

“Just” war or Just “War”?

Ephesians 6:14-16

Back in 1973 the book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* by the distinguished psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, created a media sensation. He noted the disappearance of the word “sin” in social conversation and noted how we have shifted the responsibility of sin from the individual to society.

Recently the *Wall Street Journal* published an article titled, “Not That Long Ago, ‘Evil,’ Really Meant Something” (9/26/2021). The author, Lance Morrow, makes the point that today many people see no difference between history’s monsters and people on TV they don’t like or with whom they disagree. He laments this trend as another example of the triumph of feelings over facts. He concludes: “If you’re serious about evil, talk about consequences. “You can’t call someone evil – unless as with Hitler or Stalin or Mao or Pol Pot – the evidence is there: The body count.”

What about war? What do we say about war? In 1975 in that little country called Cambodia a Maoist group called the Khmer Rouge took over, led by the butcher Pol Pot. For four years they controlled the country and executed at least 1.7 million of their fellow countrymen, if not 2.5. About 20%. And most of those executed were the educated ones. After four years they were pushed back into a corner of the land and they continued to agitate. Only recently two or three who are still alive were brought to trial. And they told about the slaughter.

The reason that is important is that an identical group of Maoists in the late 1980’s, called The Shining Path, began to take over Peru. In 1990 Alberto Fujimori was elected President and for ten years led the government, and although it was nip and tuck, they managed to put down The Shining Path. Yet Fujimori was subsequently put on trial and imprisoned for twenty-five years even though two-thirds of the people in the country had supported what he did as President.

What was the problem? This is never a clean fight. The Shining Path, would likely have done as they had already done in Cambodia and that was brutal. How the Shining Path was put down was also brutal. And the question is: Could it have been done differently? Could some other leader have done it differently? We do not say the end justifies the means, but we think through what could have been done.

The reason that is important for us is because we have this passage in Ephesians 6:14-16:

“Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand in the day of evil, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the

equipment of the gospel of peace; besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the darts of the evil one."

We have the hymn: "Onward Christian Soldiers." Many new hymnals leave it out. The United Methodist Church left it out, but so many objected that by a vote of their annual convention, they reinstated the hymn. They didn't want this hymn and the Bible texts on which it is based to be erased from the life of the church.

What about war? What does the Bible say?

For the first three hundred years of the Christian church the early Christians struggled with the question of war. The famous historian, Adolf von Harnack wrote a book, *Militia Christi*, on what the early church said and did about the problem of war.

They knew what Romans 13:1-4 said: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For . . . those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. . . ." Also in 1 Peter 2:13-14: "The institutions which God instituted are to be followed." And then verse 2:19: "Obey the Emperor."

On the other hand, they also knew, as it says in Revelation 13, that the state can be aligned with the anti-Christ. They struggled with what to do. That tells us something about the idea of just being naïve and letting whatever happens happen.

Paul continues in Romans 13: 8-10: to talk about the Christian life in terms of asking about consequences. The love-ethic is not about a sentimental love. The love-ethic asks about harm and consequences: "'You shall love the neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to the neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

It's like the Hippocratic oath, that ancient Greek oath of ethics that doctors famously take: "First, do no harm." What one asks is, and this is not just for Christians but for all of us in the world as living human beings: What does harm? That can be illustrated and can be thought through.

First of all, in the context of Ephesians 6: What about self-defense?

Immanuel Kant said that telling the truth is a moral absolute. You gotta tell the truth in life, no matter what. If a murderer comes to you and asks where his intended victim is, you can't tell a lie.

A Lutheran college professor was a loud and proud pacifist. He took the position that no matter what happens in life you should never do violence. That for him was a moral absolute. Some students then asked him: "What would you do, if you were walking down

the street with your wife and someone with a knife came at your wife to attack her?" He didn't answer.

With all the talk of peace, one must ask about greater harm and lesser harm. As Luther wrote (*LW* 46:96):

"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."

Let's look also at something that happens in the Passion story as related in Luke 22:35-38. There the eleven disciples and Jesus are in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he says to them: "When I sent you out with no purse or bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, 'Nothing.' He said to them, 'But now, let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one.'" Then they go and do that and say to Jesus (vs 38): "Look Lord, here are two swords." And he said to them, 'It is enough.'" That's because it was a dangerous place there on the Mount of Olives. So it was smart to be prepared. Self-defense.

Some Christian pacifists will say: "Just trust the Lord, and he will take care of you." That actually happens once in the New Testament. In Matthew 4 in the temptation story, it is Satan who says that to Jesus! He says: "Just trust the Lord, and he will take care of you." So don't think automatically that that message is the voice of anyone except the evil one.

What about war today?

First, we know that evil is real, and war is often unexpected. Think of Sept 11, 2001, or Dec. 7, 1941. We don't hear much about Pakistan, but it has about 200 nuclear weapons and a dangerous mix of terrorists. Moreover, Pakistan, already a friend to Iran and North Korea, is strengthening ties with China and extending a welcoming hand to Russia.

What is to be done? How is evil to be restrained? We live by our common reason. We talk about common sense, but as the saying goes: Common sense is not very common.

Nevertheless, we live by common reason which means asking about harm and choosing between the greater and lesser harm. We also know the problem of unintended consequences and of how good intentions go awry. We ask ourselves: How can we live together to the betterment of all of us in life on this earth? This question does not have to do with salvation. It is simply common reason, and it applies to all human beings.

Second, we Christians fall into evil ourselves. Bertrand Russell, himself an atheist, wrote about "the evil that good men do." T.S. Elliot wrote (*The Cocktail Party*):

"Half the harm that is done in the world is due to people who want to feel important. They don't want to do harm, but the harm doesn't interest them, or they do not see it, or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves."

Paul writes in Romans 3:10-18:

"None is righteous, no, not one;
No one understands, no one seeks
for God.
All have turned aside, together they
have gone wrong;
No one does good, not even one."
"Their throat is an open grave,
They use their tongues to deceive."
"The venom of asps is under their lips."
Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."
"Their feet are swift to shed blood,
In their paths are ruin and misery,
And the way of peace they do not
know."
"There is no fear of God before
Their eyes."

We are guilty. We are totally lost – and totally saved. Totally sinful – and totally righteous, because God in Christ has taken our sin and given us his perfect righteousness.

Therefore we are free. Free to live by forgiveness. Free to use our heads in the battles of life. Free to use common reason and the sword – to restrain evil that life may endure and more can hear the good news that God in Christ died for you and me.

Amen