

WAR & PEACE

This morning we hear Jesus say something rather strange. He tells His disciples, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace, but a sword.” This is strange of course because it seems to fly in the face of everything Jesus had previously taught His disciples. How do we reconcile Christ bringing the sword with Christ turning the other cheek? When we read the Gospels as a whole it is clear that as a general rule Jesus is opposed to violence of any kind. Yes, Christ said He came to bring a sword, but when Peter tried to use his sword to defend Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus promptly told him to put it away. So the overarching message of Christ is indeed a message of love and mercy not vengeance and retaliation. He taught His disciples to love their enemies: to pray for them, to suffer persecution joyfully from their hands, and never repay evil with evil, but overcome evil with good. He even went so far as to praise the peacemakers as those who will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. With such clear evidence, then, why is the Christian Church on earth not opposed to all war and violence? In short, because the answer isn't as simple as it might first appear. While certainly praising and practicing non-violence, Jesus Himself spoke of a time and place for violence. He drove out the money changers from the temple using violent force. Jesus did not forbid military service, but instead counseled soldiers to be content with their pay and respect civil authority as being established by God Himself.

The history of the Christian Church bears out this positive use of Christ's message, but it also is pockmarked with abuses of the message, as well. Up until the time of Constantine in the 4th century, Christians were under heavy attack. Scores of Christians were persecuted, tortured and martyred for their faith. They were driven underground, and as such had little or no influence on civil government. This all changed with the legalization of Christianity. Suddenly, the Christian voice found favor, and with this new found favor came the need to develop theological views on a variety of topics, including crime and punishment, as well as warfare. Out of these heated conversations comes what is known today as the Just War Doctrine, which our western civilization owes to St. Augustine. St. Augustine, writing in the 5th century, laid out what would become the definitive Just War Theory, but he did so with a great deal of caution. Here's what he said: “Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity...in order that peace may be obtained. Therefore, even in waging a war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that, by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to

the advantages of peace...As violence is used toward him who rebels and resists, so mercy is due to the vanquished or captive". St. Augustine went on to develop 4 principles to guide rulers in waging a just war. In order for a war to be just there must be: (1) just cause, (2) right intention and motive, (3) it must be a last resort when all other options for compromise and peace have been exhausted, and finally (4) the inflicted damage must be proportionate to the good expectant.

But how do we reconcile all this? How do we reconcile the moral injunction of Jesus to love our enemies with the concept of just war against our enemies? Such questions turn on how you define love. In our emotionally charged society, the definition we usually associate with love leaves no room for moral or physical force. Our common definition of love implies acceptance and a "live and let live" philosophy. But this is not the Biblical definition of love. Love, according to God, does not imply license to do whatever you want. Love implies boundaries and fidelity. When Jesus told us to love our enemies, He was not promoting a blind endorsement of their actions, but rather emphasizing our responsibility towards our enemies. We have a responsibility towards all our neighbors, whether good or wicked, to direct them towards God and His Kingdom. To speak in Lutheran terms, loving our enemies, then, includes both Law and Gospel. We are called to love our enemies, which means sometimes applying the force of the Law when necessary. In some cases this includes violence and force to restrain their hands from sinning. Luther called this the Civil Use of the Law or the "Curb". But this is indeed a sensitive topic, and tricky to navigate, because sometimes the use of violence can further encourage more violence by inciting discontent, rebellion and insurrection. On the other hand, non-violence can further encourage violence, as well by allowing the violent to operate with impunity. In order to avoid these extremes, we must proceed with caution. Clarity of thought and the use of reason are essential. Above all, the virtue of prudence must guide our decision to act or not to act. Prudence in this sense means examining our motives to determine if the right Godly intentions are informing our actions. Am I using force to humiliate or to protect an individual or group? What is the aim or end goal of my actions? Is it to increase my own status or to defend the status of others? Is it to highlight my own physical prowess or empower the weak and give voice to the voiceless? Does it accentuate vanity and greed or restore harmony? We must constantly be checking our motives and intentions against the clarity of God's revealed Word lest our sinful inclinations carry the day. Before we act, we must always seek God's counsel

through study of His Word and prayer. This means that the whole life of a Christian is an examined life: a life of reflection, repentance and, if needs be, redirection. What is done on an individual level, must be encouraged on a national level, as well. Lawmakers, rulers and elected government officials have an obligation before God to protect the innocent, defend the defenseless, and promote natural rights such as access to basic bodily needs like food, clothing and shelter, provide security, and promote liberty. The Christian has much to say on these natural laws, and rulers of State need to hear the Christian voice to be reminded of the delicate balance, which exists between war and peace.

Make no mistake about it, all war is evil and a sad reflection of our sinful disunion. We follow Christ in being against war and violence on all levels, and look instead to the promised realm of heaven where there will be no suffering or pain or bloodshed. As Christians, we would like nothing more than to heed the words of the prophet Isaiah and beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:4). But sometimes this isn't possible and we must carry out the words of the prophet Joel and beat those same plowshares back into swords and those same pruning hooks back into spears (Joel 3:10). Our God is still a God of order not chaos, and sometimes force is necessary to achieve this noble end. The quest for true and permanent justice in this world is doomed, but dedication to this impossible task is still commanded by God. We are not pacifists nor are we warmongers. Yes, God calls us to be meek and forgiving. But meekness must not be confused with weakness. Meekness is better defined as strength controlled. We control our strength and apply it only when necessary, as a last resort, to check the savagery of sin. So for the love of our neighbor sometimes war is unavoidable, but we should carry out this unfortunate task lamenting our responsibility. Amen.