

Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Cambridge on the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Armistice Day  
Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer – November 11, 2018

*“In Flanders Fields”* – John McCrae © 1918

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,  
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.*

On this day, Veterans Day, there is so much I could talk about. I could start with the audacious statement that Queen Victoria literally gave birth to WWI. Two of her grand-children, King George V and Kaiser Wilhelm were the major combatants. What is more, the conflict grew out of the final resistance to the overthrow of the Ottoman Empire by the Christian crown heads of Europe...led by the offspring and descendants of Victoria.

I could also talk about the ongoing modern impact of a war that ended 100 years ago. The modern conflicts throughout the Middle East originate from the Western European secret wartime agreement among the allies to partition the region among themselves in 1916. And this wasn't the only map re-drawn. The entire map of Europe was reshaped. Most notably the map and identity of what we now call Germany set the stage for the conflict to follow 21 years later in 1939.

I could talk about the Bolshevik Revolution and the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in July 1918 and how their murder led directly to the Cold War. I could explain that this did not just position the Russians as a Communist counterpoint to Western democracy, but the course of events emboldened the Japanese and gave them the means and creativity to strengthen their military.

I could also talk to you about modern warfare. WWI saw advances in military weaponry that equal the advent of the internet. The tank, deep-water long-range submarines, machine guns, grenades, poison gas, flamethrowers...these weapons changed the brutality of warfare and they changed the nature of the wounded. Gross disfigurement and possibilities for disease required new and innovative medicine and therapies.

It would probably, however, make the most sense for me to talk to you about Veterans on this day because for the last 64 years, this day has been designated as a time for us to honor their service. And rightfully so. My talk about veterans could include the story of Raymond Weeks, a WWII veteran who petitioned the government and won his fight to have Armistice officially changed to honor all veterans in 1954. I could talk about my own grandfathers, Rev. Jacob Dyer and Captain Timothy Weston, who both served in WW II and the pride I feel in knowing their stories and seeing

them buried with full military honors. I could talk about how one served in the Pacific the other on the front lines in France. I could talk about how both served in segregated ranks.

I could talk about patriotism and the complicated place it occupies in my own heart between pride for my family and friends who serve and my unfailing support for football players who kneel during the anthem to protest police brutality. Patriotism that humbles me in the presence of anyone who serves or has served for I see their completely selfless commitment as something I am incapable of...yet, patriotism that demands I question a government that has brought home too many broken bodies and minds because of “high level decisions” made based on financial interest regardless of the human toll. Patriotism that demands that I vocally disagree with sending troops to our southern border to stop migrants.

There really is so much I could talk about. But in the end, my job is to talk about one thing: faith.

**“We Shall Keep the Faith”** – Moina Michael © 1918

*Oh! you who sleep in Flanders Fields,  
Sleep sweet - to rise anew!  
We caught the torch you threw  
And holding high, we keep the Faith  
With All who died.*

*We cherish, too, the poppy red  
That grows on fields where valor led;  
It seems to signal to the skies  
That blood of heroes never dies,  
But lends a lustre to the red  
Of the flower that blooms above the dead  
In Flanders Fields.*

*And now the Torch and Poppy Red  
We wear in honor of our dead.  
Fear not that ye have died for naught;  
We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought  
In Flanders Fields.*

This poem by Moina Michael is a large part of the reason we use poppies as a symbol of remembrance. Her poem, inspired by John McCrae’s words that began this message, attempts to answer his request to take the torch and defend freedom. To give you some background, it is said that on war-torn fields, poppies are the only flowers capable of blooming due to the changes and acidity of the land after bombing and death and disease and depletion of the soil.

But there is another story about poppies that may be useful today:

*"They now came upon more and more of the big scarlet flowers until they found themselves in the midst of a great meadow carpeted with nothing but poppies. Now, in the magical Land of Oz, it is a well known fact that when there are many of these flowers together their odor and fragrance is so strong and so powerful, that anyone who breathes it in instantly begins to fall asleep, and if the sleeper is not carried away from the deadly scent of the blossoms, they sleep on and on forever and ever until their dying day. But Dorothy, just a little girl from Kansas, did not know this, nor could she get away from the bright red flowers that were everywhere about; so presently as she walked on her eyes grew very heavy, and soon she felt she must sit down to rest and to even sleep. " – **The Wonderful Wizard of Oz** – L. Frank Baum © 1900*

For most of us, war is distant. I get the feeling that over time, our eyes have grown heavy, we have felt the need to sit down and rest...and even sleep. We are dazzled by the brilliant color of the poppies we offer in remembrance, and we have grown drowsy in the face of the fact that whether they are the fragrant meadow in Oz or the Fields in Flanders, these flowers represent mortality. Specifically, a mortality that comes from the human weakness for war. We must wake up.

A few weeks ago, I reiterated Susan Frederick Gray's words that this is no time for a casual faith. Indeed, today, in the wake of another mass shooting, sadly one carried out by a veteran, in witness to gross voter disenfranchisement, in the face of our first amendment rights being challenged daily...it is no time for a casual faith. We must not fall asleep in the field of poppies. We cannot be intoxicated by the tributes and the memorials we offer today, and it would seem every day.

An essential part of our ability to overcome adversity and to thrive beyond resistance can come from this thing we call Unitarian Universalism...this thing we call faith. 100 years ago, it was no time for a casual faith. When I read stories about how so many soldiers were lost because they were using 19<sup>th</sup> and even 18<sup>th</sup> century tactics to fight a 20<sup>th</sup> century war...at times hundreds of soldiers being marched in grand lines out of the trenches to simply be cut down by one well-placed gunner, I must believe that none of them stepped into no-man's land without the crucial piece of their uniform...their faith that they would return or that their journey was at least justified.

But the nature and place and language of faith in our modern world has changed...even if the human attraction to war and death have not.

In this moment, on this day, I become the most unlikely evangelist. Like many of you, my world is largely secular, even if I grew up in a religious household. My immediate reaction to social justice is action and negotiation. Like you, I understand how laws are made and how policy is crafted. We understand the deals that governments make and how little we all know on a day to day basis about what is really going on in the world, despite social media. But in this time, in this moment, I am also waking up from the poppies. As I awaken, I find myself desirous of one thing, beyond even good laws and honest leaders. *I want more from Unitarian Universalism.* Not only do I want more from Unitarian Universalism, but I want more people to want it with me. I don't believe vagueness is the path to inclusion. Nor do I believe non-specificity can help us achieve liberation and affirmation of the brilliantly diverse world we so desperately seek. I cannot understand why we have to think so hard about this. Why we should have to apologize for *demanding* the beloved community. Why can't our faith declare "I am" not "I want...*maybe*."

What is so hard about standing up in the world to say:

"I am Unitarian Universalist...*I am* peace!"

"I am Unitarian Universalist...*I am* freedom!"

"I am Unitarian Universalist...*I am* inclusion!"

"I am Unitarian Universalist...*I am* affirmation!"

"I am Unitarian Universalist...*I am* whole!"

"I am Unitarian Universalist...*I am* love!"

What's so hard about that?

Part of me is ashamed to honor an armistice that has led to us dropping more bombs on children and families today. I am heartsick for any family that watches their child or partner or parent head into conflict knowing they may not ever or fully return in body or in mind. I am at once grateful but enraged by the ongoing need for us to continue to produce veterans. I feel like this because my faith that declares that *I am peace, that I am freedom, that I am inclusion, that I am affirmation, that I am wholeness and that I am love...*my faith is the exact opposite of war.

I could talk about how very much an honor it is to be able to bring your attention, your hearts and your awareness on this day to the incredibly brave people who stand between us civilians and real harm. But honestly, I believe the greatest honor we could do any veteran, the greatest tribute we can offer those who would put their lives on the line, the greatest tribute to the armistice of 1918 would be to actually end the conflict. Let us wake up and awaken our faith.

We are peace.

We are freedom.

We are inclusion.

We are affirmation.

We are whole.

We are love.

End this war once and for all.