Atom Yee Sharing A Faith Story
Willow Glen United Methodist Church
July 14, 2013

Good morning!

I want to thank Pastor Rebecca for the opportunity this morning to share a personal story from my faith journey. She told me that the theme at church this month is about how the Holy Spirit inspires us, leads us, and guides us. Terrific! I can work with that.

First, let me tell you a little bit about my background and my upbringing to provide some context.

I was born in 1947 in Shanghai, China in a United States Army Hospital. My father was a member of the U.S. Army Intelligence unit stationed in Shanghai at the Allied Occupational Forces Headquarters following the end of World War II.

My father came to the U.S. from China when he was 11, and grew up in Detroit, Michigan's Chinatown. He was born a citizen because his grandfather had emigrated much earlier and become a naturalized citizen.

My father was baptized in the 1930s at Central United Methodist Church in downtown Detroit. When he was 18, a marriage was arranged for him by a match maker in China, and he returned to the village in China to marry my mother, sight unseen.

Shortly after their marriage, my older sister Susie was conceived, but my father had to return to the U.S. before Susie was born. Before my father could return to China for my mother and sister, as promised, Japan invaded China. My mom and dad were separated for 11 years.

After Japan was defeated and the U.S. became involved in the Chinese civil war on the side of Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist Army, my father enlisted in the U.S. Army with the hope of being assigned to China. His prayers were answered and he was stationed in Shanghai. Shortly after he arrived there, he took a couple of days of leave to travel to the village in Southern China, meet my sister for the first time, and bring Susie and my mother back to Shanghai with him.

That is how I came to be born a U.S. citizen, in Shanghai in 1947. My parents, Susie, and I left China in November of 1948 on a U.S. troop transport ship as the U.S. Army evacuated Shanghai because the Red Army of the Chinese Communist Party was marching on the city.

Our family ended up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where my younger sister Lotus was born. My two sisters and I thrived there. My parents ran a Mom-and-Pop grocery store for a number of years. We were members of Central United Methodist Church in Albuquerque, an interesting coincidence because it has the same name as my father's Detroit church.

My childhood was filled with the usual stuff: Little League Baseball, Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts, camping in the Rocky Mountains, and lots of Vacation Bible School. I have fond memories of serving as an acolyte at the church. Acolytes not only lit the candles, we rang the bells, opened the Holy Bible at the beginning of the services, and generally did other things to help the worship services run smoothly.

Although life was good, we were poor for a long time. For example, in third grade I played violin for a year with a loaner instrument from the elementary school, and I loved it. The loaner program was discontinued the next year, and we could not afford to rent an instrument for me so I had to give it up. Despite the economic challenges, my parents were hard working, enterprising, and committed to the success of the family. They were very proud to be able to send their three kids to college.

My faith story today is about a very difficult time in my life in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Many of you will remember that this was a time of great turmoil in the country. Last week, we heard a 50th anniversary reading of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a memorable plea for peace and brotherhood. In addition to the Civil Rights Movement, there was another significant source of tension and contention in America, namely the Vietnam War. Both the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War weighed heavily on my generation, both when I was in high school from 1962 to 1965 and when I was in college from 1965 to 1969.

The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was written when I was in high school, in April of 1963. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated a few months later, in November of 1963. Five years later, when I was in college, Dr. King and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated within months of each other.

The Vietnam War became part of my consciousness when I was in high school. My family watched the Huntley Brinkley report or Walter Cronkite every night, and saw Defense Secretary McNamara's diagrams of the war's daily progress and casualty count. The fighting and American involvement progressed with increasing intensity through the terms of Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. By the time I was in college, the national debate over America's role in this war had become hugely polarizing. It divided families, friendship groups, and church congregations.

While in college, my spiritual life revolved around Sunday services at the school's chapel and subsequent conversations with my roommates, some of whom went to divinity school and some of whom joined the military after college. The university chaplain, Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., was a nationally known antiwar activist at the time. He and others caused me to begin questioning my own views. Up until this time, I had supported the war that President Kennedy had promulgated. I was starting to feel conflicted. On the one hand, I had been supporting the war out of my sense of duty and loyalty for America, but on the other hand I was feeling at odds with my Christian beliefs about peace and nonviolence.

In addition to the morality of the war itself, the military draft was the "in your face" issue constantly on the minds of college students, particularly male students. In the 1960s, all male citizens were required to register for the draft within 30 days of their 18th birthday. Full-time college students received deferments from military service under the Selective Service Act. If one did not qualify for a deferment, then one was subject to the draft, meaning a call for induction into the U.S. Army for a two-year period of military service, possibly to see combat in Vietnam.

My friends, professors, and colleagues engaged in countless debates about moral, ethical and religious issues surrounding not only the war but also the military draft. Why were we, as students, so lucky to have deferments when others – who were not college students - were not as fortunate? Was this fair? Many of us also had friends and relatives who were killed or wounded in the course of military service. It was a difficult and painful time.

In June of 1969 I graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in chemistry and headed to graduate school at the brand new campus of the University of California at Santa Cruz.
At about that same time, student deferments from military service for graduate students had just been eliminated. This meant that my graduate school studies would likely be interrupted by the draft. After consulting with the chemistry faculty at UC Santa Cruz, I applied for an occupational deferment from my Local Draft Board in Albuquerque. The deferment was based

on the national importance of the chemical research I would be conducting as a graduate student. I traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to meet with the NM State Selective Service office to advocate for my request.

In September of 1969, the first national lottery for the draft was held. The lottery randomly determined the order, based on birthdates, of who would be called for military service in the eligible age groups.

Does anyone here remember "The Draft Lottery?"

I heard the results of the lottery on my car radio, sitting in the parking lot of a supermarket along East Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz, on a dreary, rainy September night. My number was 62. This meant I was definitely going to be drafted if my request for occupational deferment was denied. And so it was. In mid April 1970 I received a letter from the Selective Service Board telling me that I was Classified 1-A. Shortly after that, I received my formal Order to Report for Induction.

During this time, college campuses around the country were the scenes of increasing student opposition to the Vietnam War. In the spring of 1970 two significant events occurred that changed the course of history and changed my life.

The country of Cambodia, bordering Vietnam, was neutral in the war between Communist North Vietnam and American-allied South Vietnam. Even though Cambodia declared its neutrality, South Vietnam believed that North Vietnamese military forces and its rebel Viet Cong ally in South Vietnam were using Cambodian territory near the border for refuge and staging. On April 30, 1970 President Nixon announced to the country that the United States would participate with South Vietnam in the invasion of Cambodia.

This was significant event Number One. The invasion of Cambodia was a punch in the gut. It was the tipping point that made me realize how wrong this war I was supporting, even tentatively, was. The invasion of Cambodia caused me to lose any confidence I had in our government. I no longer had any faith in the credibility of our military leaders. The political justifications for the war began to seem empty. Most seriously, I began to question myself intensely about my moral and religious beliefs.

Didn't I learn in Isaiah about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks?

Didn't I learn in Genesis that "thou shall not kill?"

How could I support the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King's message of peace and non-violence, and still support the violence and killing of the Vietnam War?

Dr. King spoke on this issue at Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967. The speech was titled "A Time to Break Silence." His message was one of peace and nonviolence across the board – both for the Civil Rights Movement, and in Vietnam. I was beginning to listen and understand.

On college campuses, demonstrations against the Cambodian Campaign were mounting. A few days later, on May 4, 1970 at Kent State University in Ohio, the Ohio National Guard fired into a group of anti-war demonstrators, killing 4 students.

This was significant event Number Two. If the invasion of Cambodia was a punch in the gut, the killing of those 4 students by the Ohio National Guard was a stab in the heart, and my heart was broken. I remember crying for days.

For days I did some serious, deep, prayerful Christian reflection. Why was this happening? Was there something I could do, or not do? I realized that I had neglected so much of what I had been taught as a Christian. I concluded in my discernment that war is intrinsically and constitutionally incompatible with the teachings of Jesus. Jesus said to love your enemies and refuse violence. Jesus called us to be peacemakers.

As a result of this discernment, my religious compass became my moral compass.

It did not take long for the change in my life to begin. After consultation with friends, my family and religious colleagues, including the campus minister at UC Santa Cruz, who was an ordained United Methodist minister, I decided to apply for Conscientious Objector status.

The story gets more complicated at this point, largely due to the intricacies of the Selective Service System. The first wrinkle in the story is that qualification for Conscientious Objector status AFTER one receives an Order to Report for Induction requires an extra explanation about why the request for Conscientious Objector status did not come before the Order to Report, or at the time of registration for the draft. That actually was not a problem. I articulated my explanation about the how the Cambodian Invasion and the Kent State University shootings prompted my discernment about conscientious objection and my maturing as a Christian.

The second wrinkle was that qualification for Conscientious Objector status required documentation of strict religious training and belief. It was not until two years later, in the fall of 1972, that the United States Supreme Court ruled that a conscientious objector need no longer object on the basis of religious training and belief, but could object on the basis of philosophical and moral beliefs.

I worked quickly to prepare my application and asked for letters of support. I found out through telephone calls from Santa Cruz to Albuquerque that my childhood pastor at Central Methodist had moved on to become the District Superintendent in Enid, Oklahoma, which was closer to his family. He was most supportive, gave me lots of good advice, appreciated my Christian resolve, and wrote an outstanding letter that documented my religious training during his pastorate. Later, I found out that the chair of the Local Draft Board in Albuquerque, which had jurisdiction over my case and was known to be unfriendly toward conscientious objectors, was coincidentally a member of Central United Methodist Church.

Throughout this process, I also learned that the greater United Methodist Church has a long history of working for peace, historic opposition to compulsory military training and service, and, in particular, strong support for conscientious objectors.

The third wrinkle involved my request for support from a close friend in the church, a lay deacon with whom I felt very close while I was a child and young adult in Albuquerque. Following a lengthy and friendly phone conversation, he wrote to me to say that he had decided he could not support my application for conscientious objection after all. He told me that he was a seriously disabled veteran of World War II, which I already knew, and that he volunteered to serve his country long before World War II began. "I stood up to be counted as a good citizen and to take my chances of death or disability without fear." He went on to tell me that he had already lost two nephews in the Vietnam War, which I did not know. Though he stated that he would respect me for my own decisions, it was clear that we had experienced a chasm in our relationship. While I felt enormously disappointed and saddened, I had to respect his beliefs, too.

My former pastor sent me words of comfort. In that letter, he said he wasn't surprised by the position of the lay deacon, and also said "One of the most distinctive characteristics of Methodists from John Wesley's time until now is: we think and we let think, and we keep in our community of faith those who disagree with us." Indeed, this point is found in the United Methodist Church document on Church and Peace in the section about Conscientious

Objection: “The church must hold within its fellowship persons who sincerely differ at this point of critical decision, call all to repentance, mediate to all God’s mercy, minister to all in Christ’s name.”

As one story ends, another one begins. For me, the good news was receiving the letter in July 1970 from the Local Draft Board in Albuquerque that I had been reclassified as a Conscientious Objector. I was now a card carrying “1-O” and required to perform “civilian work contributing to the maintenance of the national health, safety, or interest…”

My Alternate Civilian Service was spent in Boston, Massachusetts doing research at Tufts-New England Medical Center, for less-than-minimum-wage pay. After two years, in August of 1972, I returned to California to start graduate school all over again.

Last week in worship service the hymn that spoke to me was “We Shall Overcome.” Dr. King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail was both inspirational and a sign exemplified in the civil rights movement that God works through so many different people and in different ways. This week, the hymn that speaks to me is “This Is My Song,” which is also known as A Song of Peace. Pastor Rebecca suggested this hymn to me for today.

“This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.”

Whether the lands afar are in Southeast Asia or in the Middle East,

“This is my prayer, O Lord of all earth's kingdoms:
Thy kingdom come; on earth thy will be done.”

Amen.