

**That Scary Stuff in the Back of the Closet**  
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**The United Church of Gainesville**  
**January 6, 2008**  
**Epiphany**

Mark 2:18-22 - New wineskins; Isaiah 40 – Comfort my people

Three things have happened to put this sermon together. First, the break from Christmas to New Year's is traditionally the time that it is suggested to me that it would be a good idea if I cleaned out my closet. The one who suggests this is absolutely right, and without the nudge of the one who suggests, my walk in closet would become a place where there was no longer room for me to walk in.

Second, this is Epiphany; the day tradition holds that the wise ones arrived at the stable to honor the baby Jesus. An epiphany is an "aha!" It is a time when we look back, realize that something special has happened, and begin to understand its meaning.

Third, Michael Broas is leading a seminar here today at 11:00 and continuing it at noon reflecting on his journey back to Vietnam for the first time since he served in the military there during the Vietnam War. Once I heard of this seminar, I bought the new book by former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw, Boom, reflecting on both the ideals and the polarization of the 1960's and early 1970's.

For our theme on the mending circle, I wanted to go back to some of the scary stuff, not in my literal closet, but my closet of memories and dreams from the 1960's and address a sense of healing. I want to explore and see what we can learn from the seemingly impossible perplexities of that the Vietnam War and its era, not to figure it out, but simply to avoid being a hypocrite both about the past and about how I am dealing with the present.

My primary concern is the clichés about the Vietnam War and its protests that are developing into accepted truths that will marginalize both those who fought it and those who opposed it (who were sometimes one and the same). It has been said that a cliché is actually true the first 500 times it is uttered. So there is something behind the clichés and stereotypes of the sixties. In these clichés anti-war protestors are portrayed as foul mouthed, dope smoking long-haired hippies who castigated the Vietnam vets and called them baby killers. Vietnam vets are portrayed as foul mouthed, drug addled, anti-social warriors rendered dysfunctional by the war. And the war is portrayed as struggle that was lost simply because it never was given a chance to be won. And while there is some truth in all these portrayals, it is seldom the whole truth and often not even a half truth.

I experienced the Vietnam War as a divinity student. I had a IV-D exemption. This was one of the many injustices of this war, that some of

us were protected while others were drafted. I believed I should have been just as vulnerable to the draft as any other young man my age.

The war touched virtually every relationship of that time and polarized many. It was a source of angry and sorrowful disagreement among families and friends, at schools, at churches, and at work.

I vowed to be as informed as I could be on every aspect of that war, as well as the history of just war theory, and to explore for myself the place of conscience and patriotism.

I came to believe that American presence in Vietnam was wrong, that we were intervening in a civil war, propping up a repressive regime. A particular low point of the war occurred during the Tet offensive when we watched the US destroy 80% of the city of Hue leaving 116,000 of a population of 140,000 homeless and killing 5,800 of its residents. That's when the inamous statement was made, "We had to destroy the city in order to save it." I came to believe that this mentality violated even traditional Christian just war theory.

I marched in protest. I fasted and prayed. I participated in debates. I wrote letters to congress, newspapers, and called the radio and TV stations. I worked in election campaigns. I addressed the issue with the youth groups, in adult classes, and in sermons in my student church assignments and my first church after divinity school.

What I want to speak about most, however, is that I and the people I associated with during those years always had the highest respect for those who served in Vietnam. We recognized that they had been drafted, and they were doing their duty as they saw fit. We insisted that their sacrifices and their struggles be respected in our rallies, our debates, and our actions. I never judged a Vietnam vet. I grieved for high school and college friends wounded and killed in Vietnam. I was critical of the war but not of those who fought. I agreed with William Sloane Coffin that it was no one's patriotic duty to ask young men to die bravely in a bad cause. I too have wept at the Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C.

But what is clear today is that those subtleties mattered little to those who had to fight and die, and there were 58,000 Americans who never came home. Of those who did come home, it is clear that many Vietnam vets were treated badly at many levels and on many sides.

Those who opposed the war were often clubbed, gassed, arrested, alienated from their families and sometimes exiled from their country. But none of us suffered as the soldiers themselves. And it is clear that no one has broken the code of what that era meant. Nor have we learned how to bridge the chasm that opened up between those on the left and the right that divides us to this day.

So I look again at what we need to understand in order to learn and heal as a country.

Jesus tells this story from the second chapter of the gospel of Mark. "No one," he says, "sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does the patch tears away from it, the new from the old,

and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins.”

It’s a little difficult to feel the power of this saying today, because we don’t patch clothes very much, and even when we do, all our cloth is relatively shrink proof. And none of us carries wine around in skins, new or old. But we can get the gist of the meaning here. Jesus is giving this metaphor in response to folks who are criticizing him and his disciples for not following the venerated tradition of fasting while praying. Jesus says it is time for a new kind of praying. Traditional solutions and old religious practices don’t work always work in new situations.

In new situations we need new containers, new wineskins that can swell with fermenting wine of change.

There is always something to be learned from history lest we repeat the mistake. But it is also true that applying the lessons of the last war to the current war is like putting new wine in old skins. In fact the problem of most wars is that we mistakenly think the lessons of the last war work now.

What can we learn for today? First, somehow our whole country and political system needs to realize that it is easy and often popular to start a war, but it is next to impossible to get out of one. Most of America questions the war in Iraq today, but the majority of Americans supported our entry into it. In the beginning, we have to learn more about our enemies and ourselves before we go off to any war.

Second, we have to recognize that the wounds of war last for generations on all sides. The American South was economically neglected for a hundred years after the Civil War, and its wounds are only finally healing.

The hatreds in the Middle East date back to wars fifty, a hundred, and even five hundred years old.

Third, if we send our youth into war, we have to support their safety and needs both in the theater of war and when they return home. We have to recognize the damage we are going to do to any young soul that has to engage in killing and face the threat of being killed. We have to acknowledge what sending a young man or woman off to combat for 13-15 months does to his or her relationship with family back home, and how many of the psychic and emotional wounds are as impossible to heal as the limbs that have been severed. Furthermore, no matter how much we may criticize the leadership and policies of any given war, we must respect and care for those who fight it and the wounds they suffer. From prayers, to personal concern, to public financial support, we and our whole country are called to be there for them.

Shopping at Ward’s Supermarket on NW 23 Ave. in Gainesville, I noticed a little jar requesting funds for Army Specialist Catlin Mixon, who lost two legs and had 75% of his left arm smashed in Iraq. I wondered

how a U.S. soldier who suffered such wounds would need money. Doesn't our country adequately support its war wounded?

I called Ward's this week and spoke to Felicia Ward whose sister is Specialist Mixon's mother. Felicia Ward said that the government has paid for all of Catlin Mixon's medical care, paid to make his parents' home accessible for him, and has given him compensation. But she said that that payment is nothing compared to what this is costing him and his family. Catlin's sister quit her job to be with him in Texas during rehab, for without someone at his side, he would be lost in the system. His parents quit working for three months to care for him when he first had his first surgeries. Catlin is doing well, she said. They have replaced his arm with cadaver bones, and he is almost able to lift it to his face. But there are so many needs.

So I am sending a contribution as well as some of UCG's Christmas Eve offering and special funds to the Catlin Mixon fund, and I will continue to look for ways to let our soldiers know we care.

I hope and pray that we may find a way to end this war before so many more American and Iraqi Catlin Mixons have their lives shattered. I hope that our denomination's collection of signatures, prayers, and money may be a step in healing.

In Ken Burns' PBS TV series on the Civil War there is a story of a fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg in 1913. The survivors of the battle decided to stage a reenactment of Pickett's charge. That battle, in 1863, was one of the bloodiest in American history, with 60,000 casualties. At the reunion, the aged Union veterans were poised up on Little Round top and Confederate veterans were below in Devil's den. This time, when the Confederates began marching across the wheat field, instead of the bloody Pickett's charge with muskets firing, the two sides spontaneously swarmed toward each other, embraced each other and wept without shame.

My goal and hope is that as a church we may be a channel for God to be the bridge that God seeks to be across the great divides of our time, healing the wounds of our own wars, large and small. One of my favorite passages in the entire bible is Isaiah chapter 40. It begins with the power the Handel gave it in "The Messiah." "Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, and her iniquity is pardoned."

I want us to be find ways to let God be that agent of that comfort and pardon in and through our lives.

I close by reading Isaiah 40 translated by David Rosenberg, from The Poet's Bible. After this reading Karen Fielding will sing "Bridge over Troubled Water" accompanied by Zach Goldstein. During the song and the time for silent prayer that follows, I invite you to write your prayers to and for our soldiers in Iraq. There are folded pieces of paper that were distributed during time for sharing, with room for four prayers, one on each side of the page. Please write your prayer, pass it to the person near

you. The fourth person will hold the prayer booklet and place it in the basket in the foyer to be bound into a prayer journal and sent to our chaplains in Iraq. When you are not writing prayers, pray silently, that God may heal and comfort you and through you others. Hear this translation of the words of the prophet Isaiah speaking to a people returning from war and exile.

“Console my people comfort your people  
speak to the heart of Jerusalem tenderly  
in a voice embracing her  
call to her that her exile is over  
come home  
the sentence is over that knocked the voice out of her  
and now that hand of justice is still open to support her  
listen a voice is calling to open a road through the desert...  
deep stone valleys you struggle through will be filled in...  
stubborn obstacles mountains and hills will be swept away like dust  
and a new carpet laid out level for all flesh to see and to walk on together  
to feel the firm reality of God’s way  
spread before us direct and clear as words spoken through air...  
Here is your God see how he is strength itself  
and vision is her arm ruling hearts with the power of feeling justice  
to see we are here...  
God’s words make us a priceless vehicle  
carrying God’s work forward in our arms like books  
that is the air we breathe  
and we are carried in it like lambs gently breathing  
in the arms of a shepherd in the law of life itself  
in the justice of air itself.

(David Rosenberg, The Poet’s Bible p. 277-278)