

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the second Sunday in Lent 2022: "How do we respond to war?"

Good morning my friends. Today presents us with a question that I doubt any of us like to face, but face it we must: how do we as church, as the people of God, respond in the face of war?

The conflict in the Ukraine is now a few weeks old, and the toll in human life and on the earth has already been terribly high. And of course there are also ongoing conflicts in other parts of the globe.

So how do we respond?

On the surface the answer is fairly simple. Christianity has historically recognized only two ways forward as godly paths: complete pacifism or very limited just war.

Now these answers are directly useful to us if we're either on the front lines or sitting in the halls of power. But in this situation, as well as most, we are in neither position.

So what is our response to a situation such as the current one?

I believe that even though we must apply them somewhat indirectly, the historic teachings of both pacifism and just war can be entirely useful to us. In both cases scholars and mystics spent in many cases the better part of their lifetimes studying the Scriptures and praying in order to answer the question of how Christ's faithful followers are to behave when confronted with the specter of war.

One of the paths is that of pacifism, that being complete nonviolence.

And the path of just war, while it allows for violence under certain circumstances, insists that it be extremely limited and focused. Force may be used only to the extent absolutely necessary to protect the innocent and restore peace. And violence against civilians is always prohibited.

I believe that perhaps a hybrid of these two paths can offer us a roadmap for how we, thousands of miles away from the conflicts in question, can respond in a meaningful way.

The pacifism piece is relatively easy to wrap our heads around. In anything we say and do, we must seek not only to avoid stoking the flames of violence but to seek to actively curb violence. Our thoughts, speech, and actions must be those of peacemakers.

The just war piece, however, is a bit trickier, but equally important. No matter how hard we try and how good we become at being peacemakers, it does not appear that the conflict is going to abruptly end. Given that, I believe we can use just war theory to everyone's benefit.

The most important thing is a key distinction in our state of mind. And that's where today's Scriptures come to bear. Both the passage we heard from Philippians as well as the Gospel have as their context walking right into the midst of conflict and danger.

Jesus is headed to Jerusalem where he knows full well betrayal, arrest, and violence await him. Paul is in the thick of the opposition and persecution faced by the early church.

And their response? To walk headlong into the fray armed with nothing by the sword of righteousness, knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt that, as Paul writes, their citizenship is in heaven and it is a heavenly goal that they are pursuing.

And it's very worth noting how this state of mind plays out. They put no mental or physical energy into the destruction of their enemies at all. Perhaps they put a few nonviolent obstacles in the way of the aggressors, but otherwise the aggressors get almost no attention.

The victims of aggression, however, get a tremendous amount of focus. The question of how to protect the innocent and how to bring peace and an opportunity to prosper to those who need it most is front and center in the Gospel narrative.

This is how a just war is waged. The key issue is where our attention is focused. If it is focused on the destruction of the aggressors we are not in a just war mindset. And the inevitable result of this mindset is easy to see. Everyone loses. The best possible outcome is basic survival, and many innocent lives will be destroyed in the crossfire.

If, however, our attention is focused firmly on the protection and upbuilding of those most negatively affected, a very different pathway opens up. With this pathway, even in the midst of a conflict that can at times look very big and very scary, there are

opportunities for building community, building economies, and not only saving lives but giving them the means to flourish.

There are some very practical ways to apply these principles to current circumstances. The first is simply to pray, ideally to pray without ceasing. Many might scoff at this, but if we really believe that an all-powerful God receives our prayers when we offer them, this is arguably the most important and most powerful thing we can do. And specifically we can pray for peace and righteousness to come upon everyone involved, aggressors and victims alike. In our prayers we need not seek the destruction of the enemy but rather that the Holy Spirit fills their hearts and turns them.

And then comes the tangible action piece. Rather than meeting violence with violence, destruction with destruction, we have the opportunity to combat violence with peace and destruction with building up. Yes, there is space for throwing nonviolent obstacles in the way of aggression, and we should certainly do that in both word and action at every opportunity. But the overwhelming majority of our energy can be focused not on the aggression at all but rather on those most in need of support and encouragement.

To this end, many structures are already in place. Organizations like Episcopal Relief and Development and the International Rescue Committee have structured and focused operations that are as efficient as possible in providing survival necessities where most needed, rebuilding communities torn by conflict or other disasters, and, when necessary, resettling displaced persons in other locations where they can flourish.

As tempting as it can be to respond to circumstances such as the ones of which we hear these days with either despair or anger, our Christian faith makes no room for these. Nonviolence or just war aimed at bringing peace and prosperity to everyone involved, even the aggressors, are the only pathways that centuries of our forebears have agreed that the Gospel allows.

And fortunately we have many partners in the struggle. Countless individuals and organizations dedicated wholeheartedly to the pursuit of peace and justice welcome us to join in their work. And above all we have the partnership of God who welcomes our prayers for peace and, even if we can't always understand or feel it, uses those prayers to transform us and the whole world for good.