

**A Language We Need to Forget**  
**Memorial Day 2013**  
**Rev. Alida Ward**  
**Micah 4:1-4**

My daughter Brigitta comes home from Serbia on Wednesday, after a semester abroad in Belgrade, studying peace and conflict in the Balkans. Lest that sound to you like four brutal months of intensity and challenge, let me assure you that she also participated in a regular weekly study of Belgrade nightclubs, and, a couple weeks ago, she got to do a personal study of Beyonce's dance moves when Beyonce chose Belgrade as the place to kick off her world tour, and Brigitta and her girlfriends caught the concert. And in fact, this weekend she and a friend are studying the beaches in Croatia, which apparently are lovely.

So, the studying has been varied, and exciting. She has also, of course, studied the language of Serbia – Serbian -- and told me with some pride the other day that her instructor had praised her as being adept in Serbian. Who knew that this facility for Serbian lurked within her?

Brigitta's worry, though, is that once she's back here, where, clearly, the need to communicate in Serbian will be significantly lessened, she will lose everything she's learned. If in fact any of you happen to know a local Serb that she can continue conversation with, she would be most grateful.

She's right, of course, to be worried. Language is there to serve a purpose, and when the purpose disappears, often the language does too. For instance, these are the key phrases that David and I made sure we knew the Serbian for during our brief visit in Belgrade this spring, the phrases that we felt would serve an important purpose:

*Veenó, moh-leem* (wine, please.)

*Vee-seh.* (More.)

*Koh-leena su metal-nay* (His knees are metal) ... that one's very important for explaining why we always set off metal detectors.

These phrases, however, once no longer needed, go pretty quickly out of your head. Koleena su metalnay is not something we are probably ever going to need again, and by June, or sooner, I guarantee it'll be out of my brain. And Brigitta, after a little while back in Fairfield, will probably lose the ability to say things like DA-lee zell-ish da EE-grosh (Do you want to dance?).

Language, and languages you don't need any more, languages you forget, that's in a way what the prophet Micah was talking about in that passage Michelle just read to you. Languages you forget when you don't need them anymore.

What Michelle read is one of the most powerful and beautiful scriptures of faith, the promise of what is not yet but will be, the vision of the world that is not here but someday will be.

In days to come, Micah promises, in days to come  
people shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning-hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

Swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks and we will learn war no more.

Growing up in my church in Virginia, we *sang* this scripture in the words of the old spiritual - gonna lay down my sword and shield, we sang, down by the riverside, down by the riverside. I ain't gonna study war no more, I ain't gonna study war no more.

What Micah is dreaming of, visioning, promising is a world in which war is a language that you no longer need to learn. War is a language that will no longer be spoken, a language that you'll no longer be able to remember because you won't need it anymore.

War, like foreign phrases that you learn and then don't use, will disappear from your mind. We will learn war no more, says Micah. I ain't gonna study war no more. You just won't need to *know* that language.

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We gather this morning on Memorial Day weekend.

*Memorial Day weekend.*

It's a phrase that makes folks check to see whether the grill is working, and around here, hurry downtown to pick up a beach pass for the car.

But of course what it really is is the time to pause and remember, with sorrow and with deepest gratitude, those who now live forever in God's own heaven, those whose lives ended on battlefields far from home, on sand-swept streets or cold mountainsides, those taken from us by war.

In our own church family, there are men who remember the brothers in arms they lost fighting side by side in France, in the Pacific. In our church family, there are those who remember the dear ones they lost in Vietnam, the friends whose faces they cannot forget. Right now, in our own church family, there are those who have thankfully welcomed home a child from Iraq, a nephew from Afghanistan, and there are those who daily pray for cherished ones still there. To all those who offered and offer themselves for the country they love, we give honor, we give thanks; and for all those families who this weekend are sorrowing, we pray comfort.

Memorial Day began after the Civil War, a day when all the nation was urged to go and decorate the graves of soldiers lost in that horrific struggle. It was created to be a day on which all people would remember war's tragic cost. A day when all people might resolve together to study war no more.

Like the words of the prophet Micah, Memorial Day was born in the hope that one day swords would be beaten into plowshares and all God's people would learn war no more. A day when no one would need, any more, to speak the language of war. And believe me, no one speaks more eloquently about that hoped-for day than soldiers themselves. No one speaks more powerfully about that yearning for peace than the ones who have surely earned the right to speak.

Dwight D. Eisenhower famously said "I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can." I was reminded of that quote while reading a reflection written by an Iraq war veteran, Josh Stieber, who served in Iraq in 2007 -2008.

A deeply patriotic young man, and a deeply believing Christian, Josh ended up serving in a unit which saw some of the worst of the action, a unit which also became notorious for a chilling video which some soldiers made of one of their raids. It was all over the news at the time, I remember it well.

Josh wrestled daily with his faith in the midst of this. He remembers asking a friend, "how does 'turn the other cheek' fit in here?" He came home tormented by what he had seen, what he had had to do, and who it was he felt himself becoming.

And so he decided he wanted to learn war no more. To forget the language of war. He did something a little nutty, yes, but also inspiring -- he and another Iraq war veteran decided that they would bike across the country for six months, and just talk to people. Talk to people about love and hope and reconciliation and the world that God has in mind for us. They called their bike trip 'The Contagious Love Experiment', which sounds a little like a band name from my high school years, but that's what they were aiming for -- contagious love.

They talked to anyone they came across, talked to people about what it was like to be in the midst of war, talked about how hard it was to return and how much they were struggling to re-learn their lives. They talked about love and friendship and hope and the world they dreamed of, and wanted to work for.

Josh wrote this: "To let a heartfelt compassion lead us to build friendships and break stereotypes, instead of building weapons and breaking skulls, **that** was a mission worthy of trying to accomplish."

In other words, to learn war no more. To forget the language of war, and re-learn the vocabulary of love.

It seems to me that as people of faith, as followers of Christ, what we are called to do on Memorial Day, in addition to giving thanks, is to promise those who

have been lost that in their name and in their honor we will work for a world in which God's people study war no more, in which the language of war is no longer needed.

That we will dedicate ourselves anew to the vision of the prophet Micah of a time when there is no need for a day to remember those whom war has taken away, because swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

That day seems so very far off, yes, I know. And what, really, are we supposed to do to get there? None of us make decisions that affect the course of history, right?

It seems that way. But each of us daily chooses the language in which we speak, and the language we choose can be the language of peace. Turning swords to plowshares is something we can all do.

I don't know that I've ever seen a more dramatic example of someone choosing the language of peace than what I saw -- what we all saw -- this week. It was when a Londoner named Ingrid Kennett got off her bus and hurried over to try to help a man that she saw was badly hurt. It was soldier Lee Rigby, and he had already died. And in the midst of the most violent scene any of us can imagine, Ingrid Kennett walked over to the man who was his killer, and chose to speak words of calm. She asked him why he had done what he'd done. "We want to start a war," he said. "Well, really," she said, gently, "is that reasonable?" And then she just stayed there. She just stayed there with him. "I thought it was a good idea to keep talking with him," she said, later, "just in case he was planning to hurt anyone else."

I don't know what all the answers are to what tears our world apart right now. But I do know that the answers, when they come, will surely be spoken in the same language that Ingrid Kennett spoke, a language of gentleness and calm, a language of selflessness and concern.

God willing, none of us will ever be in any place remotely like that London street. But we do, each one of us, each day, choose the language we speak. We

choose whether we will speak the language of swords or of plowshares; we choose whether to use cutting words or to sow love and understanding; we make our choices between hurt or healing each day.

The peace that Micah dreamed of begins in each of us; the peace our soldiers longed for begins in each of us; the peaceable kingdom that God imagined for us begins in each of us.

We choose the language of love, and we work toward the day when the language of war is a forgotten language, a vocabulary no longer needed, no longer known.

“I ain't gonna study war no more.” Or as they would say in Serbia:

*Mir (meer):* **Peace.**

Amen.