

## IMAGINE

A Sermon By  
The Rev. Susan Manker-Seale  
December 16, 2007

Twenty-seven years ago, on December 8, 1980, John Lennon was shot and killed in front of his New York City apartment. My husband, Curtiss, and I had been married almost a year, and we were living in Tucson. I heard the news on the radio as I drove to Ochoa Elementary school where I taught bilingual special education classes. I cried all the way down 22nd Street to work.

Most people of my generation can tell you exactly where they were when they heard the news of Lennon's death. Many of us also remember where we were when the Beatles first played on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1964. My brothers and sister and I were watching the Flintstones in our living room in Phoenix that evening, and my father came in and said we had to watch some new group he'd heard about. He changed the channel to our protests. But after the Beatles started playing, we were hooked. He graciously offered to change the channel back, but we wouldn't let him.

Such events are milestones of our mutual cultural experience, like guideposts along the paths of our lives. They shape our understanding of what is important in the world, from those who push the envelope of creativity and acceptability to those who dare to proclaim a new way to live and who give us renewed hope. John Lennon did all of that, and more, and he is remembered with love by many, many people.

For me, the greatest gift Lennon gave us is his song "Imagine." I have loved it and contemplated it since I was fifteen. He wrote it in 1971, when he was only thirty years old. It was a credo and a challenge, a belief in a world of peace if we all were brave enough to imagine it into being.

In spite of believing in his conclusion, though, I have not agreed with his premise: that countries and religions in themselves are at fault for the wars and fears, or that possessions are the reason for greed and hunger. The promise of heaven and the fear of hell have been tools of some religions to control the people, and I agree, Universalist that I am, that living for today is more important than yearning for or being fearful of an afterlife of grace or pain. It is especially important in this time of encroaching global warming that we learn to love the earth on which we live and learn to take care of it, covenant to protect it and each other as best we can.

Countries--well, sometimes I think they are a strange, archaic political construct. The boundaries in Europe are disappearing with the European union, and it's interesting to watch how that is evolving. But Europe is a relatively small place and one where people have been intermingling for a very long time. Families live across borders, and in a place where people actually bother to learn each other's languages, and travel easily, political boundaries begin to break down. They can't stand up to the relationships people develop with those in neighboring places, when they become true neighbors.

Fences don't solve anything, as our own government needs to remember. Here in Southern Arizona, we have a similar relationship with "south of the border." Except there are those in power now who, instead of going with the positive value of cross-border relationships

and international intermingling, now want to close the doors and forget our common humanity, proclaiming patriotism as the reason to shut others out.

In a few months we will need a passport to travel to Rocky Point, Mexico, otherwise known as Puerto Penasco, and what had once seemed like a right or a natural relationship with Sonora will become a trip into a foreign land with more restrictions than I can remember. It doesn't seem right. It seems like a backward move, just like the walls.

In this internet age, people around the world are making friends and living in places near and far, crossing borders, at least where it seems safe. The United Nations seems to have earned a privileged role in the world, and even come to be seen as not strong enough in dealing with the conflicts between countries. That is a good thing. Maybe there will be a world body that helps guide our states and gives us ways to live together. But I don't see it coming very soon.

Countries are not in themselves bad, but are ways we make decisions about society and our needs. I don't see us doing without them, maybe ever. But I do see us opening borders and communicating better, intermingling and making decisions for mutual benefit, decisions that don't exploit the poor and needy.

Lennon said, "Imagine...nothing to kill or die for." Patriotism, the kind that creates hatred of what is foreign and the desire to go to war, is what Lennon was talking about, I think. And yet, when we remember the massacres and rapes and displacements and starvation occurring in Darfur, Sudan, right now, I wonder, how do you fight fire with fire?

In 1967, in the *New York Times*, A.J. Muste said, "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way." (p. 384, *Treasury of Religious and Spiritual Quotations*) I believe that. Lennon believed that. The Tao de Ching taught that—it's in our hymnals, number 602. Twentyfive hundred years ago Lao-Tse said, "If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations. If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities. If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors. If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home. If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart." (*Singing the Living Tradition*)

So if people are at war because of starvation or corruption, how do we heal them? Who was it that sang "All we are saying is give peace a chance?" The Beatles, John Lennon, took up the wisdom of the sages and put it to song at a time when we desperately needed it, in protest of the Vietnam War, and today we still need to sing those songs of peace.

I went down to Raul Grijalva's office on Thursday for a MoveOn.org protest and presentation of petitions to Congress to stop the saber-rattling towards Iran. The invitation came the night before in an email, and I thought to myself that I must speak up and make a stand early and not assume that this administration wouldn't follow through on its threats against even another country. It felt good to be with twenty-five others who found time in their busy schedules to make a stand for peace.

Lennon and Yoko Ono are famous not just for John's songs and the amazing relationship the two of them had, but also because they continually made a stand for peace. There was a time when Lennon became a target of Nixon's paranoia, spurring clandestine activities on the part of the FBI. In the book *Memories of John Lennon*, activist, professor and legislator Tom Hayden writes that "John Lennon cannot be memorialized without recalling his radical political attitudes at a time of roiling unrest in Britain, America and around the globe.... John also became an enemy of the state, which future generations of fans need to remember." (p. 89)

Lennon imagined a world not only without countries, but without religion, too. He blamed religion, as do many people, for what is wrong in the world, for that something "to kill

and die for.” History clearly reveals the horrors of religion in the crusades, the inquisitions, the pogroms, the holocausts, the jihads. But religion is also responsible for the sanctuaries, the gathered wisdom of ages, the brave defenders of the oppressed, the reminder that there are some things worth dying for, the communities of hope and peace. And religion at its best, is the expression of humanity’s vision of beauty and creativity, which has become embodied in myth and story, ritual and song.

Especially in this time of holiday madness, a phrase that has become commonplace because it is so true, we find ourselves embraced by the best of religion: Divali, Hanukkah, Ramadan (when it’s in the winter), Solstice, Christmas, and Kwanzaa, the winter celebrations of light in the darkness that remind us, and have reminded us for ages, of hope and peace in the depth of cold. It matters not if the story of the birth of Jesus is not literally true; it remains one of many stories that hold seeds of human wisdom and yearning, like the stars, symbols of all the Good that seems beyond our reach but still touches us with their light.

I would not like to see a world without religion. But I would like to see a world without dogma, without coercion in matters of faith. I would like to see people celebrate the different ways we express the right and good, the varying traditions which have come down to us over generations which tie us to family and values that are important. We can worship in different ways, or celebrate life in service to humanity and the living earth, and covenant for peace on earth, goodwill to all. In Lennon’s words, we can live “life in peace,” and share “all the world,” if we join up, dream it, imagine it, and “the world will be as one.”

In their editorial to the people of New York City in 1979, Ono and Lennon wrote that “We live in a beautiful univers....[and] The future of the earth is up to all of us.” (p. 176, *Memories of John Lennon*) Those are two very good things to remember, to remember to appreciate what we have and are, and to remember our responsibility to the earth in its entirety, no matter our religion, no matter our country. This holiday season, may you embrace all that is good which religion represents, and with imagination, dream your way toward a world of peace for everyone.