
Sermon
Of War and Peace

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
November 8, 2009

First Reading: *Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight (in Springfield, Illinois)* by Vachel Lindsay

It is portentous, and a thing of state
That here at midnight, in our little town,
A mourning figure walks, and will not rest,
Near the old court-house pacing up and down.
Or by his homestead, or in shadowed yards
He lingers where his children used to play;
Or through the market, on the well-worn stones
He stalks until the dawn-stars burn away.

A bronzed, lank man! His suit of ancient black,
A famous high top-hat and plain work shawl
Make him the quaint great figure that men love,
The prairie-lawyer, master of us all.

He cannot sleep upon his hillside now.
He is among us: -- as in times before!
And we who toss and lie awake for long
Breathe deep, and start, to see him pass the door.

His head is bowed. He thinks on men and kings.
Yea, when the sick world cries, how can he sleep?
Too many peasants fight, they know not why,
Too many homesteads in black terror weep.

The sins of all the war-lords burn his heart.
He sees the dreadnaughts scouring every main.
He carries on his shawl-wrapped shoulders now
The bitterness, the folly, and the pain.

He cannot rest until a spirit-dawn
Shall come; -- the shining hope of Europe free:
The league of sober folk, the Workers' Earth
Bringing long peace to Cornland, Alp, and Sea.

It breaks his heart that kings must murder still,
That all his hours of travail here for men

Seem yet in vain. And who will bring white peace
That he may sleep upon his hill again?

Second Reading: Abraham Lincoln. Speech at Edwardsville. September 11, 1958.

What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, the guns of our war steamers, or the strength of our gallant and disciplined army. These are not our reliance against a resumption of tyranny in our fair land. All of them may be turned against our liberties, without making us stronger or weaker for the struggle. Our reliance is in the *love of liberty* which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors.

Sermon

Three days from now is Veteran's Day. It was first celebrated in 1919 as Armistice Day in recognition of the cessation of the hostilities of World War One the previous year on November 11th. It was originally intended as a day to honor the veterans of that War to End All Wars. That changed in 1954 when it was renamed Veteran's Day and proclaimed a day to honor America's veteran's of all wars. It has been so every since.

For me, this year, it's a day and an idea with a strange feeling because of the events at Fort Hood. It's hard to know what to say. I believe we know little beyond the bare facts of shots fired, lives ended and countless others scarred forever. The great question of why remains unanswered, perhaps unanswerable. A few hints are emerging, but my instinct is to say that regardless of what we may learn about why, that in fact there is no such thing as a good answer to such events. It is a painful reminder amongst many others that service to country is to go in harm's way. If you wonder why men and women – given the risks would choose to do so, I suggest the words of Harold G. Moore, speaking of himself and the young men who served with him during the Vietnam War.

"We went where we were sent because we loved our country. We were . . . proud of the opportunity to serve [our] . . . country. . . We went to war because our country asked us to go. . . . But more importantly because we saw it as our duty to go. That is one kind of love." (*We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*)

Devotion to duty and love of country deserves better than what happened to those young men and women at Fort Hood. They deserved better.

Setting aside the events at Fort Hood, I believe the young men and women who serve our country often deserve better than what they get. I remember how those who served in the military were too often treated during the Vietnam War. I was opposed to that war, horrified by what I consider to be one of the greatest mistakes my country has ever made, but equally distressed by the treatment of those who went and served. The young men and women who served in that war deserved better.

That's the problem with war. There are those who glory in war. A handful – men such as George Patton – actually join in the fighting; but the vast majority, the overwhelming majority of those who see war as glorious and are quick to call for others to go and fight are among those sometimes referred to as chicken hawks. For one reason or another they are or were too busy or too important to run the risk of going in harm's way. I do not believe service in the armed forces is or should be a requirement for elective office – especially the Presidency – but I find it admirable experience. I believe those who have actually fought in war are less likely – not always, of course, but less likely – to glory in it, more likely to think long and hard before sending other young men and women to war, more likely to take seriously their obligation to those who serve, those who demonstrate their devotion to duty and love of country by going in harm's way.

In reflecting upon this year's Veteran's Day I believe one of the best ways to honor them is by taking the time to think seriously about war and peace, about why we go to war and how we can make peace. It is the least that those who serve deserve. I would begin with a reminder. I am not a pacifist. I served in the Army, but was on active duty only for training. I am glad I did not have to go to Vietnam, the war of my generation. And while I opposed that war, thinking it a tragic mistake, I do not oppose the possibility of war. I believe that sometimes it is necessary.

I do not consider war to be evil in and of itself. That's because I believe ethical decision making – and the question of war is just that – are always choices between competing good – or, if you wish, between competing evils. Ethical questions such as the decision whether to go to war are, therefore, questions of justice that conjure up the classical image of justice as a woman holding a set of scales. Which way will the scales tip?

War has been called the suspension of morality, but it isn't. It is the condition when the usual rules are thrown out the window because the scales of justice tip so far that the normal restraints of civilization no longer serve their purpose. The scales of justice tip towards death and destruction because the alternative is worse. It is why religion has a theory of just war. Just War theory was developed by Roman Catholic theologians, but it is an ethical concept that has been widely accepted in other religious traditions, including our own. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says a war is 'just' when:

- * the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations [is] ... lasting, grave, and certain;
- * all other means of putting an end to it ... have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
- * there...[is a] serious prospects of success;
- * the use of arms [will] ... not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.

We are currently involved in two highly publicized wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are contemplating sending more troops to Afghanistan. Considering only

Afghanistan, what should we do? How does that war and the prospect for more armed intervention stack up against the Just War Theory?

I would begin by noting that there are those who say we do not need to be dithering over such questions. Some of those who are upset with such dithering say we just need to send the troops in immediately. Others say we need to pull all the troops out immediately. I find myself stuck in the middle. We have suffered grievous injury. I believe our initial entry into Afghanistan was fully justified under the theory of Just War. But what about now? Is it right to allow the Taliban to harbor Al Qaeda? Is it right to allow the Taliban to mistreat women and prevent them from being educated? Is it right to allow them to be the supplier of most of the world's opium? I don't think so. I believe there is ample justification for intervening with armed force. But then I have to ask this: Are we likely to succeed? Even if there is no alternative, are we likely to succeed? I don't know. Part of my uncertainty is because I am not sure what it is we are trying to accomplish. I suspect that is why our President has been accused of dithering. I think and I hope he is trying to figure out what our goals are. But even if those goals are clear and recognizable to us all, are we likely to succeed? I don't know.

I believe it is important for ministers in our tradition to state their personal positions on matters such as this from the pulpit. Not because you are expected to agree with what the minister says, with what I say, but to set the example that will challenge you to think for yourself. But in this case I don't know what's right. I believe the first two requirements of just war theory are fairly met. I am uncertain – going forward – about the last two. I lean towards some increase in our military commitment to allow us some time and room if, and only if, we can articulate some accompanying non-military agenda – the content of which I am unsure – that will move us towards a right and just result. If you say that is dithering, I can only reply 'guilty as charged.'

Let me emphasize that I would insist upon a parallel non-military agenda. That is because I have become convinced that although war may be just and necessary, that war in and of itself can never be the final solution to any problem. I have spoken in the past about my admiration for General George Marshall, the architect of the Marshall Plan that rejuvenated Europe – and Germany – following the end of World War II. Some historians of the Twentieth Century have argued that World War II was a continuation of World War I. The harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles ensured its continuation. I believe they are right. It was only the magnanimous terms and the Marshall Plan's generosity of spirit that brought an end to the conflict that began in 1914. But there is more to it than that. And here I would turn to the work of John Dominic Crossan and his interpretation of the life of Jesus in its historical context.

Crossan, in an attempt to understand the historical Jesus, has spent years studying the Roman Empire. In its history he finds compelling evidence for what he calls Rome's Imperial Theology. It is a simple paradigm. The Romans, says Crossan, believed that religion led to war, war led to victory and victory led to peace. That is the formula that was used following World War I which resulted in the return to war in 1939. Crossan believes that Jesus was arguing for a different kind of imperial theology – a theology of the kingdom of God. I don't know if Crossan is correct in his assessment of what Jesus was thinking and arguing, but whether he is right or wrong about Jesus, I believe his alternative theology is superior to that of the Romans. Crossan argues that

the theology of the Kingdom of God is this: religion leads to justice and justice leads to peace.

There are obvious problem with that kind of theology. First of all, the historical record demonstrates conclusively that religion too often leads to war. But it is not a theology about the way the world is, but a theology that tells us how the world ought to be. And I believe it is a theology that tells us the true path to peace. There is a time when wars must be fought, when violence must be used, but victory – true victory – is never a product of force of arms. True victory always await the coming of justice. This, I believe, is the meaning of Lincoln’s words when he said the bulwark of our liberty

is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, the guns of our war steamers, or the strength of our gallant and disciplined army. . . . Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors.

I believe it is never enough to send our young men and women to win a victory of arms. They deserve better. We deserve better. They must always be sent in the spirit of liberty, in the spirit that prizes justice and compassion for all. If we do not – if we send them only to win a victory of arms – no matter how great the provocation, no matter how great the justification – then, as Lincoln said, we run the risk of destroying the spirit of liberty and planting the seeds of despotism at our own door. John Dominic Crossan, writing as a religious historian, calls attention to this risk with his analysis of what happened to Rome which began as a republic but became a dictatorship. The great lesson of Rome, says, Crossan, is that one can have a republic or an empire, but not both at the same time – or at least not for long. I believe Lincoln and Crossan are speaking the same message. I believe we ignore their wisdom at our peril.

I do not believe peace is something to be won once and for all. I believe there will ever be a need for men and women to go in harm’s way. And there will ever be a need, a duty and a responsibility to honor their love of duty and country, to honor their sacrifice. I can think of no better way to do so than to insist that when they go that they take with them “the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere.” It is the spirit that reminds us that victory flows not just from a conflict of arms, but from the triumph of justice. May God bless those who have served. May God bless those who serve. May God bless those who will serve.

Amen.