

THINGS THAT MAKE FOR PEACE

Texts on Sunday, August 12, 2012

Jeremiah 6: 1-15; Luke 19: 41-48

IN VERY MANY ASPECTS of our common life, we Americans cannot find the will for concerted moral action. With respect to some of the crises America faces, our sermons this summer and fall aim to consider core values which opposing wings embrace, and to ask how the Christian tradition can encourage and inform and strengthen us to hold a light of God before us and before those we must oppose, as we all fly into the obscurity of the future.

Today, our subject is war and violence. God knows, it is the subject of our biblical texts—and of hundreds of others besides. We might say that while the jewels of the Bible’s teachings are about loving God and loving neighbor, the biblical setting for those jewels is a ring of violence and warfare. Love is commanded in these testaments, old and new, because love is rare and necessary and practical in life so raw and invaded as was theirs. But in America, we have a romance with violence. If Jesus drew near and saw the American city set upon a hill, would he not weep?

The American expressions of violence are so manifest that spooning up statistics for you now would misspend our time. Indeed, with the massacres in Aurora and Oak Creek hard upon us, and the muteness of our presidential candidates so startling in the matter of our breaking off this evil romance, speakers who take violence as their subject must exercise every nerve to avoid a serious risk in our warring madness, namely, yet further numbing us with numbers. Numbers will not stir our slumbers. We need wisdom, not sleep.

So, hear the alarm sounding. On August 3rd, Israel’s former head of military intelligence announced on Israeli television that that nation will attack Iran within a few weeks. America, you see, is not alone in dancing with the devil; our sister Israel has the disease as well. Is the decision to war or not to war the sort of thing best left to experts and politicians—to those who “have all the facts,” as those who have all the power like to say? Let us turn to some recent history.

On Palm Sunday of 2003, in the church I then served, we read the day’s lectionary passage, in which Jesus weeps over the city. *Had you only known the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes!* In the month previous, President George Bush had started to pour “shock and awe” on the nation of Iraq, and America, confident that our leaders had all the facts, had gone hog-wild in love with making war. In that sermon, I said:

There comes a moment in the torrent of news when people of faith can no longer build a wall of separation between their love for God and the requirements of justice and call the wall “politics.” At such times, religion—if it is to relate ourselves to God, and if our God is not to shut the ears to our pious bleats—must connect the stars through which this globe is hurtling, to constellate there again the image of the cross, formed from heaven for earth,

and show the way of the Cross to those made blind by fear. With such guidance, joined with all people of faith, our ship of Earth might in time, just in time, turn toward the things that make for peace . . .

But here is what this war is about. It is about erecting for America a sense of purpose, without facing the question, why we as a people are so lost and spent on selling and buying and hoarding, to no end. This war is about getting Viet Nam right. The major players in the present plan are almost all members of the club of losers who misled us in Viet Nam. This war is a weapon of mass distraction, for we are a house divided more sharply into rich and poor than is any other developed nation, but to that injustice we will not attend. This war is about oil. It is an expression of political cowardice in the face of a need for radically changed energy policies. This war is about avoiding the 21st century, which is not going to be the American century. . . . To impel us to make the tragic sacrifices this war will require, our leaders will inspire us to terror or to TV—to anything, really, which will keep our heart and mind from feeling our national burden, which is this, that we, like ancient Israel upon its exile from the city of peace, have lost our identity and our sense for our place in history.

Little of that diagnosis has changed in ten years. Yes, the president is different, and by all accounts differs from the previous one in that he strenuously does *not* want to make war on the next nation of troublesome tyrants on the little list. But war is not wholly about the president. True, as the Nazi commander Hermann Goering said to an intelligence officer during the 1946 Nuremberg trials, “It is the leaders who determine the policy.” But he added, “[I]t is always a simple matter to drag the people along . . . That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.” War is also about us—our fears, our silences.

If Israel’s Netanyahu chooses war, (according to polling data his own people oppose it in the main) then America will all but certainly go to war again on the pretense that Iran presents the greatest danger to world peace. This is backwards. This is a big lie. It is those willing to strike first who present the great danger to the world, for those who think they “have all the facts” do not reckon with what Tolstoy called “[that] immense mass of evil that must result . . . from allowing men to assume the right of anticipating what *may* happen.” America is so involved in the history of modern Israel that even our best leaders are powerless to criticize that nation for its injustices against the Palestinian people or, it seems, to prevent their head of state from driving all the nations to war. This time, we cannot wait for the bombs to drop to cry out that war on Iran is wrong. But be we need to look deeper within. What impels us to war?

Some of the answer is easy. As every organism naturally defends itself against threats, so citizens naturally fear for the security of their people when threatened and are willing to defend the nation. As civilizations evolved, those tribes which formed well-defined boundaries of inclusion and were thereby able to exact from themselves the resources needed for robust self-defense succeeded as nations, while others failed. Often, such nations have been able by force of arms to bring weak peoples and lands under their control, claiming that such violence

is necessary to establish an adequate border security. On that pretext, America slaughtered the native populations of this great continent and took over most of Mexico. On that pretext, Israel has annexed the West Bank of Jordan.

Like Israel both old and new, many Americans now add to this defensive argument for war a different claim, namely, that God directs our wars in order to bring the holy lands under the control of his chosen ones. In the matter of Israel's threats against Iran, some part of American Christendom now eagerly awaits more war, not for the sake of our national defense, but so that their violent vision, drawn from their reading of *Revelation*, might be realized. Like a magic bean-stalk to hell, religion and military power twine one around the other.

As we have often said here, the religious sometimes show up faithful, and sometimes fearful, but those who live mostly fearful in this world cannot see what those full of faith can see. It begins with this. The use of violence to any end always distorts truth. The first victor in battle is self-deception. Is Israel truly threatened by Iran? Was America threatened by Iraq? What is not acknowledged in public discussion of war-making, because it is subtle and spiritual and hard for pundits to grasp, is the demonic character of power. The spirit of power throws itself into the personalities of war-makers, tempting them and thrilling them with unimagined new capacities. War is pure temptation for politicians, whose whole careers have been worked upon the anvil of power. No individual can be trusted with war powers—and yet, since 1950, America has discarded its constitutional check on its presidents' power to make war. The Congress will not lift a finger to say No! Everyone knows this, yet we make no cry against it. We are all complicit in the spiritual crisis of self-deception, giving in to violent means.

Hermann Goering's cynical realism about a nation's weakness notwithstanding, the people of a nation also derive from their wars a benefit not at all related to their need for self-defense. They get to project their ugliest fears about themselves onto others. Walter Wink characterizes it this way:

What a wonderfully expansive feeling it is to denounce evil grandly [and] fall into us/them thinking; to forget our own complicity in our past complacency toward the evil we now so tardily oppose . . . Part of the payoff of demonizing others is to feel good about ourselves . . . But the person or system that we call enemy also evokes the evil within us, like a piano string set vibrating by a piercing scream. This two-way traffic of projection and introjection, if not halted, eventually becomes a form of mimesis, where each party begins to imitate the other. (*Jesus and Nonviolence*, p. 79)

About twenty years ago, *Sojourners* magazine published an article by this very same New Testament scholar, Walter Wink. The argument still vibrates in my thoughts. Producing pailfuls of historical examples, Wink shows how war inevitably causes the "good side" to resemble its enemy in attitudes and practices. He shows how America came to mimic the efficient killing machine of Nazi Germany, the bureaucratic secrecy of the Soviet Union, and the torture tactics of terrorists. Far from being merely "politics by other means," in Clausewitz' phrase, war is a dance with forces of evil able to lead every people to its bed.

It is no wonder we Americans are stuck on whether to go to war more—or stop. The claim that we need more security provides the clue, for you can easily see that this claim inspires total hunger for more—total license to pour more resources into the maw of an insatiable desire—more security! By definition, there can never be enough security for a people enthralled to a military-industrial complex.

Therefore, only those fortified with inner security; only those not afraid to die; only those free and ready to relinquish some of what they have in order to bless others—only they can lead in these times. Only faith establishes the criterion of self-judgment which can undo our self-righteousness, heal our blindness, and enable us to live reasonably peacefully in this troubled, slumbering world.

I never cease to be startled by the quantity and ferocity of the Biblical oracles declaiming that Jerusalem will be destroyed by God's design because they did not heed the things that make for peace. Now, I do not for one instant believe that there exists a God who designs wars, to punish people, not now, not ever. But I do believe that when the ancient world inscribed these oracles, they were making the best sense they could of an enduring fact. It is this. Those who blind themselves to their spiritual nature and to the Godly gift in all human so that they may give their attention totally to what the world can be forced to render up to them, materially speaking—such persons are always driven to war to get more of what they believe is really real, and always, in the end, destroy themselves.

There must be another way. In his little book called *Jesus and Nonviolence*, Walter Wink proposes that our time in history has shifted the “ultimate religious question. [It] is no longer the Reformation's question, ‘How can I find a gracious God?’ It is instead, ‘How can I find God in my enemy’ What guilt was for Luther, the enemy has become for us—the goad that can drive us to God.”

Something has shifted forever in history. Perhaps it was the invention of the atomic bomb. Be that as it may, humanity can find no way forward except through training and practice of nonviolence. The reason is simple. Nonviolence bears an eternal advantage over other methods of public influence, for its means and its ends are united without contradiction. Unlike ordinary methods of struggle for power, no one masters nonviolence; no one can “use it” toward an evil end without actually abandoning it altogether. All who are drawn to its practice see that they must first see into themselves honestly, starkly, even painfully—and no one so drawn can any longer judge those who are not ready for these truths. Unlike those asleep in the myths that make for violence, those who walk this way, willing to suffer so that others may be freed, bring heaven to earth. Come this way to see the things that make for peace.