

“Turn the Other What?”

Luke 6:20-31
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Well, there it is, right in front of us. There can be no more loaded text for a time of war than these teachings of Jesus:

“Blessed are you when people hate you...”

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also...”

“Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

Couldn't be plainer than that. And in times of peace these are comforting words indeed. Words of high nobility and grace. The high road. Altogether good advice. I remember reading these words when other nations were at war and thinking, “If only they could follow this sage advice. The world would be a much better place.”

But what can these words possibly mean in such times as we find ourselves? What can they mean after 6000 people were killed on a crisp and beautiful September morning by people who remain largely unknown to us and whose hatred for us remains unabated and undistilled?

Having lost two 100 story buildings, a wing of our Pentagon and four airplanes, can Jesus possibly mean that we should—after having prayed for our enemies and loving them, put four more airplanes at their disposal so that they can fly them, loaded with passengers, into several of our other tall buildings on a day when they would be filled with innocent civilians on a mid-morning coffee break?

This is a dilemma as old as the world: How to maintain an ethic of peace in a time of war.

Let me just say at the outset that I do not pick the texts for each Sunday. They are assigned by ecumenical commissions for this All Saints Sunday. Many churches are having to deal with these texts this Sunday morning. And every preacher this day will say what I have to say. That these teachings are always difficult, but especially difficult when we have been the subject of an unprovoked attack in which so many innocent lives were taken.

Well, some would say that the attack was not unprovoked. Certainly our enemies for whom we are instructed to pray and encouraged to love, would say that we have provoked them into this desperate act. They would say that we as a nation are guilty of having

occupied the holy lands of Islam with our armed forces. That we, as a nation, have blindly supported Israel and not paid enough attention to the plight of the Palestinians.

But can that in any way excuse an attack on so many who had no direct role in placing our armies in Saudi Arabia or providing military aid for Israel? Of course not. America is certainly not without guilt in national or international affairs. But I would say that no one over the age of 6 is completely without guilt. The charge is not wrong. It is just irrelevant to the issues that face us now.

The church of Jesus Christ must find a way to face these tough issues while engaging his tough teachings on this subject, especially on this day of All Saints. On this day we are aware of Jesus, whose lordship over the church throughout the ages must needs be without question.

The same question was faced by faithful Christians in World War II (every person for whom we will offer prayers in a moment were adults during World War II). Even pacifists in those days had to face the meaning of their commitments in a time of war. Half of the draft-age Quakers during that war enlisted in military service on the presumption that whatever solutions pacifism and non-violence had to offer the world, it didn't account for a madman like Adolph Hitler.

Oh, the great dilemmas the saints before us had to confront.

As a modern day Quaker, National Public Radio host Scott Simon has put it, "It seems to me that in confronting the forces that attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States has no sane alternative but to wage war; and wage it with unflinching resolution."¹

"Notice," he continues, "I don't say reprisal or revenge. What I mean is self-defense--protecting the United States from further attack by destroying those who would launch them."

We can argue amongst ourselves, modern saints of the church that we are, about how to go about that. But there is little doubt in my mind that we must engage this enemy with all our national resolve. Not for the cause of revenge, not with a blind patriotic self-righteousness, but for the single purpose of ending what our enemies in their own ideological blindness have begun.

To that end we are now engaged in a long twilight of struggle against insanity and misplaced religiosity. It is not my purpose here to give any of our political or military leaders advice on how to conduct such a struggle. As a citizen, I have opinions, but they are not

¹Address to the United Church of Christ, September 21, 2001.
<http://www.ucc.org/911/092701b.htm>

relevant to my task this morning. It can only be my purpose this morning to convey to the saints gathered in this place on this All Saints Sunday how the saints before us have engaged this awful dilemma.

When we engage in war, we must have Jesus' difficult teachings before us at all times. Pray for those who hate us, even love them. Turn away from conflict where it can be avoided, but face it where it can't. Face it reluctantly and always with the end of peace in sight.

The church has struggled throughout history with this question and has come to a time-tested theory to account for this struggle of the soul. It is given the rather awkward title of "**Just War Theory**" but it still is important for our time. In order for a war to be justified in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it must meet certain requirements. It must be a **just cause**; especially self-defense is cited as a just cause. The engagement in war must be a **last resort**; all other options must be exhausted. It must have a **probability of success**. It must be **declared by a recognized authority** (that is, private vigilante groups cannot engage in a just war). The response must be **proportional**; "you don't burn down a house to kill a mouse." Warriors must **protect as much as possible civilians and non-combatants** from harm. And we must always **treat our enemies as human beings** and that, even while fighting them with all necessary force, we must **look forward to a time of peace** when we will live in a global economy with those who once hatefully despised us. We did that with Europe at the end of World War II when, under the Marshall plan, we gave up 2% of our own post-war gross national product to the reconstruction of the nations of our former enemies.

A final paragraph from Quaker Scott Simon. "I'm glad to see reporting now that asks, 'Why do they hate us?' We need to hear the complaints of those who experience U.S. foreign policy, sometimes at the blunt end. But I would not want our increasing erudition [on this subject] to distract us from the answer that applies to those who are now physically attacking the United States: they hate us because they are psychotics. They should be taken no more seriously as political theorists than Charles Manson or Timothy McVeigh."

But still, we should pray for them. And we should, to the best of our finite human abilities, even love them. And at the same time, we should do all we can to put an end to the wickedness and contempt for civilization that has brought us to this place.

Such is the awful requirement of sainthood in the church of Jesus Christ in a time such as this.

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