

What About War?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

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Text: Matthew 24:4-14

As I began this message reflecting on this entire notion of war as it relates to the Christian faith, it seems wise to undertake this conversation by first identifying what scholars at Harvard Divinity School name as my “social location.” Social location is acknowledging one’s own background and personal context in relation to the topic at hand. Identifying one’s social location is understood as a crucial starting point in certain conversations since it makes clear one’s perspective and background, each of which function as the lens through which the topic is approached. This might sound like a pointless intellectual exercise, but it really isn’t since it forces the author to come to grips with their own biases and admit that those biases will be reflected in how one approaches the topic. This is always the case for any of us and yet an approach seldom utilized. For me, as I approach this topic which has been debated and discussed by scholars, theologians and philosophers for millennia, it seems a crucial starting point. So, here goes.

My social location is that of a late middle aged White woman who is familiar with the ravages of war, but always several steps removed. I am the daughter of a man who was ineligible to serve in the armed services during World War II due to health reasons. I am the daughter-in-law of a man who served with distinction in World War II rising to the rank of Colonel in the United States Army. Peter’s dad was a recipient of the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart and was interred at Arlington National Cemetery just outside Washington, DC with full military honors. Thus, in our home is a “family pass” which allows us whenever we visit to drive directly into the cemetery, past the armed guards at the sentry gate who raise their

arms in salute as we drive in. Win's grave when he was buried in 1979 was located in Section 60, a new area of the cemetery with spectacular views of the Pentagon and downtown Washington. Now he is surrounded by his fallen brothers and sisters in wars which took place in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars which would have broken Win's heart.

I am the sister of two older brothers neither of whom ever served in the military and Peter never served either. He considered it, but somehow it just never felt quite right. That's a decision made in his late twenties we still talk about on occasion, so momentous it was and remains. I am also the friend of several who fought in Vietnam, one of whom never came home. While I came of age in the late 60's and 70's, I never actually participated in the anti-Vietnam War protests roiling the country back then. As I look back on this, I am surprised I didn't. The only thing I can guess about myself back then is that I knew if I did such a thing my parents would be disappointed and I would not have disappointed them for anything. But I knew those protests were happening, and I knew they were right.

The Kent State University shootings in Ohio happened just a few years before I graduated from high school. Kent State was located less than a hundred miles from where I grew up and only about 45 miles from the college I attended. For those of you not familiar with this event, four college students participating in an anti-war demonstration on the university campus were shot dead in a fusillade of 67 rounds fired into the crowd by 28 National Guardsmen in only 13 seconds. The National Guard, sent in by the Ohio governor to counter a peaceful protest by students, also wounded nine others.¹ I remember when this happened. Vividly, because I was in the process of applying to schools. Kent State was never on my list of schools, but it was for several of my friends. After the shooting, no one from my

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kent_State_shootings

graduating class went to Kent State. When I arrived at my school, Thiel College, one of my hall-mates in the dorm was unhappy from day one because she was supposed to go to Kent State, and at the last minute her parents wouldn't let her. She transferred there anyway at the end of our first year. I was happy for her, but I understood her parents' fears. I am sure my parents shared them. This horrific event changed the entire national conversation about the Vietnam War as it became clear that the desire to prosecute a war so many hated was now costing the lives of American youth in America. This ultimately proved unacceptable and the Vietnam War came to a dramatic and climactic end in 1975.

I share all this information because it absolutely colors how I view this entire notion of what the church, what our Christian faith, has to say about war. Important to know is that the debate about faith and war, the entire notion of whether a war could ever be "justified" is more ancient than we realize. The first of these debates are evident in the records of ancient Egypt going back to the twelfth dynasty, roughly 2100 BCE.² Similar debates also occurred in ancient civilizations around the world including China and India as well as ancient Greece and Rome. So it would seem that even though all these societies came up with their own versions of what is known as "Just War theory," none of them were ever completely comfortable with their own rationales for war. The general gist of these rationales was that war is sometimes unavoidable – like when a nation is invaded – but it is never desirable and should always be avoided until it is the only option remaining.

The Christian debates on the "just war" theory date back to St. Augustine in the 5th century. Augustine stated:

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_war_theory

... individuals should not resort immediately to violence, but God has given the sword to government for a good reason (based upon Romans 13:4). In *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* book 22 sections 69–76, Augustine argues that Christians, as part of a government, need not be ashamed of protecting peace and punishing wickedness when they are forced to do so by a government. Augustine asserted that was a personal and philosophical stance: "What is here required is not a bodily action, but an inward disposition. The sacred seat of virtue is the heart." Nonetheless, he asserted, peacefulness in the face of a grave wrong that could be stopped by only violence would be a sin.³

St. Thomas Aquinas writing in the 12th century came up with the tenets of the just war theory still accepted by some Christians today. In his great work *Summa Theologica* Aquinas argues:

... three requirements must be met. Firstly, the war must be waged upon the command of a rightful [sovereign](#). Secondly, the war needs to be waged for just cause, on account of some wrong ... committed. Thirdly, warriors must have the right intent, namely to promote good and to avoid evil. Aquinas came to the conclusion that a just war could be offensive and that injustice should not be tolerated so as to avoid war. Nevertheless, Aquinas argued that violence must only be used as a last resort. On the [battlefield](#), violence was only justified to the extent it was necessary. Soldiers needed to avoid cruelty and a just war was limited by the conduct of just combatants. ⁴

So, according to these two major theologians and scholars, war is justified when it is a war against evil fought by soldiers who are constrained in just how violent they can acceptably be. In other words, they are establishing boundaries that those fighting a war must remain within. Whether or not that actually ever happens is open to ongoing debate, and might I add confusion. I would argue that in the third decade of the 21st century we are as confused about the justification of war as ever.

We look at the situation in Ukraine, a country attacked for no reason by neighboring Russia. The war has been brutal, especially when Russian President Putin was not given the easy victory he expected, and the war drags on and on. Ukraine is a nation which only a year ago, before war broke out, was a beautiful country, anxious

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

to ally more closely with the West and filled with young people – families with children – excited about the life they were creating together in the country they loved. Now, much of the country lies in rubble. Thousands of innocent civilians have been killed in bombings or brutalized by invading Russian troops. Yet, according to Aquinas’ just war argument, Russia would argue it meets the definition because the war is being prosecuted by a legitimate sovereign; it is being prosecuted for legitimate reasons (in Putin’s eyes); and its soldiers are fighting for good over evil (again in Putin’s opinion). To those of us seeing the war unfold, Russia meets none of those criteria: Putin is seen by many dissidents as an illegitimate sovereign; the reasons for the war he gives change weekly because none of them are accurate; and the soldiers have demonstrably been cruel and ruthless repeatedly. A just war? Hardly. And the Russian Orthodox church is one of Putin’s strongest backers. How can that be?

News coverage has made it plain that the Russian Orthodox Church, banned under Communism, is now a strong presence which unquestionably backs the actions of President Putin. Led by Patriarch Kirill, he and therefore the church he leads is an enthusiastic supporter of Putin’s war with Ukraine. There are two reasons for this. First, the Russian Orthodox Church has grown substantially in just the last decade, presumably with Putin’s support and assistance. Second, Kirill claims to be the true Patriarch of all Eastern Orthodox Churches, including the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Ukraine is a very devout country with church attendance and full participation high – in their own Ukrainian Orthodox Church which Ukrainians see as its own separate patriarchy. They do not recognize Kirill’s authority over them in any way. So, Kirill supports Putin because he is bringing the wayward Ukrainians back into the Russian fold. What the Ukrainians feel themselves is literally irrelevant.

Thus, we see in the Ukrainian War the classic debate over where God stands in such a situation. Both sides of this war are decidedly Christian. Both sides are undoubtedly praying to God for the war to end. But each side has very different views on what that end should be. Whose side is God on anyway? Dear ones, this very same question has been asked in every war throughout history. Whether the God in question is Hindu or Egyptian or Roman or Greek or even the great “I Am” of the Hebrew Bible, both sides in wars want to claim that God is on their side. But honestly, how can that be? What kind of a god would accept the death and brutality of war? What kind of a god would see war as inevitable, even necessary, as a means of resolving conflict?

My answer, dear ones, is simply this. God never sees war as an answer. Never. God never sees the brutality of war as justified, even when it is necessary to stop a great evil – like slavery in the United States or the Holocaust in Germany. What God does offer to us deeply flawed humans is grace and forgiveness of the sins unavoidable in war. Now you may be thinking, but what about all those wars written about in the Old Testament? What about how the escaping Israelites rejoiced when Pharaoh’s pursuing charioteers of his army were drowned? What about those walls of Jericho tumbling down when the priests blew their horns so the Israelite army could attack and destroy everything? Those wars, like all wars, were never about God. Those wars were totally about the humans who fought them and their desire to feel right in doing such awful things. The stories of war in the Old Testament are just that – stories. They are not recorded history, accurate to the last detail, no matter what fundamentalist Christians may want to believe. They are stories, sometimes created out of whole cloth and sometimes with small anchor points in history as verifiable through other sources. But stories they are. Human justifications for

sinful acts they are. God may be called upon in those stories, but God is not the primary actor in those stories. Mere mortals are. And this, dear ones, is still the case today.

So why did I pick this particular text for us to reflect on today as we consider this basic question of our faith – what about war?

Well, I'll be honest. It was difficult for me to identify a text which captured the thoughts I wanted to share with you this morning. I ultimately chose this one because it is the closest thing to a statement on war Jesus himself makes. Today's text comes following a message Jesus offers to the crowd in which he predicts that in the not too distant future the Temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed. Obviously, this distressed the disciples who spoke with him about it after the crowd had departed. His answer to them is the text we read this morning. It is usually read from an eschatological perspective meaning the focus is "the end of days." While there is no doubt Jesus is talking about that in this text, I think the most significant point Jesus makes here is not about how and when the world will end. By the way, he says wars will be a big part of it along with all sorts of other horrible things but not to worry about it because it will happen when it happens. This preoccupation with the end of days was quite typical in Jesus' time when folks were so brutally repressed by the Romans. They wanted to believe that this suffering would have an end point and if that end point was the end of the world, maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

This is why I am not convinced Jesus was trying to tell us all to be vigilant about watching for the signs for the end of all things. Jesus was all about love and hope and trusting that with God all things were possible. That's why I am intrigued by one statement Jesus makes in this text, in verse 4. He says, "Beware that no one leads you astray.

For many will come in my name saying, “I am the Messiah!” and they will lead many astray.” Think about that for a moment. Many will come in my name, claim to be a messiah, a leader appointed by God, and they will lead many astray. Now doesn’t that sound familiar? How many times have we heard political and even church leaders claiming God wants our country to do this or become that? How many wars have been fought because one or two leaders have believed their own press and decided they were doing God’s will – when Putin attacked Ukraine; when the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter; when the Germans attacked Poland and rolled through the rest of Europe; when the United States Army massacred 300 Native American men, women and children at Wounded Knee. When

Dear ones, you know and I know that I could go on and on with this list. You know as well as I do that war is never a good thing but sometimes, like in Ukraine, it is inevitable. You know like I do that God is never in the middle of the wars, except to stand with the innocent, with the wounded and the dying, with the survivors who will be forever marked by the horrors of war. In those moments when God feels absent is when God is most present because God never abandons us. Even when we don’t follow Jesus’ warning to be wary of those who will try to lead us astray with false claims of inspired leadership, God is still there – loving us through the consequences and forgiving us for the sins committed whether they are intentional or done out of carelessness or ignorance. Dear ones, wherever we – God’s beloved – find ourselves, God is there. No exceptions. What about war? Never God’s choice but sometimes human destiny. War always represents human failure. Thank goodness our God is loving, merciful and forgiving. May we all work harder to be worthy of God’s love and God’s vision for a peaceful world. Amen.

