

Matt. 5:38-48

Rom. 13:1-7

As we approach the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, I thought it would be a good time to reflect on some of the difficult questions raised for Christians by all wars. Namely, is war- the deliberate, pre-meditated taking of human life- ever a moral option for Christians? And if so, when? These are vexing questions. But, fortunately for us, Christians have wrestled with these matters since the earliest years of the church. So, the teaching of the Scriptures and the reflections of Christians through the ages can help us. Let's start with the Scriptures, beginning with these words of Jesus in Matt. 5. *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also... You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* (Matt. 5:38-39, 43-44) This is a pretty straightforward, though troubling text. Jesus clearly says that when we are wronged, we are not to retaliate. We are not to take revenge; in fact, we are to love our enemies. Vengeance is not our job. That is God's job.

Throughout history some Christians have regarded this passage as

the final word concerning war. Christians are not to take up arms- ever. They believe that the taking of a human life, of a person made in the very image of God, is never justified. These pacifist Christians, who made up the majority of those in the early church, note that violence rarely solves a conflict. It usually just pushes the conflict underground where it emerges later in a more virulent form. Many pacifist Christians, like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., believe that more good can be accomplished with strategies like non-violent resistance than through violence. And they can point to major victories in places like Ghandi's India and the civil rights movement here in the USA to support their claim. The new movie, "Copperhead," focuses on a pacifist Christian during the Civil War. Today, many Christians in this part of Pennsylvania- Brethren, Amish, and Mennonites- refuse to participate in any armed conflict because of these teachings of Jesus Christ. Messiah College, a Brethren in Christ school right up Route 15 in Grantham, flew their American flag at half mast all during WWII as a protest against war! Pacifists can be found in mainline churches, too.

If these words of Jesus were all that the Scripture had to say on this subject, our answer to the question about Christians and war would be pretty simple. No, we should not ever go to war, because violence is never justified.

But there are other passages of Scripture in tension with this one. For example, we can find several instances in the Old Testament where God explicitly instructed his people Israel to go to war, against the Philistines, for example. (II Sam. 5:17-20) And listen to what the Apostle Paul tells us about the role of governments in Romans 13. He writes, *“If you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer...”* (Romans 13:4) God has granted authority to governments to use force (“to bear the sword”) in some cases.

That brings us to a very tricky question. When can such lethal force legitimately be used? All Christians acknowledge that the decision to take human life is a monumental one. It is a decision to destroy what God has created in his own image, to perform an act that only the Creator of life has a right to do, and to defy the 6th Commandment, “Thou shall not kill.” The burden of proof clearly lies with those who would justify taking human life. But over the centuries most Christians have come to the conclusion that there are some times when the taking of human life is a lesser evil than not taking that life. For example, most of us would agree that to let Adolf Hitler’s reign of terror go unchecked would have been a worse evil than going to war to stop him. That situation seems pretty clear.

But what about the evil caused by Fidel Castro in Cuba, or Crown

Prince Abdallah in Saudi Arabia, or Saddam Hussein in Iraq, or Bashar al Assad in Syria? Those situations are not so clear. So how do we decide when it is morally acceptable to use lethal force and when it is not?

Greatly complicating this whole issue is the fact that human sin affects our judgment! Our selfish wants, our desire for revenge, and our sense of national pride can easily color our judgment about whether it is morally right to go to war. We can see that clearly in the way we justified violence against Native Americans in this country. In the heat of nationalistic fervor we can rationalize almost any use of force. So how do we decide what God would have us do? Christians have agonized over this question since at least the fifth century. At that time, Christians in Rome were conflicted as to whether they should take up arms to repel the invading Berber hordes.

So St. Augustine, a bishop in North Africa, came up with a set of criteria, a list of rules to help Christians determine whether they could participate in and support a given war or not. This list cannot be found in the Bible. But it does reflect biblical teaching and values. These principles came to be known as the "Just War" principles and have served to guide the majority of Christians for the last 1500 years. They are still taught at the Army War College in Carlisle. I've listed them in your bulletin. In our remaining time, I'd like to walk us briefly through them. Keep in mind that

Augustine said that all of these criteria must be satisfied if the war is to be considered a just one.

First, there must be a formal declaration of war by a rightful authority. A couple of us Presbyterians cannot band together and attack the Methodist church down the street because of some alleged slight. There must be a formal declaration of war by a rightful authority.

Second, there must be limited objectives. A war can be legitimately fought to defend against an attack or to free an oppressed people, but not to destroy an entire nation whose policies and conduct we do not like. The ultimate goal must be the restoration of peace, which is God's will for humanity.

Third, the probable good to be achieved must outweigh the probable evil to be caused by the war. War is evil. It causes the loss of life of combatants on both sides. It causes the destruction of land and basic infrastructures like water and food supply and electricity. It causes chaos and terror for civilians. Money is diverted from education, medicine, and food production. This third criteria says that the positive results of war must be greater than these costs. And the implication of this is that we must use proportionate means to obtain our objectives. Christians are not allowed to participate in a war which deliberately devastates a nation to punish it when a small strike would accomplish our objectives.

Fourth, every attempt must be made to minimize civilian casualties. We have seen that even when being cautious, our own bombing and drone strikes have mistakenly killed innocent civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other places. That should remind us that any war will inevitably involve innocent civilian deaths. We must make every effort to limit such casualties. Sometimes as a nation we have done this well. Other times, as in the firebombing of Dresden and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we have set aside this concern. A just war requires every effort to minimize civilian casualties.

Fifth, there must be a reasonable chance for success. Augustine and other church theologians believed that it is morally unacceptable to initiate the horrors of war when there is no reasonable chance of success.

Sixth, there must be a just cause. Traditionally, only defending a weaker country under attack or defending yourself against an invasion were seen as just causes. Sometimes we are tempted to go to war for other reasons, to protect the national honor, for example. And we began the war in Iraq not as a result of being attacked, but as a pre-emptive strike to prevent Saddam Hussein from potentially striking us with alleged weapons of mass destruction. Most Americans believed that was a just cause at the time. However, our experience there demonstrated the moral and practical difficulties with such a justification. It requires us to know the

hearts and intentions of our enemies. It requires absolutely accurate intelligence, which we did not have. Previously, we as a country rarely tried to justify a pre-emptive strike in peacetime. For example, we refrained from launching a pre-emptive strike during the much-more-dangerous Cuban missile crisis in 1962. The cause of a given war must be just.

Finally, war must be a last resort. We recognize that going to war is a decision to participate in a horrible evil. So all other means of resolving the conflict must be explored and exhausted before committing ourselves to war.

The just war principles do not solve all of our moral problems. But they do give us a way to talk together about the morality of a given war. You may disagree with them. Let's talk about it. What principles would you use instead?

Whenever we contemplate going to war, we Christians need to remember that we answer to a higher authority. Although we love our country and are grateful for the rights and freedoms we enjoy as Americans, our ultimate loyalty belongs to Jesus Christ; our national loyalty is secondary to that. God is not an American. He is God of all people everywhere and because of that the national interest of the United States of America cannot be the sole reason for going to war. If we want God to bless America, we must be willing to follow the leading of God.

The music in our worship service this morning reflects some of the ambivalence about war among Christians. Our choir anthem, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” was written by Julia Ward Howe in 1861 to a popular, stirring tune of the day. It is really a hymn about judgment, but it ties God’s final judgment to the judgment about to be inflicted by the North on the South! It reflects a more positive, potentially redemptive view of war, paralleling Paul’s thoughts in Romans 13.

Our second hymn, “When Will People Cease Their Fighting?” reflects strong anti-war and peace-making sentiments, paralleling the words of Jesus and some of the Old Testament prophets. Our closing hymn reflects the real difficulties we face in discerning these matters, asking for God’s wisdom and courage to face the troubling times in which we find ourselves.

In December of 1914, Allied and German troops faced a stalemate as both sides were dug into deep, muddy trenches a few hundred feet apart. They were experiencing unimaginable horrors of war. But when Christmas came, the German soldiers put up candles and Christmas trees along their trenches to celebrate the holiday. They also sang Christmas carols that were heard by the Allies, who responded by singing carols back to them. In time a German soldier walked out into no man’s land under a flag of truce. He brought gifts of cigarettes and candy. An Allied soldier met him and reciprocated. Soon the trenches emptied, as both sides shared family

photos, goodies, sang songs together, and played a soccer game. Higher commanders on both sides were horrified by the fraternization, but maybe those men were on to something.

They remind us that wars are fought by real human people with families, jobs, and religious commitments. Wars should always be a last resort to resolve our differences.