

JOURNEY TOWARD PEACE
The Rev. Frederick C. Maier
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My journey began in the year 1880, when my grandfather, who was born and brought up in Germany, was about to become 18 years of age.

He knew that when he turned 18, he would have to begin 3 years of military service, and he recoiled at the thought. His name, by the way, was Gottlieb, which in German means “beloved of God.”

His older brother, however, had gone to America, and he urged young Gottlieb to come to America also, to avoid the draft. So my grandfather made his way to Rotterdam, and, not having enough money for passage to America, he became a stowaway on a ship bound for New York.

After a day and a half at sea, he came up out of the hold, because he was hungry. The ship’s captain, being a kindly man, skipped the usual flogging, and put him to work swabbing decks. In New York, he simply left the ship and made his way to St. Louis where his older brother lived, and found a job in a lumber yard.

My own father was different. He dropped out of school after the 8th grade, and at the age of 15, enlisted for a 6 year term in the Navy. He trained on the USS Constellation, a sister ship to the Constitution.

One night, about two years later, standing watch on his ship in the South Atlantic, he saw in the sky the Southern Cross, and he had a vision that the Lord was calling him to be a minister. He wrote to his local Congressman about it, and his Congressman was

the service. My father went home, was able to finish his education through college and seminary, and become a Presbyterian minister.

My own personal journey began on New Year's Day, 1938, when I stood in my dormitory room at Union Theological Seminary, and signed a pledge saying that I would never support or participate in war, which made me a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

In the spring of 1940, I got my degree from Union Seminary. I wanted to stay near the Seminary, so I searched for a church in the New York area, and in September I received a call to a rather unique church located in Blairstown, New Jersey, a town named after its founder, John I. Blair, who built the Lackawanna Railroad, and not only founded the Presbyterian Church in town, but also built Blair Academy, a school for boys on the edge of the village. There was an arrangement by which the 250 boys at the Academy occupied all the front part of the church on Sunday, so my much smaller congregation sat in the back of the church.

I was to begin my pastorate there on October 1, but for the remainder of September, I stayed at the Seminary. I awoke one morning there, to find that some 20 Seminary students had stayed up all night discussing and finally signing a statement saying they would not register for the draft on October 1. That morning they asked me to take a copy of their statement downtown to the New York Times office, to be published in the paper, which I did.

Of the 20 students, 12 later reconsidered and registered, but the other 8 refused, and were tried and sentenced to a year and a day in prison. They included, as I remember, the President of the Student Body, the Presidents of the Senior Class and the Middler Class, and at least one other member of the Student Council. My own decision was that it was military service that I refused to engage in, and I was willing to register, but I drew the line at

enlisting, so on October 1, I registered, writing on the bottom of the registration card that I was a conscientious objector, which I was permitted to do. That same afternoon, I took the train for Blairstown, about 70 miles northwest, to begin my first pastorate.

All went well for the first year, but in December 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and the United States was at war. What should I do? I went to New York for counsel. At the Seminary, I slipped into the chapel where Harry Emerson Fosdick was teaching a class in Homiletics. When the students had departed, I walked forward to speak to Dr. Fosdick. I asked him what he planned to say on Sunday. “Well”, he said, “I will not declare my opposition to the war. My people already know where I stand, and I don’t have to.”

I thought, “Well, that’s ok, but my people don’t know where I stand.” So I went on down to Broadway Tabernacle, and asked Allan Chalmers what he planned to say. He said “I will tell the people I cannot support, I cannot sanction, I cannot bless this war.”

So on the following Sunday, with the balcony of my church filled with parents who had come to take their sons home for the Christmas holiday, I made a statement from the pulpit using pretty much those same words. It came as quite a shock to the congregation, but the boys and their parents went home for the Christmas recess, and it seemed to blow over.

A few months later, however, I preached a sermon on “The Judgment of God”, during which I declared that war was a judgment of God. I went on to say that war was also a judgment on the Japanese, pounding the pulpit this time for emphasis, but the people didn’t hear that part – only that God was judging us. Following the service there was quite an uproar. The congregation was greatly upset. The students held meetings in their dormitories,

and decided they would refuse to come to church the next Sunday, so my congregation had a vast emptiness to fill that week.

The Academy faculty was trying to calm the student body, and the students finally decided to send a small committee to meet with me. They asked me to promise never to touch on that subject again. I explained that, as a pastor, I tried to listen to the Holy Spirit, and preach accordingly, but I assured them that I had no intention of speaking on that matter again. They agreed to return to church, but the rumblings did not cease.

The following year at one of the summer conferences for Presbyterian young people at the Academy during July, I was again a student leader. I became acquainted with George Borthwick, a pastor from Brooklyn, and confided in him that I felt I needed to move to another congregation because of the tension that still existed. He said, "There are three young people here from a church on Long Island that is seeking a pastor. I'll tell them you might be interested."

They immediately approached me to find out if this was true. Then they went home and pounded on the door of the Chairman of the Pulpit Committee, and insisted that they consider me for the pulpit in Baldwin. The Chair of the Committee then called me on the phone, and asked if I could come and preach for them, and I agreed to come the last Sunday in August as I returned from my vacation.

As I went back to Blirstown after preaching in Baldwin, I found a committee waiting for me. The Session and the Trustees had held a joint meeting in my absence, and sent the Clerk of Session and the President of the Board of Trustees to tell

me they wanted me to leave. I told them I would try to do so. To make a long story short, the church in Baldwin called me, and on November first I packed up my possessions and left Blirstown.

Some time in 1944 I became aware of the plans by Ralph Mould and John Oliver Nelson to form a Presbyterian peace organization, which I think was first called the Peace Fellowship of Presbyterians, and I immediately became a member. In the earliest years, Nelson used to mail out a little sheet he called "Briefly", which was aptly named, because at that time it consisted of one small folded sheet, making 4 pages not much larger than 4 x 6 inches, and contained only the writings of Nelson himself.

In the year 1948, I was a commissioner to the General Assembly, and I remember that the Assembly had before it for approval, a proposed catechism for young people. I noted that one of the questions said "What is my duty to my country?" And the answer given was "My duty to my country is to obey its laws, to support its officers" and two or three other things. I rose to offer an amendment, to add after the phrase "to obey its laws" the words "so long as they are in conformity with the will of God."

Immediately there was an objection. Dr. Clarence McCartney, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh and former Moderator of the General Assembly, rose to speak forcefully against the amendment, and after some debate, the amendment was defeated by a substantial majority.

A few minutes later, Harold Fey, the editor of the Christian Century, sought me out, and thrusting a copy of the Book of Order in front of me, pointed to the place where it said “God alone is Lord of the conscience”, and suggested that I now make a motion that in view of the action we had just taken, we delete this from the Book of Order. It seemed to me that this was pushing it too far, and I declined.

After a wonderful pastorate of 12 ½ years in Baldwin, I was called in 1956 to a position with the Board of Christian Education in Philadelphia. While I was there, I engaged in numerous peace demonstrations and other actions in opposition to injustice. It had become very clear to me, that justice was a prerequisite to peace. In the pursuit of justice, I participated in various protests. One of these was taking part in the March on Washington in August 1963 in support of civil rights for black people. This was the first great outpouring of people to descend on Washington in protest. I can still remember how the line of buses was stopped by the police just outside of Washington, and then escorted into the center of the city. As we passed along through neighborhoods that were heavily populated by black people, I will never forget how they were standing on their lawns and front porches, and waving at the buses as we went by. It was at that demonstration that I heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his “I Have a Dream” address.

In the summer of 1962, I made my first trip to Mississippi. It was to a small city named Canton, about 40 miles north of Jackson. As I remember it, there were about 15 or 20 of us who went to Canton to try to prevent any violence from occurring on that day when the black people were attempting to register to vote. They stood in a long line extending from the door of the courthouse clear out to the edge of the town square. Our job was simply to walk around the square in pairs to make our presence obvious, so that this would discourage any violence. It seemed to work, but it was nevertheless true that the authorities so obstructed the process of registration, that only 8 black people were able to register during the entire day.

We slept in black peoples' houses during the night, and the next day, as three of us were driven in a car back to Jackson to catch a plane home, we were followed by a sheriff's deputy in a car with a gun sticking out of the window in our direction. When we came to the county line, that car pulled off the road and stopped. And we breathed a sigh of relief. Later that year I went to another town in Mississippi, where pairs of us called at houses to encourage black people to register to vote.

In July 1964, I went to Birmingham, Alabama with one other Presbyterian minister, to join with a black pastor in Birmingham in picketing the city's biggest department store on its main street, because they refused to hire black people in their store. At noon, Herb Oliver, the black pastor, said we should put down our signs for an hour and go have lunch. Either before or after lunch, I recall, he took us to a hotel in Birmingham, where we found a considerable number of black pastors gathered around a TV set in the lobby. We went in, and with them we watched President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Bill. When he did it, the black pastors erupted with vigorous applause.

Sometime in the late '70s, I became Treasurer of the Peace Fellowship, and 2 or 3 years later my wife Ruth became Secretary. We served until we both retired about 1993 or '94. For many years I was the one who made the arrangements for the Peace Breakfast at the General Assembly, and I made the pitch for contributions before we passed the offering plate. I recall also that while we lived near Philadelphia, someone formed an interracial "Peace Choir", and Ruth and I became members of it. We sang on Sunday evenings in a considerable number of churches in suburban Philadelphia, and always took an offering of which usually about ½ went to the Peace Fellowship after we had made a brief description of our work.

And now if you will permit me, I would like to make a few comments about the obstacles we encounter in working for peace.

Probably the biggest is the simple fact that for the vast majority of the people in America, nationalism is a considerably higher loyalty than anything else. It is either considered superior to Christian faith, or it is simply assumed that nationalism is compatible with Christian faith. For many years the 'New York Daily News' carried in its masthead a quotation from Stephen Decatur: "My country! In her intercourse with foreign agents, may she ever be in the right, but right or wrong, my country!" It was only after persistent objections from a few Christian saints, that that particular slogan was finally dropped. But the bulk of our people believe that this nation is favored by God, and that whatever we do is God's will.

In times of conflict, nationalistic emotions rise even higher. Have you noticed since the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 flags have sprung up everywhere? Whenever we see the President speaking on TV, we see not only the customary flag

beside him, but a whole phalanx of flags, very large ones. And everywhere you go you see more of them.

The second obstacle in working for peace, is the fact that most people accept the idea that the end justifies the means. In my opinion, there is no more harmful principle in all of human thought. This is the principle that justifies all wars. It is the principle that justifies torture, and anything else that one thinks will help us to achieve what we consider a righteous end. Whenever we employ this principle, we always assume that we are adequate judges of the efficacy of our means, and of course the ends that we seek are always our ends, and are always good in our own sight.

This idea that we ourselves can be the judge of what is good and right is an evidence of what Christian theologians have always called “pride”, which they considered to be the very worst of human sins. We might do well to study sometime how in actual fact, it is more true to say that the means determines the end.

A third obstacle might be the idea that pacifism is just for a few committed people. It seems to me, however, that it is hard for anyone to take the New Testament seriously, looking at the example and teachings of Jesus, and come to any other conclusion than that He meant for all people to believe and practice these things. The biggest problem I see in the church today is that while many are willing to salute Jesus, few people are willing to take Him seriously. To many, it seems that Jesus was an impractical idealist. I believe He was the most solid realist who ever lived. He understood that Love is the basic law of life, and that only as we learn to practice it will we ever live in peace and enjoy happiness.