



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Peace, why is it so hard to accept?

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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How many of you remember this song from 1967 – *San Francisco* or *Flowers in their Hair*?

The singer, Scott McKenzie, died last weekend, he was 73 years old. I am always 16 when I hear him sing about the gentle people with flowers in their hair during that summer of love in San Francisco. The song was written for the Monterey Pop Festival. When the Festival was proposed, the prospect of a whole lot of young people – scary hippies – coming to town had everybody on the Monterey Peninsula up in arms. But John Phillips, of the Mama's and the Papa's managed to talk the town into holding the 3 day festival. There were a lot of people, but there was not one arrest during the whole three days and the money raised built free clinics in San Francisco and LA. Scott McKenzie's song became an anthem for the peace movement here and even more in Eastern Europe as the cold war and repressive regimes sought to control people's desire for freedom. Just listening to the song *San Francisco* in East Berlin got people in trouble. Over the years, Scott McKenzie was been approached by vets and former POWs who told him what his song meant to them. One of them even gave Scott his Bronze Star.

As a 16 year old, I remember thinking that promoting peace and love instead of incessant war made perfect sense. How could anyone be upset about that? But upset they were. 1967 opened a wound in this country. The challenge to the status quo played out violently. Returning Vietnam vets were treated shamefully. The war ended with no sense of victory or pride. There was in some ways, a national identity crisis – who were we if we weren't the heroes riding to the rescue in white hats, cheered and adored by all.

In today's Gospel - which I would like to go on record as saying, s "enough with the bread already, it's been 4 straight weeks!" but today the disciples opine that what Jesus is saying is hard to grasp "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?" They shouldn't have been surprised. This is a very, theological, abstract teaching, full of metaphor and cannibalism. But figuring it out isn't nearly as important (in my opinion) as figuring out some of the more straightforward teachings about love and peace and community. Jesus told them to love their neighbors and they didn't say "ooo, this teaching is difficult, who can accept it?" And yet, it has proved very difficult. "Blessed are the peacemakers." Now that teaching is difficult, who can accept it?" All too often Jesus' identity as the Prince of Peace is cast aside as simply naive and out of touch with human nature.

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Reading about Scott McKenzie and the time in which he wrote his song sent me off researching anti-war and peace movements. And you know, there really haven't been very many in human history. 400 years before Jesus, Aristophanes wrote a play called *Lysistrata* in which the women of Greece finally got fed up with the incessant wars that were killing their sons. When it became clear to them that war was a habit they banded together to encourage their men folk to stop. They used the only weapon they had - forcing abstinence on their husbands by barricading themselves in the temple. Did I mention that the play is a comedy? In the play their strategy worked, don't know that it's ever been tried in real life.

The Quakers were a voice for peace during the Civil War and in every war since then but they were unable to develop any traction in the public conscience. Until the 60s, the world did not see a concerted grassroots movement to end war. Do you remember the photo of the young man putting a flower in the barrel of the rifle held by riot police at the peace march in Washington. It became the iconic image of flower power, flowers as the whole armor of God, simplicity over hardware and might. For many it spoke to the heart, many others were enraged by it. And I must confess that I have never understood why. Why is the teaching about peace so hard to accept?

Here's an example, when I moved to Orange County, California in 2004, the number of cars with magnetized yellow ribbons professing support for the troops was staggering. Camp Pendleton is just south of the O.C., and its presence in the community is strong. Throughout the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Camp Pendleton has been at or near the top of the list in casualties. Along with its decidedly pro-military leaning, Orange County is also a very heavily conservative Christian culture. I discovered that preaching or working for peace was usually met with hostility. I was taken to task by the mayor of Laguna Niguel, one of my parishioners, for being out of step with what people of Orange County wanted to hear. Being for peace was equated with being against America and considered dangerous. The Gospel of Peace was not welcome. I was physically threatened by a member of my church because her college-aged daughter was upset to the point of tears by my suggestion that we listen to several points of view on war in general and on the ones we are still fighting in particular. Questioning blind allegiance was not appreciated. If I asked people what they thought about Jesus claiming to be the Bread that came down from Heaven, I would have been met with a blank stare, but if I asked them what they thought about Jesus' teaching of peace and non-violence I'd get an earful and the occasional threat. So I don't worry when people don't get the fine points of today's gospel. We have bigger issues that still need to be understood and accepted.

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I heard the other day that the US military budget is larger than the combined spending in China, Russia, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Brazil and a host of other nations. While military spending is decreasing in most places around the world, ours continues to grow. But the rhetoric we hear now tells us that if we don't cut programs that serve low income families we are heading for sure ruin. It's true, the things that Jesus said are hard to accept and collectively, we're not doing a good job. But that doesn't mean that we can't. The spirit of the Prince of Peace is in each and everyone one of us.

While the summer of love and flower power has passed, the movement spoke to an awakening desire for peace and the idea that true power was found in the people. The demonstrations against the war in Viet Nam changed the landscape and eventually the war ended. Then the movement went dark but it had planted its seeds in human hearts around the world; the Solidarity movement in the Czech Republic, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Tiananmen Square and the Arab Spring. The world is trying to accept the teachings of peace and to see beyond the bad habit of war. We are trying to allow freedom to burst into bloom.

For me, the San Francisco of 1967 has become like Brigadoon, sleeping somewhere in the mists. But it keeps waking up around the world with all of its hope and belief in peace and gentle people with flowers in their hair. Surely, it's not too hard to accept.

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