

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

November 6, 2011

War

(Seventh in series, Contemporary Issues in Religion and Morality)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Luke 22:35-38; Matthew 5:9 NRSV

“War” might be an unusual title for a sermon. Perhaps a Christian sermon would be better titled *War and Peace* like Tolstoy’s great novel. The holiness of peace, complicated and difficult though it is to achieve, is surely the blessing for which all people of true religion pray and strive. But national decisions about whether or not to go to war, and individual decisions about whether or not to participate in a war, those are questions with which Christian people might deeply struggle. The topics in this sermon series were not chosen because there are simple right and wrong opinions about them but rather because of the impact they have upon our lives. And there may be few things which have a more profound impact upon the world than war. So you might not find a definitive answer to the question of war this morning, and, as always, you are invited to disagree, if you wish, with what is said here—after all, clergy are charged at ordination with the authority to preach, not to preach authoritatively. And what value would be the Christian pulpit that never considers important issues just because they are complex? Those might need careful biblical reflection all the more! Hence the one word subject this morning, “War”.

Although there are differences of opinion among sincere Christian people about whether or not armed conflict is ever at all right, and further disagreement about whether or not it is right in any particular situation, there seem to me to be only two general positions from which a Christian might choose. One would be that violence is never ever a proper Christian response to anything and that a Christian should never be a soldier. This position is pacifism. The other possible Christian point of view is that war may sometimes be necessary in order to stop an even greater evil. This is often called the Just War Theory. No matter which position is taken, for Christian people the one common value that must stand behind it is the belief that it is the most loving thing to do under the circumstances. Love is always the measure of what is right and wrong for Christians.

I went to college from 1968 to 1972. This was during the height of the Vietnam War. The college I attended was Elizabethtown College in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. It is a school affiliated with the Church of the Brethren, a pacifist denomination. I have never been a member of the Church of the Brethren. I just attended one of their colleges. Because the official position of the Church of the Brethren is pacifism, any member of the Church of the Brethren is almost automatically excused from military service for religious reasons. Throughout American history young men from the Church of the

Brethren as from the Mennonite, Amish, and Quaker traditions chose to serve their country in times of war through alternative service, such as in a medical corps or other non combat role wherein they were not required to carry a weapon. Many lost their lives serving in war zones in some type of alternative service. But during the Vietnam War years many members of the pacifist churches chose not to obey the draft laws and either fled the country or were willing to go to jail because they did not think it right even to cooperate with a process central to the prosecution of a war which to their minds was so contrary to Christian values. Being a religion and philosophy major on the campus of a Church of the Brethren college during the Vietnam War years was an excellent opportunity to learn about Christian pacifism. I was not a pacifist when I started my college studies nor was I at their completion, nor am I now, but I thought about it, a lot.

For most of the pacifists I met on campus, students and professors alike, I had great respect. They were sincere. I really think they would have allowed themselves to be hurt or killed if the only way to prevent it would have been to hurt or kill their attacker. They were willing to defend themselves but they were not willing to harm someone else while doing it. As a simple hypothetical example, if someone were to attempt to punch one of them in the nose, they would have done their best to avoid the blow but they would not have offered a blow of their own in return. Pure Christian pacifists believe that violence is always wrong no matter what and that violence almost always leads only to more violence. For them the decision about war is always clear. They believe that war is always wrong. For them there are no just wars. For them there is really no greater evil than war. And while I disagree with them, I have great respect for them. If you are one, I look up to you. Christian pacifists are not cowards. They will take the blow. They will even allow their lives to be ended if they must. It requires great courage to look an enemy in the eye and say, I will not fight no matter what you do to me. Perhaps I am not a pacifist because I do not have what it takes.

I would rather think that I am not a pacifist because I do not believe that in all situations pacifism is the most loving thing. I am not sure if he was the first to say it, but I first remember hearing this statement from General Alexander Haig. During his confirmation hearing to be Secretary of State in the Reagan Administration, Haig said, "I believe there are some things worse than war." That forthright statement really helped to clarify the issue for me. I agree with Haig here. I think there are some things even worse than war. This seems especially true to me when thinking of others who are on the receiving end of violence and unable to defend themselves. Is it the loving thing to allow innocent people to suffer someone else's violence if we have the power to intervene? Would it be the loving thing to allow a cruel and ruthless demagogue of a foreign nation to destroy or oppress the citizens of our own country if we have the capability to stop it? Would it be the loving thing just to submit the world to the tyranny of psychopathic megalomaniacs who have no conscience if one was able to put an end to them? If only violence can succeed against the perpetrators of terrible crimes against innocent people or nations then would not a compassionate Christian choose to use it? For me the answer to that question is yes.

From the Christian point of view the important thing would be to make sure that violence is only ever used as an absolute last resort, and implemented only ever reluctantly when all else has been tried and failed. Of that there really can be no dissent among reasonable Christian people who believe in the possibility of a just war.

Christian Just War Theory has a long history from the earliest church fathers to the present day. One of the most important modern Just War theorists was Reformed Church theologian Reinhold Niebuhr writing the book in 1939, *Why Christians are not Pacifist*. Niebuhr's Reformed Church became part of the United Church of Christ in 1957 and thus we can claim Reinhold Niebuhr as one of our own. The position held by most of the leaders and members of the UCC and its parent denominations over the years has been that of Just War Theory, not pacifism.

Just War Theory is divided into three parts: the decision to go to war, the prosecution of the war, and the ending of the war. Although each theorist tweaks the principles by which a war may be justified, some basic guidelines prevail.

In order for Christian decision makers to rightly choose to go to war the following qualifications must be met. First, it must be a just cause. In other words, it must be for the protection of innocent life which might not be protected any other way. Second, there must be comparative justice. In other words, the suffering inflicted must not be greater than the suffering the enemy has caused. Third, the one making the decision to go to war must be a competent legal authority. Fourth, there must be a high probability of victory. It would not be Christian to inflict terrible suffering and destruction attempting to end an injustice if from the beginning there is little probability of success. Fifth, the war must be a last resort. All other steps to end the injustice must be tried before resorting to war. And sixth, there must be proportionality. The determined benefits must outweigh the costs. Only when those six criteria are met might there be a decision to go to war that could be called Christian.

But after the decision to go to war is made, there are principles that Christians must follow in fighting the war. Military operations must be against enemy combatants only and all efforts must be made to avoid innocent civilian casualties. And because what is known now as collateral damage is so prevalent with the use of ever more powerful and non discriminating explosives, I personally would add to this principle the caution that civilian death and injury must be avoided even if it means increased danger for members of the military. In warfare today, more civilians are killed than military personnel. To my mind that is contrary to the principles of Christian Just War Theory.

Determining the end of a war has guidelines too. A war should be ended as soon as the safety of civilians and justice for them has been restored. Those responsible for the original crimes which caused the war are to be brought to justice and no revenge or satisfaction is to be taken on anyone else.

The purpose of the sermon this morning is not to determine the rightness or wrongness of any particular war our country has fought. Those of us who agree with Just

War Theory might conclude that some wars we have waged were more justified than others. Those of us who are pacifists would say that none of them were. But that every Christian has a responsibility to think carefully about something with such horrific consequences as war is to my mind beyond dispute. And as Christians we surely want also to think as hard about the ways in which war might be prevented. I remember what a past French President, Jacques Chirac, once said, "War always means failure." Indeed. Whenever there is war the goal of all people of true religion to keep the peace has not been met. The primary responsibility of diplomacy has fallen short. *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God!* How the world needs them now.

Most of us who agree with some form of Just War Theory honor our military and are grateful for the sacrifices its members are willing to make on our behalf. We believe that there is evil in the world and sometimes we must do what we would rather not in order to stop the suffering it causes. But may God save us from over making the point. There is this insightful episode in the life of Jesus which might not get enough attention when considering the question of war. Jesus was once discussing with the disciples the difficulty of living in a world where evil exists when one of the disciples said, *Lord, look, here are two swords.* Jesus replied, *it is enough.*