

WHAT WOULD JESUS SAY ABOUT WAR?

Matthew 5:1-12

Dr. J. Howard Olds

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Once more we Americans gather for worship amidst the imminent danger of war. This week our government officials told us to gather supplies of food and water, make emergency communication plans with our families, and buy duct tape. Many of our sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters have been deployed to military alert positions. Today we wait for yet another United Nations resolution.

In one sense, there is nothing new about wars and rumors of wars. In my lifetime alone, there have been over a half million Americans killed and nearly another million wounded on the battlefields of international conflict. Everybody seems to have an opinion now as they have in the past. Editorialists fill our newspapers and sound off on television. Demonstrators are marching. Religious leaders, including our own bishops, are speaking. To enter this discussion as your pastor is not something I take lightly nor do thoughtlessly. After all it was my father who kept saying to me, "It's better to be thought a fool than to speak up and remove all doubt." I think about that today. On the one hand, enough has already been said. On the other hand, you keep asking. So in a spirit of prayer and deep humility, I share some thoughts with you today that I hope might guide us as we seek our way forward in this diverse body of faith, as citizens of a beloved country in a world that desperately needs to discover community.

United Methodists have never been of one mind about war. Officially we believe "war is incompatible with the teachings of Christ and urge the peaceful settlement of disputes among nations. However, the Church acknowledges that when peaceful alternatives have failed, armed force may be necessary." We support those who serve in the military and those who conscientiously object to such service. Some of us are pacifists. Others of us endorse "just war" theories. All of us yearn for the day when peace and justice will prevail for all people of all nations. That is where our denomination stands. No one else, not even the bishops of this church, can change that.

WHAT SHALL WE BELIEVE?

Ultimately, down in the depths of our own hearts, each of us must decide what we believe. Historically, religious people have held various views of war and peace. For many of you today this is old news, but I share it as a history lesson to provide a foundation for a call to prayer that I want to make in this service.

Historically, moral people have looked at war in varieties of ways. There has historically been what is called a Holy War Tradition. It is the belief that God uses war to accomplish His will.

Deuteronomy 20 contains the children of Israel's instructions for war: *In the cities that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them. Otherwise they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God if you fail to do so.* Harsh words, hard words.

On November 27, 1095 A.D. Pope Urban II called on the people of Western Europe to liberate the holy sites of Jerusalem from the domain of the Muslim Turks. So began the Crusades, a ruthless, blood thirsty, barbaric undertaking by cross-carrying Christians in an effort to deliver holy places from infidels. It is an ugly picture on the face of Christian history.

If the thought of Holy War sounds barbaric, foreign and far away, let me remind you of some current events:

The Al Quida declared Holy War against the United States on September 11, 2001. Shortly thereafter, President Bush began talking about the Axis of Evil and our need to wipe it off the face of the earth.

Television evangelist, Charles F. Stanley, in a recent sermon said, "Throughout Scripture there is evidence that God favors war for divine reasons and sometimes uses it to accomplish His will. Now is the time for God's people to rise up as a unified body against the global threat of evil and terror."

Let me say to you today that I believe such talk breaks the heart of Jesus Christ, who came to earth as the Prince of Peace.

At the other end of the spectrum there have been moral people of the past who have picked up the Pacifist Tradition. In essence, pacifists hold an opposition to all killing, all military service, and all warfare.

Justin Martyr in the second century A.D. announced that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise of peace. Christians, therefore, have "in every part of the world converted our weapons of war into implements of peace." Fundamentally, that is where the Christian church stood until the time of Constantine.

There continue to be whole denominations of Christians who are pacifists in their whole approach to life - the Mennonites, Church of the Brethren, Quakers. They maintain this witness even today.

More often, individuals make this witness. Mahatma Gandhi walked alone as a disarming presence of love into the incredible violence between Hindus and Muslims in the villages of India in 1946 - 1947. Certainly Jesus encouraged his followers to bless their persecutors, to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, and to give two coats when asked for one. Were these instructions intended as national policy or principles of personal piety remains a matter of public debate. Jesus may or may not have been a pacifist. Nobody really knows.

In between those two poles, moral people of the past have developed what is called a Just War Theory. The Just War Theory is a complex set of criteria established for the purposes of morally restraining any resort to war. Introduced by St. Augustine in the 4th century, after Christians had abandoned their pacifist stance, and revised in the Middle Ages by St. Thomas Aquinas, these principles continue to instruct morally sensitive people concerning war.

In essence they are contained in these five principles:

Is there a Just Cause? A decision for war must vindicate justice itself in response to

serious evil, such as an aggressive attack. Remember Pearl Harbor.

Is there a Just Intent? The ends sought must include the restoration of peace with justice and must not seek self-aggrandizement or the total devastation of another nation.

Last Resort—Every possibility of peaceful settlement of a conflict must be tried before war is begun.

Legitimate Authority—A decision for war may be made and declared only by properly constituted governmental authority.

Reasonable Hope for Success—Can the ends sought be achieved?

In addition to these traditional Just War teachings there are also guidelines presented by that school of thought for conduct during a conflict and they include:

Discrimination—Respect for the rights of enemy people, which rules out atrocities, reprisals, looting, and wanton violence.

Proportionality—The amount of damage inflicted must be strictly in proportion to the ends sought. The war's harm must not exceed the war's good.

Has the case been made for a Just War against Iraq? While this remains a debate of strong opinions, there appear to be questions that deserve an answer.

Will a pre-emptive attack on Iraq set a precedent and increase terrorism?

Have we reached a last resort?

Who is the legitimate civil authority to decide?

Neither you nor I have the final answer nor will we make the final decision. Let us pray for those who do.

Let me turn now to a more practical question, WHAT SHALL WE DO?

As we try to live our lives, baptize our children, raise our families and go about our daily lives, what shall we do in a moment like this? Let me suggest three things.

Live by faith, not fear—Jesus said in John 14:27 *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.* Fear is a reaction to the unknown. So is faith. Somewhere down in the depths of our hearts we will choose whether we will live by faith or by fear.

During the Gulf War scud missiles from Iraq were fired on the nation of Israel. The threat was so real that the people of Israel were equipped with gas masks and atropine syringes. Every household was told to prepare a sealed room. Studies following the war revealed that more people died from heart failure brought on by fear and stress than from the scud missiles themselves. I am not suggesting we bury our heads in the sand and pretend that all is well in our land. I am advocating that we face our fears as people of faith.

So on I go not knowing I would not if I might
I would rather walk in the dark with God than walk alone by light.
I would rather walk with him by faith, than walk alone by sight.

I don't know about you, but if we are called upon to suffer, I want to do it in the spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who kept pastoring churches and preaching in the presence of the Nazis. I want to do it in the spirit of Corrie ten Boom who kept praying on her way to the gas chambers. I don't want to be held up in some place alone. I want to be among people, healing hurts, sharing grief, holding the hands of others. This is no time for isolation. It is time for community and understanding and love. What can ordinary people like you and me do? We can live by faith every day.

What can ordinary people like you and me do? We can Become Peacemakers. There is one thing that is absolutely clear about the teachings of Jesus. It is not open to debate and argument. It is in the scripture reading for today. *Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God* (Matthew 5:9). Peace-makers are not necessarily peace wishers or peace hoppers. They may not even be peace walkers, or peace speakers or peace announcers, but Jesus calls us to the business of peacemaking.

Jesus is surely weeping over our world today as he wept over Jerusalem so long ago. *"If you had only known this day what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes."*

Peacemakers are persons whose hearts are so anchored in God that they do not need to be offended by the actions of others. Yes, we are commanded to love even our enemies. If we cannot stand to be in a church with people who differ with us a little, how on earth are we going to live in a world community that differs with us a lot? Or I ask you even a further question, how on earth are we going to find any happiness in heaven where people from every nation, every race and every country on earth shall gather? We had better be trying to find ways on earth to live with one another or else we will make a hell of heaven.

Peacemakers value life, respect people, work for the liberty and justice for all. They are willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of others. Jean Donovan, two weeks before she was assassinated in El Salvador as a missionary in 1980, wrote this letter to a friend. "The Peace Corps left today and my heart sank low. The danger is extreme and they were right to leave. Now I must assess my own position because I am not up for suicide. Several times I have decided to leave. I almost could except for the children, the poor victims of adult lunacy. Who would care for them?" Those are questions that peacemakers ask.

What can ordinary people like you and me do? We can pray for God's Intervention. Do you believe in prayer? I mean really, do you believe in prayer? Paul, talking about warring with the principalities and powers in the outer region of darkness in Ephesians, Chapter 6, says, *"Put on the whole armor of God!"* That's a hard message. Put on the armor of God. How much do you believe as a Christian about prayer?

What if, by the power of prayer, Saddam Hussein came to his senses and went into exile?

What if by prayer, President Bush became as patient as he is persistent?

What if on 3-3-03, as some of you have e-mailed me, the world united in one voice with one prayer asking for God's intervention into our troubled world?

What if we started now? What if we really prayed for peace? What if we really asked for forgiveness? What if we really knocked on the door of God's mercy until the lion lies down with the lamb and the people of earth study war no more?

Do you believe in prayer? If you believe in prayer, will you join with me in a prayer right now. Let me direct your praying.

Would you pray with me in this moment for direct intervention of God and all of His power in the presence of world affairs until there is peace and justice for all? Let us pray to the Lord.

Would you also pray today for President Bush and all of his advisors that they may have unusual discernment into the will of God? Let us pray to the Lord.

Would you pray for world leaders today as they make critical decisions and feel the weight and responsibility of their actions? Let us pray to the Lord.

Would you pray today for the men and women of our armed forces and their families as they have been called to service? Let us pray to the Lord.

Let us pray for Saddam Hussein and his leadership team that they may find a way to lead to peace. Let us pray to the Lord.

Let us pray for the people of Iraq, many of whom suffer already. Let us pray to the Lord.

Let the Church be the Church. Let the Church use its most powerful instrument. Let the Church learn to pray and out of the depths of your own heart today may you make your petitions known to God. Let us pray to the Lord.

Amen.

Let the Church be the Church. Let the Church use its most powerful instrument. Let the Church learn to pray and out of the depths of your own heart today may you make your petitions known to God. You may wish to kneel at the altar or you may wish to continue bowing in your pew.

Let us pray to the Lord.