

**The Other Side of War**  
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz  
Sunday, May 4, 2025  
All Souls NYC

Steve<sup>1</sup> stood outside single family home in the Mekong Delta, his fist raised, ready to knock on the door. He knew that what happened next could change his life.

Steve had flown over 8,000 miles from the United States to arrive at the doorstep of the Lamb That family. This was now almost twenty years after the Vietnam War ended and for the better part of those twenty years, Steve could not sleep but more than a few hours a night. His dreams were haunted by nightmares. He used drugs and alcohol to try to push away the demons that surrounded him. At one point, he had wanted to die. But something inside of him also wanted to live and wanted to do something to confront this part of his past. And so that journey brought him to the doorstep of the Lamb That family and to the home of Ut, a Vietnamese guide for American tourists. On the other side of that door were Ut's parents, who had fought in and survived the Vietnam War, though not unscathed. On the other side of that door there was a war that had not ended when Saigon fell. On the other side of that door are two stories; drawn from recent and past experiences that have brought me to today's reflection.

But first, perhaps you might be wondering: why have I chosen this Sunday to take up this theme and tell you these stories? Many of my colleagues are doing Star Wars based services today – beginning their sermons with “May the Fourth Be with You.” I was tempted to do that myself – a light-hearted reflection to send you off into what I had hoped would be a bright and sunny May morning. But, I'm saving the Star Wars reflection for another Sunday, because my

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<sup>1</sup> Steve and Ut are the names of real individuals, based on a true story. However, some of the details of this story are drawn from the written remembrances of Vietnam Veterans and Vietnamese civilians. This is a composite story, weaving together both what was told to me by our guide, Ut, and the stories of several servicepersons who survived the Vietnam War.

mind and heart have gone in a different direction. There are two anniversaries that I've been mindful of this week: April 30<sup>th</sup> was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the end of American side of the War in Vietnam. And today, May 4<sup>th</sup> is the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the killing of four students and wounding of nine others on the campus of my alma mater, Kent State University, some of whom were protesting that same war.

The third reason I've been thinking about these two dates is because of spending two and a half weeks in Vietnam and Cambodia this past December. I became interested in these two countries not because I had a personal connection with the Vietnam War, but because of the many stories I've heard from spending time in nail salons, usually run by Vietnamese families, many of whom fled Vietnam during or shortly after the fall of Saigon. Their harrowing stories of leaving their homeland – as well as the stories I heard about the United States from Vietnamese people who lived through that time, were powerful and compelling.

We are living in a time when powerful leaders, at home and abroad, are exercising their power with chaotic disregard for diplomacy, conflict de-escalation and the soft power of building relationships for mutual good, putting this country – and the world – in peril. But as we know, war is not just something that happens over there – in a faraway land. There are also battles which we wage inside of the human heart – torn between standing with our morals and compromising them; and battles we wage with one another, when we can't agree on which set of values we should share.

Wars supposedly have start date and ending dates, but when peace comes, the peace that means only the end of direct military violence, the other side of war begins. That other side of course involves physical recovery, the construction of new infrastructure of cities and towns, the building of housing and the recovery of an economy. But there is a spiritual recovery on the other

side of war as well, not just in support of the emotional and spiritual needs of the people who have suffered losses as a result of the war, but also long-term recovery from the moral injury that is left when a war is supposedly over.

In recent years important work has been done by both psychologists and theologians on what we now understand as the invisible “moral injuries” suffered because of conflict and war. It is not PTSD, although PTSD can contribute to the moral injury. The definition of moral injury is “the psychological, social and spiritual impact of events involving betrayal or transgression of one’s own deeply held moral beliefs and values occurring in high stakes situations.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of those who have served in wartime, moral injury involves lasting emotional, psychological, social, behavioral and spiritual impacts of actions that violate a service member’s core behavioral expectations of self or others. So, a soldier like Steve is sent to Vietnam believing that his military service serves a just cause and in preparing for war tries to square that with the morality he learned in his Christian Sunday School in Dayton, Ohio, – to love one’s neighbor as oneself; to turn the other cheek, to forgive one’s enemies.

Steve went to Vietnam unsure about how much combat he would see. When Steve’s boat of soldiers was attacked by Viet Cong guerillas from the riverbank where people from the village were washing clothes and refreshing their bodies, he panicked. He opened fire, wildly and randomly, shooting at whatever he saw on the banks of the river. He had no idea if he killed the men who were shooting at him. He felt pretty sure afterwards that he had killed some of the civilians, women and children who were doing laundry in the river.

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<sup>2</sup> Add citation here

As his boat sped away, and his fellow soldiers congratulated themselves on surviving, Steve began to experience the suffering of what would be the first of many moral injuries of his life. He was haunted by the fear that he had killed innocent people under the sanction of war.

My husband and I heard Steve's story from our Vietnamese guide, Ut. Ut told us that Steve decided twenty years after he left Vietnam that the only way he could find some inner healing would be to return to that land where the killing had taken place. And even more than that, he wanted to meet people who were Viet Cong. He hired Ut as a guide and a translator to shepherd him through the hardest memories of his life. Ut knew what he had to do. He invited Steve to meet his own parents, who were part of a family who had four generations of warfare in their history, each generation fighting a foreign invader – Chinese, Cambodian, French, Americans. Ut asked his parents if he could invite Steve for dinner. And that's what led him to the doorstep of Ut's house. That door opened, and Steve was greeted first by the smell of Pho – the noodle soup that takes all day to cook properly – and then by smiles from a Vietnamese couple who seemed so small compared to Steve's size, a couple now in their seventies, welcoming him into their home.

Ut told us that Steve and his parents talked long into the night. His parents told Steve about what it was like to be surrounded by American servicemen, some who were kind and others who were violent and abusive. Steve told Ut's parents about how he was afraid *all the time*, that his tour of duty had turned him into a person he no longer knew and never wanted to become. Ut said that when Steve left his parents' home that night, his demeanor had changed. Steve and Ut stayed in touch for years afterwards. Steve got sober, married, had a child. Steve died from cancer about ten years ago now, but Ut said that he attributed that meeting with Ut's

parents as a transformative moment that changed his life. Something inside him had begun to heal.

Why tell you these stories of something that happened long ago and far away? Because the fear that bred and fed the violence that occurred on May 4, 1970 – came home to a midwestern college campus. I was not yet college age on that day, but my own experience of its aftermath has convinced me that the trauma of moral injury can be experienced not just by the individuals directly involved in the violence of war but by communities, like Kent, by states, like Ohio, and by an entire nation. Shots were fired among our own people, not against foreigners demonized as enemies. When I go back to Kent and walk the campus, I am reminded that the past isn't dead; it isn't even past – it lives with us and within us.

While the phrase moral injury is most often used in the context of veterans, there is also a recognition that moral injuries can occur in less grievous circumstances – described as “moral distress.” I believe that what many of us are experiencing right now – in these times – is a form of moral distress. A few of the symptoms of moral distress are a sense that one can never do enough, hypervigilance, chronic exhaustion, inability to listen, fear, anger, feeling hopeless and helpless. Do you know what I'm talking about here? Have you been feeling it too? Because the values which I believe in – we believe in – those that framed the foundation of this faith are being systematically attacked by a slew of executive orders.

If we believe in justice, then we see injustice when Americans who are here legally can be arrested and threatened with deportation for exercising their right to protest.

If we believe in equity, then we cannot ignore the fact that political conservatives have attempted to literally whitewash the reality of racism and the horrors that America has inflicted on people of color and indigenous peoples.

If we believe that pluralism and diversity is a strength, then we cannot turn a blind eye to the attempts to eradicate diversity in all sectors of public life.

These aren't just intellectual or political differences of opinion. There are moral stresses and distresses to the body politic; that is, the larger body of a country to which we belong and to which many of us believe in. The war being waged right now, is a war of words – between those who believe the current administrations directives are a necessary correction to make American great again; and those, and I put myself in this camp, who are increasingly terrified about the rise of nationalism, fascism, racism, antisemitism, anti-Islamophobia, transphobia. What could be on the other side of *that* war?

I have an answer, but it comes through the sharing of another story. In 2011, my husband and I were granted a three-month sabbatical when we would spend a month in each of three countries: Spain, Israel, and Turkey. Our sabbatical focus had been inspired by the story of Andalusia, the peninsula in Southern Spain, where, for more than seven centuries, Jews, Muslims and Christians lived together in an atmosphere of tolerance, and where literature, science and the arts flourished. After visiting Spain, our next stop was Israel and Palestine.

With support from Witness for Peace and the Jewish Federation of Cleveland, OH, we connected with an organization called The Parents Circle- Families Forum, a grassroots organization of Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost immediate family members due to the conflict. It was founded by Yizhak Frankenthal, whose 19-year-old son, Arik Frankenthal was kidnapped and killed by Hamas. He was joined by Palestinian mothers and fathers and siblings who had similarly lost loved ones in the ongoing violence of this conflict. They invited us to witness their conversation of shared losses as well as the ways in which they were healing from those losses. There they sat – sharing the most excruciating experience anyone can suffer – the

the loss of their children. At the end of their sharing, they turned to our group to see if we had questions for them. “How can you do this?” asked one woman. “How can you sit in the same room with each other?” One Palestinian father said that the first step towards reconciliation is to recognize the suffering of the other side. Another spokesperson for the Parent’s Circle put it this way “If you are pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel, you are not helping us. You are just feeling good about yourself.”<sup>3</sup> What was the other side of war? Loss, certainly but what I experienced was something else – hope, not born on rhetoric, but on the one on one experience of talking to each other.

When I arrived here at All Souls in January, one of the requests I heard clearly was that some members of this congregation wanted to talk about the war that is currently being waged between Israel and Hamas. In subsequent prayers, I acknowledged the terror and trauma of the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack by Hamas, whose brutality was beyond comprehension. I mourned the loss of life, with the hostages who are still in captivity, with the irrefutable evidence of the rise of antisemitism at home and abroad. And, I felt the revulsion and horror of the war being waged at the expense of civilian population of Gaza, whose livelihood and lives are destroyed; whose food supplies have now been cut off, who live in the fear that the other side of this war will mean the expulsion from land they have lived on for many generations. Both of these needs and realities exist, in, among and beyond us.

As I say these words, can you feel what’s rising inside you right now? Can you feel the pull towards one side or another? Can you hear the arguments in your minds, framing the email you will send me after this sermon to tell me what I should have said or not said? I feel all those things too. These are some of the symptoms of the moral distress we are all experiencing as we

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/10/palestine-israel-peace-campaigners>

try to find our own place to stand within the long history and complex politics behind the violence we have seen in Israel since the October 7 massacres and kidnappings. Moral injury is both a psychological and spiritual condition that does not respect borders or distances because our spiritual lives are inextricably intertwined with our values.

Some of us seek out a congregation – or a synagogue – or a mosque to be reminded of those values – and to find ways to strengthen our moral muscles to respond to the culture that chooses guns over flowers; war over peace. And what should *our* response here at All Souls be to not only this war being fought in Israel and Gaza but for all the wars being fought on other soil in which we are complicit – wars far away but ones that deeply and profoundly touch us? And what about the political and cultural wars that are directly impacting our lives and the lives of those whom we know and love and the institutions we cherish? The rage and frustration that some of us are feeling right now is not about one powerful person; it goes deeper than that. It's an assault on the values which we cherish and perhaps have taken for granted. These are also a kind of moral injuries are not as soul damaging as what Steve experienced, but they wound us nevertheless.

It seems naïve to believe that we can do something to heal the escalating violence in the world by just sitting down with each other and telling each other our stories – or is it? There is another side of war – that we can heal from moral injury by meeting the other - by finding ways to truly listen to one another – and to see and feel the suffering of another. This congregation can serve as a laboratory for figuring out the things that make for peace – for not personally engaging in conflict but instead, learning techniques of de-escalation – maybe not this month, maybe not before my time with you ends, but maybe you will hear this sermon as an invitation to undertake



the healing of moral injury and moral distress and in doing so help others learn how to be peacemakers as well.

I keep going back to the words of Wislawa Szymborska's poem, that begins with "*after every war, someone has to clean up. Things won't straighten themselves up, after all.*" She continues to describe the rubble caused by war, but ends on a hopeful note: "in the grass that has overgrown causes and effects, someone must be stretched out blade of grass in his mouth, gazing at the clouds," or, as the Sufi poet and mystic would remind us: "*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.*" May it be so.