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Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Tipping Point

By The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Micah 4:1-4, Matthew 5:9

Suppose you and your family are rafting down an unexplored river. Most of your attention is on steering the raft away from the rocks and keeping it off the banks so that it will not get damaged or stranded. Several miles downstream unknown to you roars a huge waterfall that will fling you and your family on the rocks below.

It is easy to miss certain signals that are coming to you. You have noticed a distant, rumbling background sound. But, what does it mean? You can see a mist in the air ahead of you; but, there is nothing alarming that seems to call for your immediate attention. And besides, you are so busy guiding the raft and keeping it off the rocks that you don't want to think of anything else right now. Maybe the rumbling will go away - maybe...

But, the distant rumbling is getting louder. We can ignore it, or we can use our intelligent minds to inform us of the dangers we must avoid. What is this rumbling that is so easy for us to ignore? In two words, the rumbling is this – nuclear weapons.

This week, squeezed in with the tributes to Michael Jackson, I hope you noticed that some baby steps were taken to reduce the threat of nuclear destruction on the planet - some agreements with the Russians at reduction of our arsenals and some more tough talk directed at the Iranians. Small steps,

but we need to start somewhere. The world cries out for more steps to be taken until there are no more nuclear weapons – anywhere. Until then the rumblings in the distance can be heard if you pay attention. Things like:

The blasphemy of naming one of the most lethal weapons ever developed, a Trident submarine, *Corpus Christi*, which means literally, “The Body of Christ.”

The fact that every American city of 25,000 or more is targeted by a nuclear weapon.

The sheer numbers of nuclear weapons—we now have nuclear weapons equivalent to at least 30 billion tons of TNT, which means there are at least 10 tons of TNT equivalent destructive power for every man, every woman and every child on the face of the earth. If it could be put in the form of TNT and packed into freight cars, it would represent a string of freight cars that would reach from the earth to the moon and back 15 times.

And the rumbling goes on...

The people of the world now spend one million dollars per minute on armaments.

In response to all of this, the Senior Physicist at the Argon Laboratory in Illinois, a man named David Ingliss, has written a book about peace. In the book he says, “Two hydrogen bombs wrapped in cobalt are now technically feasible and available—one of which would destroy all life in the northern hemisphere—and the other in the southern.” **All** life. The name of his book is *Unless Peace Comes*. Mr. Ingliss is not a preacher; he’s not a peace nut; he’s one of the world’s most respected scientists.

We live in an age of guided missiles and misguided human beings, where humankind has now become the lethal factor on this planet. It used to be that we worried about one part of the globe not being able to protect itself from another part. In the nuclear age, it is the whole that cannot protect itself from the parts. The whole world lives on the target! It used to be we only had to worry about the Russians. Of course that has changed. Now the Pakistanis are more of a potential threat, and the Iranians and the North Koreans want desperately to join the nuclear club.

The baby bomb generation has always lived with the threat of nuclear destruction. I remember way back in grade school being aware of “the bomb.” Monthly we would have civil defense drills. All the children lined up in a row sitting in the Jefferson School hallways with their heads down.

But, then the sixties brought about other concerns and the threat of mutual annihilation seemed less real. We and the Russians were reaching some agreements. As we went down the River of Time during the ‘60s and ‘70s, were we worrying too much about the rocks of Vietnam, racism, inflation, and stagflation to hear the distant rumbling waterfall?

If we had listened, we could have heard the rumbling even back then:

Albert Einstein: “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything, except our way of thinking. Thus, we drift towards a catastrophe.”

Dwight Eisenhower: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in a final sense a theft from those who are hungry and not fed—those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone; it is

spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the houses of its children.”

Omar Bradley: “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.”

Jesus Christ: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

To believe that there are simple answers in a world as complex as ours, runs the risk of being simple-minded. Yet to refuse to believe that God can use us to make peace wherever we are, and beyond where we are, is to lack faith in God’s power and promises.

Peacemaking involves more than arms control and disarmament. It involves dealing with the causes of war and the needs of people throughout our world. There are no quick or easy answers to the complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes in which we find ourselves.

Our hope is in the Kingdom of God. Our faith in God leads us to believe that fear can be overcome with faith, that hate can be replaced with trust, enmity with reconciliation and injustice with justice. God redeems history; we do not. But we are called to be God’s agents of reconciliation, that not only our generation, but also that future generations, may have life through the love and power of Jesus Christ.

Have you read Malcolm Gladwell’s best seller, *The Tipping Point*? In that popular book Gladwell maintains that little changes can have big effects; when small numbers of people start behaving differently, that behavior can ripple outward until a critical mass or “tipping point” is reached, changing the world. His thesis is that ideas, products, messages and behaviors “spread just like viruses do.” Perhaps therein lays the solution for the nuclear threat.

Long before Gladwell there was a true story called, “The Hundredth Monkey.” It seems the Japanese monkey, *Macaca Fuscata*, has been observed in the wild for a period of over 30 years. In 1952, on the island of Koshima, scientists were providing monkeys with sweet potatoes dropped in the sand. The monkeys liked the taste of the raw sweet potatoes, but they found the dirt unpleasant.

An 18-month-old female named Imo found she could solve the problem by washing the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this trick to her mother. Her playmates also learned this new way and they taught their mothers, too. This cultural innovation was gradually picked up by various monkeys before the eyes of the scientists.

Between 1952 and 1958, all the *young* monkeys learned to wash the sandy sweet potatoes to make them more palatable. Only the adults who imitated their children learned this social improvement. Other adults kept eating the dirty sweet potatoes.

Then something startling took place. In the autumn of 1958, a certain number of Koshima monkeys were washing sweet potatoes—the exact number is not known.

Let us suppose that when the sun rose one morning there were 99 monkeys on Koshima Island who had learned to wash their sweet potatoes. Let’s further suppose that later that morning, the hundredth monkey learned to wash potatoes. Then it happened! That evening almost everyone in the tribe was washing sweet potatoes before eating them.

The added energy of this hundredth monkey somehow created an ideological breakthrough! But notice: the most surprising thing observed by these scientists was that the habit of washing sweet potatoes then spontaneously jumped over the sea. Colonies of monkeys on other islands, and the mainland troop of monkeys at Takasakiyama, began washing their sweet potatoes! Thus, when a certain critical number achieves an awareness, this new awareness may be communicated from mind to mind.

Although the exact number may vary, the hundredth monkey phenomenon means that when only a limited number of people know of a new way, it may remain the consciousness property of these people.

But there is a tipping point at which if only one more person tunes in to a new awareness, a field is strengthened so that this awareness reaches almost everyone!

Your awareness is needed in saving the world from nuclear war. You may be the hundredth monkey.

Let us pray,

Lord, we know peace, real peace, is only in you and that there is no peace apart from you. We also know that if there is going to be peace, we Christians need to be involved. Lord, make us the instruments of your peace. Amen.