

Swords into plowshares: a sermon on Isaiah, the Berrigan brothers and the Plowshares Eight. Rev. Rosalind Gnat, August 6, 2017

“When a people arbitrarily decides that this planet and its riches are to be divided unequally among equals, and that the only criterion for the division is the amount of naked power at its disposal, diplomacy tends to be essentially military, truth tends to be fiction, and the world tends to become a zoo without the benefit of cages. And war tends to be the ultimate rationality, because reason has been bankrupted of human alternatives.”

Who do you think wrote those words? Any ideas? No, it wasn't Bernie Sanders. In fact, it was a catholic priest; Philip Berrigan by name. Born in 1923 in Two Harbors, Minnesota, Berrigan graduated high school in Syracuse, NY, worked cleaning railroad trains and played semi-professional baseball. He was drafted into combat duty during World War II, and fought at the Battle of the Bulge – the final and biggest German offensive. He was deeply affected by his exposure to war and by the racism he witnessed during boot camp in the US South.

Berrigan, the decorated war veteran, priest and civil rights activist, wrote those words in 1973, part of his *Prison Journals of a Priest revolutionary*. It was 1967 and, already with a record of imprisonment for civil rights protests, he was in federal prison for his participation in the first of a number of anti-war actions – this time, two Catholics – Berrigan and artist Tom Lewis, and two Protestants, writer David Eberhardt and Rev. James L. Mengel – a US Airforce veteran, United Church of Christ pastor and missionary to Ghana,

West Africa and Asia - occupied the Selective Service Office in Baltimore, Maryland. While Mengel passed out copies of the New Testament edition, *Good News for Modern Man*, to office workers, newsmen and police, the other three, poured their own blood and that from poultry purchased at a local market, over the draft records. Berrigan, in their written statement, noted that "This sacrificial and constructive act" was meant to protest "the pitiful waste of American and Vietnamese blood in Indochina." Berrigan was sentenced to 6 years in prison, but was released on bail. A year later he and 8 other activists, all Catholic, poured homemade napalm on a small batch of draft cards in a parking lot in Catonsville, Maryland. The Catonsville Nine issued this statement:

We confront the Roman Catholic Church, other Christian bodies, and the synagogues of America with their silence and cowardice in the face of our country's crimes. We are convinced that the religious bureaucracy in this country is racist, is an accomplice in this war, and is hostile to the poor.

On September 9, 1980, The Plowshares Movement was born. Berrigan, his brother Daniel, and six others (the 'Plowshares Eight') entered the General Electric Nuclear Missile factory in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania where nose cones for the Mark 12A warheads were made. They hammered on two nose cones, poured blood on documents, and offered prayers for peace.

Berrigan spent 11 years of his life in prison for civil disobedience. While in prison, he would organize Bible Study and offer legal education support to inmates. The Church did not approve of Father Berrigan's activities and moved him from one city to another in

attempts to break up his organizing. This of course gave Berrigan the opportunity to organize more efficiently, starting peace fellowships, training lobbyists and organizing demonstrations across a wide swath of New York, Pennsylvania and Philadelphia.

Berrigan's last Plowshares action occurred in December 1999, when a group of protesters hammered on nuclear warplanes held at the Warfield Air National Guard Base. He was indicted for malicious destruction of property and sentenced to 30 months in prison. He was released on 14 December 2001 and died a year later of cancer. His last recorded statement is this:

"I die with the conviction, held since 1968 and Catonsville, that nuclear weapons are the scourge of the earth; to mine for them, manufacture them, deploy them, use them, is a curse against God, the human family, and the earth itself."

The day after he died, the newspaper, the Baltimore Sun, called Berrigan "the patriarch of the Roman Catholic anti-war movement, whose conscience collided with national policy for nearly three decades." If he were alive today, his conscience would still collide with national policy.

They shall beat their swords into plowshares. What does it take to beat swords into plowshares? Actually, it's pretty easy. I went online and found out that metal is easier than plastic or glass, even easier than paper, to recycle.

Swords can be beaten into plowshares – again and again and again. We do recycle metal. The trouble is that there are more sword, gun, bomb and tank makers than there are Philip Berrigans in this world. Most of us fall between the cracks – we have our opinions, we have our beliefs. We send in our \$5 and sign a petition. We don't do much – we Christians, who say we follow Jesus.

Well, let's be clear about that – Philip Berrigan was a follower of Jesus, the Jesus, with his anti-authoritarian message that messed with national policy, with his frequent acts of civil disobedience, with his mockery of Roman power.

I'll admit – ever since I was a little kid, I've been scared out of my wits at the implication of what Jesus was inviting his followers to do. By inviting us to "pick up your cross and follow me," he was NOT referring to being more patient with the annoying people in your life: he was referring to picking up your cross – i.e. putting yourself, myself, on the line. Where would Jesus be putting himself on the line today? – in front of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue? with Black Lives Matter? protecting one of God's transgender children while they use a bathroom?

Probably something like what Philip Berrigan and the Plowshares did. Something like Jesus did when he rode a donkey through the gates of Jerusalem to the temple steps - or like trashing the booths of the offering sellers at the temple.

I'm not that brave. I was involved in only one act of civil disobedience in my life – the biggest anti-nuclear demonstration to date. It was June 14th in 1982, two days after over a million people filled the great lawn of Central Park, and an action had been planned. Our group, the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Young Adults, was assigned to breach the barrier in front of the Russian Consulate.

This planned “assault” on the consulates of the five countries possessing nuclear arms was mild to say the least. We, in our No Nukes tee shirts under the image of Martin Luther – I’m not making this up – stepped over the barrier; the nice police took us by the armpits as we sank to the ground and sort of dragged us to the busses that took us downtown to be booked. A lot of singing and flower tossing ensued along the way, and the next day I woke to find a full-sized picture on page 2 of the New York Post of me being carted toward the bus.

What did we hope to accomplish? We were horrified by the violent cold war rhetoric between the two major nuclear powers – the US and Russia. We, in our lovely 19th century church on Central Park West, wanted to *do something* – so we signed on to be among the 1600 or so people who would get arrested that day. Two weeks later, The Nation magazine wrote, “*It was a good refresher course in the power of civil disobedience – deliberate, non-violent violations of valid laws through which protesters invite punishment or injury to themselves in order to call attention to matters of overriding moral urgency. As carried out by the antinuclear protesters last week, the action was lawbreaking in the spirit of fidelity to law.*”

Art Laffin, a lifelong Plowshares member, explained what the Plowshares activists hoped to accomplish with their acts of non-violent civil disobedience:

...[there is an] underlying faith that the power of nonviolent love can overcome the forces of violence; a reverence for the sacredness of all life and creation; a plea for justice for victims of poverty, the arms race and economic sanctions; and acceptance of personal responsibility for the dismantling and physical conversion of the weapons; and a spiritual conversion of the heart to the way of justice and reconciliation.

Maybe the power of non-violent love is like drops of water – they seep into the cracks and bring down mountains. Let us be drops of water in the mountains of injustice in this world. After all, it is only heat – and persistence – that changes a sword into a plowshare...

The older I get, the more certain I am that my childhood fear about Jesus’ challenge to us was right on: Jesus calls us, for the love of this earth and its inhabitants, to put ourselves on the line.