

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Matthew 26:51-52
Here I Stand: Issues the Church Should Care About – War and Peace
June 8, 2008

KJV Ecclesiastes 3:1 *To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:*

2 *A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;*

3 *A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;*

4 *A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;*

5 *A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*

6 *A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;*

7 *A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*

8 *A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.*

NRS Matthew 26:51 *Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."*

On April 20, I began this series of messages of *Issues the Church Should Care About*, by looking at the life of the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. Luther challenged the church that was confronting the issues of the day through the Biblical witness, reason, and theological reflection, and before the Pope said, "I am captive to the Word of God...Here I stand."

Each week, we have looked at some of the issues that I believe the church should care about in our day. Hopefully, we have avoided the minefields and pitfalls of partisan politics, by prayerfully listening to the call of the Gospel and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Each of us is confronted with the Biblical witness and we are charged with prayerful work of interpretation and application. To paraphrase Luther, we are captive to the word of God, God help us, we can do no other.

Today, I conclude this series of messages of, *Issues the Church Should Care About*, by considering the issues of war and peace.

When I was a student at Southern Seminary, I was classmates with Jim Barnette. His father was the legendary Henlee Barnette, professor of ethics. Jim had two brothers who were young men during the Vietnam War. One brother, John, served two tours of duty in Vietnam, and returned home a decorated veteran. He enlisted because he believed it was the right thing to do. The other brother, Wayne, disagreed with the war, feeling as though it was a sin against humanity to be asked to take another person's life for the purpose of the government. Wayne defected to Sweden to avoid the draft as a conscientious objector. These two men grew up under the same house, attended the same church, studied the same Bible, and responded according to their convictions. Their mother and father loved them both.

The tensions between war and peace that were dramatically reflected in this family, mirror many, when it comes to the issue of war and peace. The Bible only exacerbates the tension.

The Bible as a whole, the Old Testament, and the Hebrew Scriptures in particular, has its bloody moments. Wars and other acts of violence drip from its pages. Some wars can be interpreted as divinely sanctioned while others are the result of wanton greed or avarice.

If we look to the New Testament and just focus on the gospels, the tensions are still not resolved. Jesus said a lot of things that I either wish he didn't say, or I wish he would have elaborated. And then, there are some things he just didn't say much at all.

Jesus made a reference to war, by illustrating the importance of counting the cost. In all three of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke - he spoke, that there will be wars and rumors of wars and that they must take place.

Jesus sometimes seemed to contradict himself. Consider Matthew's gospel account. In chapter five, Jesus said "*Blessed are the peacemakers,*" (v.9) and "*if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also*" (v.39), but a few chapters later, in chapter ten, he says "*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*" (v.34). And then our gospel reading this morning we hear him say, "*Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.*"

I know and you know that there is a context to each of these verses. Taken on their own, one can make a case for the use of violence or to abstain from violence. What is a believer to do?

One option is that of pacifism. Pacifism is the belief that violence, war, and the taking of lives, are unacceptable ways of resolving conflicts. It is clear that was the position of the earlier church, particularly the first two or so centuries. One needs to know, however, that Christians and Jews were not required and in some cases not even allowed, to serve as soldiers. There were at least three reasons the early Christians embraced pacifism. First, Tertullian, argued that because Jesus said, "put away the sword," no follower of Jesus should bear the sword. Secondly, Christians are called to be holy, and the taking of a life is not holy. Finally, Christians are to contribute to the world through prayers and moral example, and not by fighting. By the time of Constantine, fourth century Christians were not only serving in the military, but also were engaged in hostilities against other religions as well as among themselves.

I like the "idea" of pacifism, and it is not hard to embrace it in light of the life and teachings of Jesus. Yet, I will tell you that personally I do not ascribe to total pacifism. I know many devout believers who do, and I respect and even understand their convictions. For me, I have to be honest with myself because I know that if someone were to threaten my family and others whom I love, I would do whatever necessary to protect them. That disqualifies me as a pacifist, but it does not absolve me from the textual tensions within the Bible itself.

The human condition that responds to hostility can be caricatured as flight or fight. Biologically, when we are confronted with a threat, chemicals are released, and we will make a choice, acting upon that threat: fight or flight. We make such choices nearly every day. If someone cuts us off in traffic, we have a choice to honk the horn, curse under our breath, cut them off, or simply avoid the situation both physically and emotionally. A co-worker says something offensive to you or about you. You have a choice to make: respond in kind by saying something belittling, use sarcasm, shove them, or you could ignore them or diffuse the matter. Fight or flight. Most of the time such choices are easy to make.

This is not simply a personal, individual decision. It has political and national implications. If conflict becomes unavoidable what is the ethical response of a believer?

Christian Ethicists speak of other responses. One is an attitude of crusade as response. Like the crusades of the Middle Ages, they were intent on spreading Christianity by way of the sword, to crusade is to fight on behalf of the spread of a belief or ideology. In WW II, we fought to replace fascism and the Third Reich, and later communism, with an idea of democracy. Some might argue that is what we are doing in today in Iraq. It is a position, however, not supported in the New Testament, and today is questioned as diplomatically dubious.

There is the Just War theory. For the Christian, it is maintaining the belief that all war is bad. Love of the neighbor should guide every believer. War is a reality for every generation, but that does not make it any less evil. Yes, war is evil. There really is no such thing as a good war. Ask any veteran that has engaged in combat. There is nothing good about it. Yet, there are circumstances that may lead into the inevitable decision of war.

Albert Einstein, many of you may remember, was a committed pacifist. I read in one of his biographies last year, that in spite of his sincere convictions against war, he was ultimately responsible for persuading President Roosevelt to project work on an atomic bomb. He was afraid that the Germans would beat us to it, and the ovens of Auschwitz would then have a global reach.

There is more to the theory than this simple, quick and essentially superficial presentation, but time limits me. Suffice it to say, that I cannot and will not make the argument that war is always unnecessary. War, however, is the exception, not the norm. The Bible from Old Testament to New, holds the idea of peace as the ideal.

In the Hebrew, peace or *shalom*, is suggested by some scholars as one of the most important theological words in the entire Old Testament. Shalom is not simply the absence of war, for one can cease violent actions but not violent hearts. Peace – *shalom* – calls for a reordering of our lives that builds up and not tears down.

Peace has to first be personal before it can be global. We cannot reasonably work towards peace on earth, if we do not have peace in our hearts. It matters what we say or think, as we wait with annoyance in the checkout line or as our knuckles whiten, while gripping the steering wheel in clogged traffic. How we treat our neighbor in thought and deed has a global affect.

In John chapter 20, the first word that Jesus speaks to the fearful church, is that of peace – *Peace be with you* (v. 19). Peace, that is *shalom*, was the common word Jews used to greet one another. Today, you can go to Jerusalem and buy a small tile hanging that says, “shalom ya’ll.” But, it is not just a word that means “howdy.” In fact, Jesus is more direct, *Peace be with You*. He says it twice. Be still, don’t be anxious, God has heard your fear. This powerful word on the lips of Jesus that redefines everything. When Jesus speaks this word, he puts to flight all of the “un-peace” like things in our life - war, hostility, fear, anxiety, alienation, loneliness – none of that counts anymore. There was a time when this stuff seemed to count, and this was part of the reason the early church locked its doors and hid out of fear. But now, Jesus has come and has trumped it all. He has his battle scars. Pentecost is the day when we let the peace of Jesus over-ride all the un-peace stuff – to which we pay too much attention.

So what do we do with the scriptures that give testimony that there are times and seasons: Ecclesiastes 3: *8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace?* This is the season of war and scattering.

You know that we cannot just say generically, “support our troops,” without putting a face on them. These people have a face to us: they are children, grandchildren, spouses and guests of this church. I am very proud of them, their willingness to serve and commit to something far bigger than themselves, and literally laying their lives down, for a hoped for and greater good.

This war has face to us. But, of course, all wars have a face to someone. Many of you this morning are veterans of war. You have looked evil in the eye and you know its face. I am proud of you and what you have seen and how you have sacrificed.

I ask of you all to not trivialize this war, by reducing it to a conversation that sounds more like a discussion over a ball game. In my opinion, the current news coverage – of which I am thankful – can create the impression that the war in Iraq is simply a spectator sport. It is war, not a video game or a political opinion. Somebody’s child will die, and mothers will weep, and children will be left orphaned. It is an indication, that once again, human beings have failed in living up to the image of God, in which we have been created. And while the Bible states that there are times and seasons for killing and war, God has created us for a higher purpose: 1 John 3: 16 *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? 18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

Let us then pray for peace. We all are hoping I have to believe, for a resolution to this war, that it may one day be over. But as I said earlier, peace is more than just the absence of conflict. Peace – *shalom* – calls for a reordering of our lives that builds up and not tear down. Let us claim the words of Isaiah as our ultimate hope: NRS Isaiah 2:4 *He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into **plowshares**, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

Henlee Barnette, whom I spoke of earlier, wrote a concluding thought in his own autobiography, which should serve us well: *“Let me die thinking. I have always had a hunger to know more. Here we see things ‘through a glass darkly.’ No one has all this truth.”*

As we move through the tensions of war and peace, there is so much we just do not know. Let us not, however, resign ourselves to the “inevitable.” Rather, let us move ever onward as the light of Christ, towards his love for each of us and our love for one another, that we may know, finally, ultimately and completely the: *...peace of God, which surpasses **all understanding**, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4:7)