

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
October 5, 2014
World Communion Sunday
Peacemaking Offering

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:9, Mark 9:50b, John 14:27, Revelation 21:1, 3, 4
“A Call for Peace and a Call to Choose Life”

In the early 1980s when I was a divinity student at San Francisco Theological Seminary, Suellen and I joined a march for peace in San Francisco. The event was organized by the Nuclear Freeze Movement. Among the thousands marching, was one of my favorite theology professors, Robert McAfee Brown. He was pushing a crib and surrounded by what appeared to be members of his family.

Three years later, I bought one of his books, called *Saying Yes and Saying No – On Rendering to God and Caesar*. The book ends with a letter he writes to his grandson Colin. He references the march in San Francisco and I figured that the person in the crib was Colin.

In a preface to the letter, he writes, “Since I believe that the Christian message is hopeful rather than despairing, I want to end on a note reflecting that conviction.”

The note is the letter to Colin, which springs from the text in the book of Deuteronomy, where God offers a choice: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live.” Saying Yes to life, God’s freely offered “blessing,” means saying no to death, our self-inflicted “curse” – not only for our own sakes but for the sake of all who come after us.

Dear Colin:

You, in all the strength of your ten months of life, are here today demonstrating on behalf of peace. This is not the first peace rally you have attended. And, the state of the world being what it is, it will not be your last. To your grandparents and to your parents, not to mention many uncles and aunts, you represent one of the reasons all of us are here, issuing a call for peace. For we too want to “choose life,” not only for ourselves but for you and all our “descendants” as well. So you represent our concern for peace.

But in addition, Colin Masashi Ehara, you represent our hope for peace as well. The “Colin” side of you comes from Scotland and England; the

“Masashi Ehara” side of you comes from Japan, and includes native-born Japanese along with Nisei and Sensei Japanese-Americans. During World War II, your two sets of grandparents were technically known as “enemies.” In those years, there could be no contact between the two sides of your family except on the field of battle. In an ugly example of racial hatred, white American citizens even imprisoned Japanese-American citizens behind barbed wire simply because of their ancestry.

And yet today, people from those two different backgrounds, your father and mother, not only can speak and work together, they can love each other. As you grow up, you will hear some people pray a prayer by Francis of Assisi, asking that “where there is hatred, may we sow love.” As you grow up, you will hear other people say, “Oh, but that’s impractical, that’s utopian, that’s unrealistic. We can’t move from hate to love.” And you, Colin Masashi Ehara, will be the living refutation of such cynicism – a reminder that members of races who were once called “enemies” now dwell together lovingly in the same house. You will be a living pointer to the hope that those who today are called “enemies” can one day dwell together lovingly on the same planet.

Those of us here today come from different backgrounds and traditions and history. On many things we disagree – on taxes, abortion, city ordinances, who we think will win the National League pennant. But on one matter we are increasingly united: not only must we have peace, we must change the ways we work for peace, since our government’s policy of building more and more nuclear weapons is only leading us closer to the brink of war – a war unlike all other wars, in that if it ever begins, there will almost certainly be no survivors. So our different traditions call us to think and act in new ways.

The Jewish Scriptures put before us a choice between death and life, with the consequent necessity of turning swords into plowshares, which today means turning MX missiles into day-care centers, tanks into hospitals, submarines into schools. The Christian Scriptures talk about “a new heaven and a new earth,” in which all the old things have passed away and there will be no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain. What characterizes these traditions is a belief that there must be basic changes, brand-new directions. Could there be a more radical shift than the one from death to life, from swords to plowshares, from an old earth of pain and hatred to a new earth of sharing and love?

I wish, Colin, that I could stop there, simply welcoming you to the struggle for peace. But there is something else you need to know. The costs are high. We see the ultimate costs in the deaths of those who work for peace. Many people today who demonstrate for peace are arrested and imprisoned. So the road to peace is difficult and sometimes

dangerous, and no one should ever lead you to think otherwise. Most of the people here with you today support the need for a nuclear freeze, affirming that as a tiny first step toward peace we must stop making more weapons of destruction. And yet our President calls those of us who feel this way “dangerous”; he says we are “hindrances” to peace; he calls us “irresponsible.”

There will continue to be such charges, from the President and others, and if you choose to work for peace in later years, you will find them leveled at you too; you will be called naïve or dangerous – an appeaser, a coward, a traitor. And one of your hardest jobs will be to try to love such people even as they vilify you. Take heart from the fact that here too you will not be alone; that there is an increasing community of those who will side with you and seek with you to break down barriers of misunderstanding and ill will; and that in whatever religious or humanistic tradition you choose to align yourself, there will be resources of courage available.

There is a final thing you need to reflect on as you grow up, Colin. The call for peace is very wide and very deep. Right now, we need to focus special energy on the issue of nuclear weapons, since those are the most immediate threat to our survival. But the issue of peace is more than the issue of nuclear weapons. Any call for peace, while it may begin with concern about the nuclear threat, must move on to include other things as well.

So if they tell you, Colin, “The freeze initiative passed, so now we have peace” – do not believe them, for we will not have peace as long as nuclear weapons are in place and ready to be launched.

If they tell you, “At long last we have gotten rid of nuclear weapons, so now we have peace” – do not believe them, for we will not have peace as long as conventional weapons can still destroy us.

If they tell you, “We have finally gotten rid of conventional weapons, so now we have peace” – do not believe them, for we will not have peace as long as there is hunger and unemployment.

If they tell you, “We have finally gotten rid of hunger and unemployment by having the rich take care of the poor, so now we have peace” – do not believe them, for we will not have peace as long as there are structures that divide rich from poor and make the poor dependent for their survival on the whims of the rich.

If they tell you, “We have gotten rid of the structures that perpetuate inequality, so now we have peace” – do not believe them, for we will not

have peace until the outer structures of the society and the inner leanings of the human heart are in accord.

If they tell you, “We have finally brought the inner and the outer into accord, so now we have peace” – you can begin to believe them.

But always hold up before them a final test: Does what has been attained increase or diminish the chance for children to grow up without fear, without hunger, without human diminishment? For the world you live in now, Colin, is a world in which the privileged are the ones with the money, the weapons, the economic and political power.

The world we want for you, and for all like you, is not a world in which those are the privileged ones but a world in which the only privileged ones will be the children. So you, and millions like you at every rally and in every land, remind us of why we are here today issuing a call for peace, a call to choose life rather than death, so that not only we but our descendants – you and your generation – may live.

Sadly, many of the conditions for peace that McAfee Brown writes about have not come into existence. The issue of the day is “climate change” judging from the massive march in New York City two weeks ago. But nuclear weapons are an ever-present danger especially when many of our nuclear silos are in disrepair. The gap between the rich and poor has widened.

The call for peace and the choosing of life was good for Moses 3,000 years ago, good for Jesus 2,000 years ago, good for Robert McAfee Brown and Colin 30 years ago and is good for us today. We simply must answer the call and never give up. Amen.