoking the crowd to think of the bread of life as something bigger than food that satisfies physical hunger. The manna kept the Israelites alive in the wilderness, but in and through his life Jesus was offering humankind the wisdom to live a full life, a purposeful life, an eternal life in the presence of God.

In a few minutes, we will gather around the Table for a moment of holy remembering. The words of Jesus, ***"I am the bread of life... whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh,"*** will goad us into a sacred time of soul-searching that may ask questions that are not easy to stomach. What does it mean to take that small piece of bread that symbolizes the life of Jesus into our own bodies? Can we eat the bread on this table and then walk away, dismissing the non-violent teachings of Jesus as nothing more than impractical, unworkable Christian idealism? Can this time of holy remembering around the table save us from failing to live a life worthy of our breath?

In remembering Jesus' life, Fr. Zabelka realized that he had to do an about-face, which is another word for repentance. He repented and could no longer justify or condone violence and war. He would never again bless an instrument that could unleash suffering, destruction and death on human beings and the environment. He would never again rationalize the philosophy of nuclear deterrence. He kept preaching to the Church that it's not enough to believe in Jesus; we've got to believe Jesus! He reminded the people who eat at Christ's table to make our own bodies a visible, noticeable, unmistakable and, at times, even over-the-top human effort to counter any nationalistic, religious or military justification for the destruction of human life or any other life on earth. Zabelka ***"handed out tens of thousands of buttons that read, 'Do Something for Peace.'"***¹⁶ He followed in Jesus' footsteps and lived a life in God's presence, a life worthwhile of his breath.

We cannot be silent. If we do nothing, conflicting geopolitical interests and escalating tensions among nuclear powers will continue to hold the planet hostage to the possibility of a devastating nuclear war. As Christians who are also citizens of the nation with the second largest stockpile of nuclear warheads in the world, we have the responsibility to say something against nuclear weapons and do something for peace. We have to remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki and acknowledge that while we live in a world of geopolitics where nation-states are always defending their own interests and wrestling with the difficult calculus of choosing between cooperation and confrontation, Christ insists that we keep saying and doing something to rid the world of nuclear bombs. It is not enough to pray for peace when our tax dollars are being used to pay for a war that might very well lead to a broader conflagration among nuclear-armed alliances. As Christians

who want to live lives worthwhile of our breath, we must say and do something so no other human or non-human being will ever have their breath taken away by the bright flash of a nuclear bomb.

In one the few articles he wrote, Fr. Zabelka said, ***“What the world needs is a grouping of Christians that will stand up and pay up with Jesus Christ. What the world needs is Christians who, in language that the simplest soul could understand, will proclaim: the follower of Christ cannot participate in mass slaughter. He or she must love as Christ loved, live as Christ lived and, if necessary, die as Christ died, loving one’s enemies.”***¹⁷

These are not easy words to hear, so as we gather around the table for a time of holy remembering and to take Christ’s life into our bodies, may we pray together:

Holy God, may the bread we will eat this morning empower us to grow into the likeness of Christ. May our remembering of Jesus’ life and death inspire us to take his non-violent teachings of love and compassion into our hearts. May our eating this morning renew our faith and give us the strength to live lives worthwhile of the precious breath of life you have given us. May each one of us be ready to say and do something for a world without nuclear weapons. God, have mercy on us. Amen.

¹ Transcript of the interview given to Rev. Emanuel Charles McCarthy by Fr. George Zabelka before his death in 1992 in Fr. Zabelka: A Military Chaplain Repents, Center for Christian Non-Violence [<https://www.emmanuelcharlesmccarthy.org/fr-george-zabelka-a-military-chaplain-repents/>].

² Ibid.

³ By Fr. George Zabelka in Blessing the Bombs, Plough Magazine, 14 July 2011 [<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/justice/nonviolence/blessing-the-bombs>].

⁴ Transcript of the interview given to Rev. Emanuel Charles McCarthy by Fr. George Zabelka before his death in 1992 in Fr. Zabelka: A Military Chaplain Repents, Center for Christian Non-Violence [<https://www.emmanuelcharlesmccarthy.org/fr-george-zabelka-a-military-chaplain-repents/>].

⁵ By Fr. Charles McCarthy in Fr. George Zabelka, The Catholic Worker, Vol. LIX, Number 4, 01 June 1992.

⁶ The Reluctant Prophet, British documentary on the life of Rev. George Zabelka.

⁷ By António Guterres in Secretary-General's remarks to the Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, United Nations, 01 August 2022 [<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2022-08-01/secretary-generals-remarks-the-tenth-review-conference-of-the-parties-the-treaty-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons>].

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann in Ethics of Hope, p. 47.

¹¹ ICAN, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons – How many countries have nuclear weapons and how many are there?, [https://www.icanw.org/how_many_countries_have_nuclear_weapons_and_how_many_are_there].

¹² Quote attributed to Edmund Burke. See Quote Investigator @ <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/12/04/good-men-do/>.

¹³ The Reluctant Prophet, British documentary on the life of Rev. George Zabelka [adapted].

¹⁴ Transcript of the interview given to Rev. Emanuel Charles McCarthy by Fr. George Zabelka before his death in 1992 in Fr. Zabelka: A Military Chaplain Repents, Center for Christian Non-Violence [<https://www.emmanuelcharlesmccarthy.org/fr-george-zabelka-a-military-chaplain-repents/>].

¹⁵ On Being with Krista Tippett in A Life Worthy of Our Breath: with Ocean Vuong, 16 June 2022
[<https://onbeing.org/programs/ocean-vuong-a-life-worthy-of-our-breath-2022/#transcript>].

¹⁶ By Fr. Charles McCarthy in Fr. George Zabelka, *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. LIX, Number 4, 01 June 1992.

¹⁷ By Fr. George Zabelka in Blessing the Bombs, *Plough Magazine*, 14 July 2011.