"Patriotism and Peace,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on May 30, 2010

Do you remember the time, almost twenty years ago, when the Cold War ended.? There was hope we were entering a new era, and our leaders started talking about a "peace dividend," money that we'd no longer have to spend on the military could be used for social programs, cutting taxes and reducing the deficit. But it didn't come to pass--it wasn't long before our country sent troops to Panama and then to push Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait, and later, we joined in the war in the Balkans. Then September 11, 2001, happened.

I had just started divinity school. I remember those bright September days, when there were no vapor trails in the blue sky, because planes across the country had been grounded. Commuting back and forth to Cambridge, I noticed that people seemed to be driving more gently, more quietly, if that's possible, in those days. There was a period of shock and mourning in our country unlike any I'd ever known.

I wondered, in those days, how we were going to respond to the terrorist attacks. I hoped and prayed that ours would be a measured response, that we would use that time for introspection and for mourning, that we would not seek revenge, but that we would honestly ask ourselves, "Why do they hate us?" That we'd acknowledge that our country has been a force for ill, as well as for good, in the world.

Please hear me. What happened on September 11 was evil and wrong. It was mass murder against peaceful people going about t their daily lives. I believe there are times to use force—it can be necessary for self-defense or to serve some greater good. But we as a nation were so quick to fight back. I remember a graphic on the front page of a local paper. It was a map of Afghanistan, with crosshairs over it, and the caption, "The Next Ground Zero." The message was clear—you killed our people, so we are going to kill yours. This is, of course, a natural and human response, but not a noble one.

On September 11, 2001, a small group of terrorists killed almost 3000 people, most of them civilians, on American soil. But the horror of that day was not the worst of it. The even greater tragedy is how we have allowed those terrorists to change us. Since then we have been a more fearful nation, a more polarized nation, and we're creating a more militaristic world. Global military spending last year reached an all-time high of almost $1.5 trillion dollars, and the United States spent almost half of that amount. At the same time, as our youth who participated in the 30 Hour Famine this weekend can tell you, extreme poverty and hunger kills a child somewhere in the world every 7 seconds. When will we lead the world not in military spending, but in working for peace and justice?

Forrest Church, minister of All Souls UU church in New York City, who died last September, wrote an essay after 9/11 called "From Nationalism to Patriotism: Reclaiming the American Creed." He says that the first time America began to emerge as a world power was back in 1890, right around the time our Universalist forbears in Haverhill started constructing this beautiful building. Back then, religious people in this county believed American power could save the world. But these days, Forrest Church says, "the fear is that America—having become a superpower—will destroy it."[1]

He says the hope that American power can be used for good comes from the fact that we are the only nation in the world founded on a creed. "The founders extended the people's inalienable rights from safety alone to liberty and equality… This creed is universal, not parochial. It does not read 'All Americans are created equal.'" Church says to be a patriot is to hold our country to this high ideal that all are created equal. By contrast, to be a nationalist is to take the narrow view, that puts American interests first, no matter what. That says, "My country right or wrong," and attacks anyone who's critical of our nation or its policies.

Church laments the road our country went down in the months after September 11, 2001. He says, "To have squandered both the world's affection and the united spirit of our citizenry in little more than a year represents a tragic triumph of American nationalism over American patriotism."

I got into an interesting discussion on Facebook about a week ago. A friend of mine from high school, who's politically pretty different from me, regularly posts things that I disagree with. Most of the time I look the other way. I don't want to spend that much of my time on Facebook, or on the computer, or arguing, anyway! One day she posted the statement: "It really isn't about Right vs. Left, it's about right vs. wrong!" I could let that go. But then one of her friends posted "There is the truth, and there is the lie." Another wrote, "It is liberty and freedom vs. tyranny and control." Another: "AMEN! ! ! We (the right) VS them (the wrong)!" But the one that took the cake was this one: "Now down to the root...Good versus Evil."

That did it. I jumped in and wrote, "As one you all would call left, wrong, evil, I respectfully ask you--where is the concern for justice here? Remember the pledge of allegiance? 'With liberty and justice for all.'" I said all I heard in their postings was concern for individual freedom, and nothing about the common good.

We had some back and forth—those who responded to me expressed their belief that the answer to our nation's problems is unfettered individual freedom. I said, "Central to the Jewish and Christian traditions is concern for those at the margins of society." I said I wasn't against individual freedom, but that it needs to be balanced against the common good. The conversation ended when one of them posted this: "If you like

[1] Forrest Church, "From Nationalism to Patriotism: Reclaiming the American Creed," in *Spiritual Perspectives on America's Role as Superpower* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003).

communism so much just move to north Korea. Then we'll both be happy." That didn't seem worthy of a reply.

What I loved about this conversation was that I had a foundation to stand on—the Jewish and Christian tradition of prophetic witness and the command, not to seek your own self-interest, but to love God and to love your neighbor. This helped me to avoid the temptation to sink to name calling or sarcasm. And you know what? I found power in that. I'm not saying I was right and they were wrong, though that's what they kept saying. We have different perspectives. What I wasn't willing to do was sink to the level of name-calling and baseless assertions.

That's what troubles me about our society today. Discourse is often mean-spirited; there's too much heat and not enough light. Do I respect those people who called me names and made unreasonable arguments? Not particularly. But will I treat them with the dignity that every human being deserves? I'll try.

I love Memorial Day's invitation to stop and remember those who have died serving our country. There is something important and lovely in that—just as there is something powerful and poignant about being in a cemetery at a burial, standing around a grave and saying goodbye to one who has died. Memorial Day asks us to put aside our differences and simply acknowledge the sacrifice that so many have made in service to our country. Some years ago I attended a Memorial Day ceremony at a cemetery. There was a color guard, and the middle school band played, and a military chaplain said prayers and addressed the gathering. He said "A soldier's prayer is always for peace." Back in 1950 the U.S. Congress issued a proclamation calling on the people of our country to observe each Memorial Day as a prayer for permanent peace.

Recently I watched again the movie "Saving Private Ryan." It's a vivid reminder of how brutal and terrible and wasteful war is. We honor those who have died, but often neglect to remember or care for those who lived, who return home broken or traumatized by war. In the address at his second inauguration, just over month before he would be assassinated, Abraham Lincoln said, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

We are called also, in our day, to remember those who have died, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for those who have borne the battle and for their spouses and children. That's what Memorial Day is for. But I also love that, here in New England, it's the unofficial start of summer, a time for backyard barbecues and family get-togethers, for small-town parades and visits to the cemetery. I think it's ok, and proper even, to enjoy this long weekend, to be glad and grateful that we live in this beautiful country; to spend time with people we care about, to take time to enjoy ourselves. Isn't that what

peace is about? Isn't that what soldiers at war dream about—getting back to the pleasures of everyday life?

We honor them by remembering them, and by living our lives to the fullest. By being patriots, people who love our country and are willing to do something about it. It was President Lincoln who said he wasn't concerned if God was on our side, but rather, that he and the nation should be on God's side. May we be people willing to stand for what is right, and good and just. Willing to criticize our country when it betrays its ideals, and do our part to set things right. Willing to be part of constructive and civil discourse. Willing to work for peace--in our nation and in the world. Striving always to live up to our high ideals, and doing our part to make America more free, more just and more beautiful.

Amen.