

“My peace I give to you” (John 14:27)

Pentecost 11

- I. This season of Pentecost we are talking about how we live the Christian life with our feet on the ground, not merely one hour a week. We are using the famous Reformation text from John 8:36: “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

The last few weeks we have begun to look at the wider world. Last week we looked at economics. This week we focus on war and peace.

II. Christian background

1. The Bible. We begin with the Fifth Commandment: “Thou shall not kill.” Note that it doesn’t say, “Thou shall not murder,” but “Thou shall not kill.” Matt 5:38-40: “You have heard it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’” That, of course, is the famous law of retribution that you find in the Old Testament. It was an advance over what had gone before. In Genesis 4:24 someone named Lamech takes revenge for somebody who was killed by killing 77 other people. That’s way out of proportion. So “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” was an improvement.

But then it goes on in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” There it is. It’s plain, simple, self-evident, clear. Turn the other cheek. No self-defense.

On the other hand, Ephesians 6:13-17 is the famous passage which uses military imagery for the Christian life: “Put on the whole armor of God . . . take the shield of faith . . . the breastplate of righteousness . . . the helmet of salvation . . . the sword of the Spirit . . .”

2. Church history. The right to self-defense, however, has been upheld in church history. After all, it is necessary for survival. In the seventeenth century Hugo Grotius developed the case for nations to have the right of self-defense. In the 1945 United Nations Charter, Chapter 7, Article 51 upholds the right of self-defense. Of course, this right can be abused, as was done by Hitler when he invaded Poland on the pretext of self-defense.
3. Just war. In the first centuries Christians were not soldiers because being a soldier required one to venerate the emperor. To be a soldier wasn’t simply about war itself. The basic principles of just war thinking were found in ancient Egypt, China, India, Greece (Aristotle). They are, of course, also developed by Augustine (5th century) and Aquinas (14th century).

III. Today. There is widespread apathy about war today. A common stance is simply to avoid thinking or worrying about war. Many toss it off as a concern elsewhere in the world but not here. Not for me and mine.

1. The rise of Islam. It was only 328 years ago that the Siege of Vienna (1683) was lifted. Vienna had been besieged for six months by Muslim troops from the Ottoman Empire. But Polish and Hapsburg troops came and broke the siege. The push from the East, which had been there for three hundred years, was broken. The Muslims retreated, taking with them two million Europeans as slaves. If Vienna had fallen, and it almost did, the way would have been open to take over the rest of Europe.

In 1529 the Muslim troops had also been at the gates of Vienna. That played a big role in the Reformation and the rise of Luther and his ability to do what he did.

The crusades, beginning in 1095, were defensive wars.

It is similar to what happened in 732, one hundred years after the death of Mohammed. Muslim troops had gone all the way across North Africa through Spain and were forty miles from Paris. They were finally defeated by General Charles "the Hammer" Martel. The Battle of Tours, as it came to be known, was one of the ten most important battles of history.

What happened twenty years ago on September 11, 2001, is part of the same picture. First, 732, then 1529, then 1683. The Ottoman Empire gradually collapsed, until 1922, when it collapsed entirely, but then came the need for oil. Islamic rulers haven't forgotten what happened centuries earlier. Those who were behind the 9/11 attacks were keenly aware of what happened in 1683.

2. Clouds of war. Today we have conventional war, nuclear war, cyber war, biological war. Despite the threats, life seems to go on as before. "It doesn't affect me and mine." Yet the dangers build.
3. Two ways people commonly react.
 1. Good Christians obey civil authorities. In WW II some used Romans 13:1-2, which says the state is instituted by God, to defend their obedience to the German state. However, it also says in Revelation 13 that the state is demonic in some cases. You will recall Dietrich Bonhoeffer, well trained in the Lutheran tradition, who became part of the plot to murder Hitler.
 2. Utopianism. Isaiah 11:6-9. Imagine peace. Lie down with the lion. We can live by love. "We are less sinful, kinder, better than previous generations." The status of conscientious objector. Can be sloth. Can also be heroic as medics have been in war. (Apocalypticism is also a kind of sloth.)

IV. Our Lutheran stance on war and peace.

1. Sin/grace. Law/gospel. God's left-hand kingdom. We take sin seriously. Romans 13:10: Love does no harm to the neighbor. The stance: "Do no harm" = Vegetius, the ancient Roman author (5th century) of the dictum: "If you want peace, prepare for war." He captured the counter-intuitive insight that peace is best preserved by being prepared and ready for war.

A similar view is found in the Chinese metaphor of "the strong horse." As Osama bin Laden said: "When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will like the strong horse."

Martin Luther was aware of how terrible war is, yet wrote:

"What men write about war, saying that it is a great plague, is all true. But they should also consider how great the plague is that war prevents. If people were good and wanted to keep peace, war would be the greatest plague on earth. But what are you going to do about the fact that people will not keep the peace, but rob, steal, kill, outrage women and children, and take away property and honor? The small lack of peace called war or the sword must set a limit to this universal, worldwide lack of peace which would destroy everyone."¹

The Augsburg Confession (1530) also raises this concern about war and peace (Article 16):

"Christians may without sin occupy civil offices or serve as princes or judges, render decisions and pass sentence according to imperial and other existing laws, punish evil doers with the sword, engage in just wars, serve as soldiers, buy and sell, take required oaths, possess property, be married, etc."

This bold defense of soldiers and just wars was written over against other reforming groups who prohibited Christians to be involved in the world in these ways.

But this was not the Lutheran view.

2. Grace, gospel, God's right-hand kingdom.

Our task in this life is not to build the kingdom of God. We are not kingdom builders. The Lord is Lord. He brings in his kingdom by his power alone. Our job here is to restrain evil that life may endure and that more may hear the good news of how God in Christ died for you and me.

In this broken and violent world we are calm and at rest because we have been claimed by the Lord of the cross and resurrection. As John 14:27 reads: "Peace I leave with you;

¹ LW 46:96; Sermon: *Whether soldiers, too, can be saved*, 1525-26.

my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”