

**Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ
World Communion Sunday
October 1, 2006**

**“Where You Stand Determines What You See”
sermon by Kathy Kelly**

James 5: 13 – 20; Mark 9: 38 – 48

Good morning. It’s a privilege to celebrate World Communion Sunday with the Wellington Community. I’m one of many people who holds dear the community in this church. Year after year, you welcome newcomers into your fold. Your vision insists: everybody in, nobody out. This community has stood with people most harmed by our world’s crippling greed; you’ve insisted that where you stand determines what you see and from alignment with the neediest you’ve steadfastly opposed war and environmental degradation. I’m grateful to be nourished by your communion.

Even so and certainly now, it’s humbling to imagine approaching a table of communion with the millions in our world who shudder under bombardment and cry out for food, water and shelter. Mark’s gospel doesn’t allow for comfy celebration in our communion with others. Jesus relentlessly calls for disciples to cross boundaries into unimaginable unions that could cost them their lives in a society that took taboos and purity codes and caste orders very seriously. One by one, disciples abandon Jesus, and at the end he cries out “My God, my god why have you forsaken me.” The community wherein Mark’s gospel was developed holds up the hardest questions and the most severe challenges, -no false advertising here, - as a core of the call to discipleship.

Last week, John Straw helped us absorb the lines, “if anyone would be first, he or she must be last of all and servant of all.” There was no hierarchy to which disciples could aspire. Well, how about belonging to an inner circle? This morning’s reading dissolves that option. There is no inner circle, no outer circle. Everybody in, nobody out. And yet if you happen to slip up and be less than exemplary in front of a child, better that you have a mill stone tied around your neck and be thrown

into the sea. Jesus refuses to exclude anyone, but the teachings are so severe in these passages that it's not surprising to me if people self select, opt out.

Not only might you feel like the lone ranger if you're still willing to follow Jesus, you must also let go of your attachment to your own bodily parts if those prized appendages or organs cause you to sin. Flannery O'Connor knew what to make of this, but honestly I want to recommend lightening up a bit to try and understand this passage.

I can't be the only one in this church today who recalls, as a kid, being fully absorbed in noisy play, --squealing, shouting, laughing, -- sometimes we were bouncing on couches and sometimes we were racing up and down the stairs-- and then suddenly a voice boomed out: "Hey you kids, CUT IT OUT!!"

Those three insistent words from my childhood, --"cut it out!" -- might pertain in several current contexts. If the arm of the U.S. military control extends to places all over the world, increasingly making the U.S. into an imperial menace, "cut it out!" If our collective eyes covet other peoples goods and we grow accustomed to taking goods at cut rate prices, from clothes to bananas, to gasoline, well, "Hey you kids, cut it out." If our legs grow weak and we stumble because leaders know they can goad us into supporting wars by using hyperinflated threats and fears, ramping up our tolerance for nightmarish attacks on innocent civilians elsewhere.... "Now, I mean it, cut that out!"

During the past summer, I had an unusual chance to experience that booming voice in a room full of adults. In July, I was invited to be a defense witness for five ploughshares activists. They were on trial, in Dublin, Ireland, for disarming a U.S. warplane parked on the tarmac of Ireland's Shannon airport.

In February, 2003, with the U.S. completing its build-up for "Shock and Awe," these five activists broke into an airport hangar which the U.S. was using as a "pit stop" for planes en route to the war zone. They had dubbed themselves the "Pitstop Ploughshares" and, following the biblical injunction to hammer their weapons into plowshares, they took a hammer to the nosecone of a C48 U.S. Navy supply plane and disabled it.

The "Ploughshares" had heard me speak in Kildare, Ireland, five days before they disarmed the plane. They called on me as a defense witness during each of their trials, claiming that evidence I presented motivated them to take responsibility for stopping U.S. use of Shannon airport for refueling "pit stops."

The five defendants were represented by three of the most talented barristers in Ireland. Mr. Nix, praised by the prosecutor as "the last of the great orators," seemed right out of central casting. The barristers wear a sheepskin wig and long gowns. Mr. Nix is very portly and looks like a daddy walrus with his handlebar mustache and long beard. He began his summation by noting that the prosecutor had characterized the action of the defendants "political" as if that were a bad thing. "I'll tell you of someone who made a great political speech," said Mr. Nix, "the greatest political speech of all time and that's Jesus Christ." He went on to quote the Sermon on the Mount to the jury. I could hear the pencils stop scratching, see the jaws drop all around the courtroom. "The problem with these five defendants, said Mr. Nix, "is that they believe all this. Most of us practice our religion ala carte, --I'll have a little of this, no thanks, I'll pass on that, but these five believe it's their duty to love their enemies, to turn swords to plowshares."

Then Mr. Nix curiously changed the subject. He began to tell us about a recent day in a Dublin park, a glorious day when he observed children playing. He'd listened to children laugh and shout as they happily chased ducks and each other around on the green grass. "The sound of universal happiness," said Mr. Nix, "must be the sound of children playing."

But then his tone darkened. "Now Lebanon is burning," he thundered. "Today, children swimming in a pool were bombed. A swimming pool is now filled with burning children. This is war."

I honestly didn't know what he was talking about. I'd been fixated on the trial and had barely read the recent news. Later I read about the tragedy in the July 18 issue of *The Guardian* :

"Whatever the Israelis' intended target, the bomb fell on a small water canal next to the Qasmia refugee camp [near

Tyre, in southern Lebanon], home to about 500 Palestinians. Its victims were 11 children taking an afternoon swim in the canal. The first blast left a crater nearly four metres deep, burying many of the swimmers deep under the orange earth. Seven of the children were injured, three critically. Three others have not been found.

'The scene was littered with small plastic sandals, several caked in blood.' Ismael, the father of one of the children, sat on the edge of the crater, his head in his hands weeping. "Children! Children!" he roared through his tears, "Children here! My son here." He stood and looked down into the crater: "Is Hizbullah here? Only children here," he said.'

Where you stand determines what you see.

When he had finished his talk, Mr. Nix asked the jurors and all of us present:

“Would ye not try, if ye could, to stop a Hezbollah missile from slamming into northern Israel? Would ye not try, if ye could, to stop an Israeli bomb from exploding in a children’s swimming hole in southern Lebanon. He said the question is not whether these five defendants had a lawful excuse to do what they did. The question is, what’s our excuse not to act. What,” implored Mr. Nix, “ what will rise ye?”

What will rise ye?

The plowshares activists were acquitted, but Mr. Nix’s question still holds. Before returning to the U.S. I learned of a group of Lebanese young people seeking international accompaniment to enter southern Lebanon in solidarity with people under siege and attack. I arrived in Lebanon shortly before the ceasefire was declared and found myself at Qasmiyah, the swimming hole in the canal, two days after the cease fire began. It was the simplest of places, a swimming hole and next to it cement blocks where parents could sit, sipping soft drinks under sheltering roofs made of date palm leaves.

The next day, equipped with a list of 12 other massacres, we went to the village of Qana.

On foot, we entered Qana, thinking we should at least identify the site where a massacre had taken place when, on July 30th, an Israeli bomb hit a building that sheltered children as they slept. It took five hours for ambulances to reach them. Statistics differ, but the most recent Human Rights Watch report estimated that twenty-three were killed.

Turning a corner, we saw men arranging white plastic chairs for guests who came to mourn with family members in the funeral tradition. The men sat in front of one home. Women were next door.

Farah and I approached four women sitting quietly and tearfully in a small outdoor patio. They invited us to sit with them. For much of the time, we sat silently. Each time a neighboring woman arrived, the women would stand and embrace one another tearfully. They had borne their pain for eighteen days, since 1:00 a.m. on July 30th when the bomb slammed into the building just across the road from where we sat, the building where their children slept. The funeral was delayed until it would be safe to bring families together and to construct the graves.

Umm Zayneb, the mother of six-year old Zayneb, poured out a torrent of words, telling the details of what had happened to Zayneb and entrusting us with her views, which we could only barely understand. We could see that Umm Zayneb had suffered injuries. Under her veil, she wore a medical hood and a thick brace encircled her neck. She stiffly shifted her tall, slender body, unable to point across the street to what was once a building where frightened children had huddled together for shelter during the bombing. Surveillance planes must have known that children were in the building. Many times, in the daytime, Zaynab ran back and forth between the house and the shelter . Umm Zaynab said we must be able to see how close she was to her home. Yes, we could see. We listened to the drone of an unmanned surveillance plane still crisscrossing the skies above. Couldn't they see? What kind of censorship would obscure this information?

“She liked to practice English,” Umm Zaynab told us, her words turning to sobs. “She was happy because she could say English words.”

This sentence aroused a new flood of agony. The brace forced her to contain her shudders. She rocked diffidently, overwhelmed with grief.

Umm Zaynab asked one of the children to bring a stack of newspapers and magazines. “Here,” she said, carefully sorting through reports on the massacre at Qana. “This is Zaynab.” Photo after photo showed Zaynab held aloft, lifeless, by a strong, helmeted relief worker who shouted his shock and terrible awe. In another, Zaynab lies next to Zahara. The force of the explosion seems to have destroyed the internal organs of the little girls, as they slept. Their bodies are not mutilated.

Next she placed in our hands a framed picture of Zaynab, a curly headed little girl with huge dark eyes posing seriously for the camera. One can only imagine her smile.

“Who are the terrorists?” Umm Zayneb whispered, slowly reaching over to point at Zayneb’s picture. Her eyes held mine as she answered her own question. I heard her say “Bush.”

It seemed as though Mr. Nix’s words were whispering now, “What will rise you?”

A banner was strung across one of Qana’s streets that read: “Rice, they will not see your New Middle East”

Where you stand determines what you see.

Mr. Nix’s words again, “What will rise you?”

But we know it’s not just Bush, Rice and people in high places that are responsible for the orgies of killing and destruction that happen when U.S. made bombs and U.S. taxpayer monies are sent to war zones. Mark’s gospel calls each of us to step up to the mirror and then find courage, all of us together, to say “cut it out,” turn off the wars.

Before the U.S. troops entered Iraq in 2003, the number of autopsies performed each month at the Baghdad morgue was 12. In June of this year, the number of autopsies performed in the Baghdad morgue was 600. Recently, the UN reported that almost 6,600 Iraqis died in sectarian violence in the last two months for which statistics are

available - an “unprecedented” 3,590 in July, followed by 3009 in August.

One fourth of Iraq’s children suffer acute malnourishment. Last Friday’s New York Times reported that 78% of Iraqis wearily request that the U.S. troops leave their country within the year.

And yet the U.S. continues to pour money into constructing its largest Embassy, inside Baghdad’s safe green zone, while building enormous military bases close to Iraq’s promising oil fields. Greed and war go hand in hand. Mr. James Baker recently returned from a four-day trip to the green zone inside Iraq. He issued a report concluding that the U.S. will not wring its hands over memories of past mistakes. No, let’s not wring our hands, helplessly, but by all means let’s help ourselves to turn off this war and next wars by telling the truth about our wars. “And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell...”

In recent months, we’ve had a chance to read accounts of one of the Christian Peacemaker Team members who endured a hellish experience of captivity after he and three companions were kidnapped in November of 2005. Jim writes about the agonizing boredom as they were held day after day in a single room, with only an hour or so of time spent in the lower part of the house where they could watch Arabic news on TV and share a meal. Their guard, their captor, was called “Junior.” Over time, he began to tell more about his past. A U.S. missile had hit his home, killing all of his family members except for a sister who is dying of cancer. The bombing killed his fiancée as well. Junior had made up his mind. He planned to be a suicide bomber.

Jim Loney thought long and hard, after learning this, about how he could convince Junior that his body is a sacred vessel, never intended to be used as a weapon of massive destruction. Finally, he worked out a plan. The next night, he asked Junior to sit in a chair and made the motion of giving Junior a massage. Jim massaged Junior’s neck and shoulders, felt the spasms as Junior relaxed, worked out some of the taut tension. The next night, Junior said, “Mr. Jim, it’s time,” and tapped his watch. “Massage.”

Not long afterward, Junior came to work wearing a betrothal ring. “Junior,” said the CPT captives. “Masbrouk!” Congratulations. Junior was beaming. “Me no more suicide bomb.” He fingered his ring.

It’s a good story. A true story. But there’s more truth to this story, I think, if we’re willing again to step up to the mirror. It’s we, just as much as Junior, who need that healing massage. We who hold the evil capacity to destroy all life on the planet, we who could enact the destruction through our suicidal over consumption, through our insane weapon proliferation, it’s we who must slow down, relax, take a deep breath, --we who need the massaging, calming words of James’s letter: Is any among you sick? Let him or her call for elders of the church, and let them pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him or her up,therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and if I might add, “cut it out,” –turn off the war and the greed, -- “that you may be healed.”

I want to hear Mr. Nix’s words again, “What will rise you?” and I want to stand and rise with you this communion Sunday.