

**KILLING ONE'S CHILDREN  
IN ISHIGURO'S *ARTIST OF A FLOATING WORLD***

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
August 12, 2012**

Last Sunday's Old Testament reading from Second Samuel described the results of David taking Bathsheba as his eighth wife<sup>i</sup> after having her husband Uriah put in the front lines in battle to be killed: "The thing that David had done displeased the Lord... Thus says the Lord... Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house... I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house."<sup>ii</sup> Sure enough, this week's reading<sup>iii</sup> describes the culmination of David's son Absalom's revolt against his father and attempt to take his throne. Absalom has worked to steal the hearts of the Israelite people away from his father and then has had himself crowned king. David is forced to flee from his capital city, Jerusalem. But then he gathers troops to fight against Absalom and his followers and defeats them. One of his greatest generals, Joab, and his armor-bearers kill Absalom. But the father, David, ends up deeply mourning the loss of his son, weeping: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son."<sup>iv</sup>

How does it happen that a parent ends up being responsible for killing his own child? Today's reading explains that David has ordered his generals to deal gently, for his sake, with his son Absalom. But this is war, and Absalom has made himself the enemy, and he who lives by the sword ends up dying by the sword. Yet, we remember that David has started a chain reaction by his own sin of having one of his soldiers killed so that David could take his beautiful wife, acting profoundly unethically and in effect becoming a murderer. What goes around comes around.

There's a poignant novel by Japanese-born British writer Kazuo Ishiguro which has touched me in its recounting of how parents can unwittingly kill their own children. It's called *An Artist of the Floating World*,<sup>vi</sup> and it's dedicated to the author's parents.<sup>vi</sup> If the train of responsibility is run backwards, we can see, much like King David, how a loving father can bear responsibility for a chain of events that leads to his son's death.

Masuji Ono as a teenager decided to take up painting as a profession, despite the fact that his own father was deeply opposed and burned all of Ono's paintings when he was fifteen.<sup>vii</sup> His father, who had assumed that Ono would take over the family business, was particularly concerned because he felt that artists generally lived "in squalor and poverty...inhabit[ing] a world which gives them every temptation to become weak-willed and depraved."<sup>viii</sup> His destruction of the canvases, though, only succeeded in kindling Ono's ambition to be a great artist.

For a number of years he worked under art masters who taught him how to represent the "floating world" of geishas and nightclubs. In the early 1930's, though, he was convinced to turn his talents to producing propaganda art for the new imperialistic Japan. By that time he was an established artist and had his own students, whom he taught to rise above what he called decadent influences – the frivolous and the grotesque – in order to further the "more manly spirit...emerging in Japan"<sup>ix</sup> One of his paintings was called "Complacency," showing "three fat, well-dressed men, sitting in a comfortable bar laughing together," while near them was the image of three boys in rags "in front of a squalid shanty hut", holding "sticks in classic kendo stances" and wearing "the manly scowls of samurai warriors ready to fight."<sup>x</sup> Then there was a later re-working of this painting which "as a print in the thirties, achieved a certain fame and influence" called "Eyes to the Horizon," with three well-dressed, nervous looking men and three stern-faced

soldiers, two holding rifles with bayonets and an officer in the middle holding out his sword from a superimposed coastline of Japan, “pointing the way forward, west towards Asia.” There was a backdrop of the military flag of the rising sun and words on the left margin reading “No time for cowardly talking. Japan must go forward.”<sup>xi</sup>

At one point in the novel we learn that Ono, as official adviser to the national Committee of Unpatriotic Activities, turns in his most gifted student to the police as a traitor – because he’s not willing to move from painting the floating world to painting works of propaganda for the gathering war effort. The student’s paintings were burned, just as Ono’s father had burned his paintings, and the young man was imprisoned, beaten, tortured, and permanently injured.<sup>xii</sup>

What becomes difficult in this sensitively written, deeply nuanced book is the realization for the reader that Ono really was trying act morally to further the best interests of his country during this period. The story is primarily set in the post-war years of 1948-1950, when the novel’s characters know that Japan has been defeated. A new generation of citizens, including Ono’s two daughters and their husbands, has come to condemn the imperialism and militarism that led to the Japanese war of aggression, both to the west into Asia and to the East to Pearl Harbor. Ono is then able to admit that, “I made many mistakes. I accept that what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people.” Yet, he also explains that, “at the time I acted in good faith. I believed in all sincerity I was achieving good for my fellow countrymen.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Ono stops painting for a number of years after the war, but then begins again in 1950 with watercolors of plants and flowers, perhaps moving back in the direction of depicting the floating world of beauty and pleasure.<sup>xiv</sup> At the same time, he talks with old friends about how leading up to the war they “acted on what we believed and did our utmost.”<sup>xv</sup> They “took some

bold steps and often did things with much single-mindedness,” which they think might be “preferable to never putting one’s convictions to the test, for lack of will or courage.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Then there’s the dimension of personal ambition and of self-esteem. They speak about their aspiration “to be something more than ordinary,”<sup>xxvii</sup> their commitment “to risk everything in the endeavor to rise above the mediocre”<sup>xxviii</sup> Ono always had his father’s words echoing in his ears: that he had “a weak streak that would give him a tendency toward slothfulness.”<sup>xxix</sup> So, instead he wanted to be a person of “courage and integrity.”<sup>xxx</sup>

But it was the Japanese nationalism and imperialism that Ono furthered which killed his only son, we learn. Drafted to become a soldier in the war effort, his son, Kenji, died along with twenty-three other young Japanese men in a “hopeless charge” across a minefield in Manchuria.<sup>xxxi</sup> Ono’s son-in-law, who made it back alive from the war, is bitter as he says to Ono in 1948, ““What really makes me angry...[is] that those who sent the likes of Kenji out there to die these brave deaths, where are they today? They’re carrying on with their lives, much the same as ever... Brave young men die for stupid causes, and the real culprits are still with us, afraid to show themselves for what they are... To my mind, that’s the greatest cowardice of all.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Hard for a father to hear, when he knows that he bears some level of responsibility for his own son’s death.

So, what about us today – those of us who have children, those of us who will have children before too long, and those of us who parent in other ways? Where are we at greatest risk of killing our children? I would guess, at least now in the middle of summer 2012, it’s in the area of our collective inability or unwillingness to take meaningful action to stop global warming. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration told us this week that this July was the hottest month ever recorded in the Lower 48 states, breaking a record set during the Dust Bowl

of the 1930's. Their records go back to 1895. In fact, the first seven months of 2012 were the warmest on record for this nation. Of course, global warming means weather extremes of all kinds from region to region, with records continually being set throughout the U.S. this year for storms, drought, heavy rainfall, and unusual temperatures. And there is scientific consensus that "this would not have happened in the absence of human-caused climate change."<sup>xxiii</sup> The World Health Organization estimates that global warming is now leading to 150,000 deaths and 5 million illnesses annually, and the rate at which we are killing our children and ourselves is increasing with each passing day.<sup>xxiv</sup> So we need desperately to exercise political will and personal will to stop the killing.

Jesus says in today's gospel lesson,<sup>xxv</sup> "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The Kingdom of God, promised to come on earth as it is in heaven, for which Jesus saw himself as the harbinger and as the first fruits, is entirely life affirming. It stands against the ravages of war ("Blessed are the peacemakers"<sup>xxvi</sup>). It promotes community and social justice ("Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."<sup>xxvii</sup>). It has the golden rule as its centerpiece ("In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."). These are the things we need to align ourselves with to stop the killing, to never be thirsty, to never be hungry, to eat the bread of life. "O God...Reclaim our lives and bring from death new birth."<sup>xxviii</sup>

## **BENEDICTION**

The courage of the early morning's dawning  
And the strength of the eternal hills,  
And the peace of the evening's ending,  
And the love of God, be always in our hearts. AMEN. (Anonymous)

## NOTES

- 
- <sup>i</sup> See 1 Samuel 18:27 and 1 Chronicles 3: 1-5.
- <sup>ii</sup> 2 Samuel 11:27; 12:10-11.
- <sup>iii</sup> 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33.
- <sup>iv</sup> 2 Samuel 18:33.
- <sup>v</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (New York: Vintage, 1989).
- <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-48.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-114, 181-184.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Seth Borenstein, "July Was Hottest Month on Record," *San Jose Mercury News* (August 9, 2012).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Larry West, "Global Warming Leads to 150,000 Deaths Every Year", *New York Times* (2012), [http://environment.about.com/od/globalwarmingandhealth/a/gw\\_deaths.htm](http://environment.about.com/od/globalwarmingandhealth/a/gw_deaths.htm), downloaded on August 11, 2012.
- <sup>xxv</sup> John 6: 35, 41-51.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Matthew 5:9.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Matthew 5:6.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Jane Parker Huber, "O God, to Whom We Sing" (1982).