

Aspiring to be Veterans of Peace

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 12, 2017—Veterans Day Observance

- Isaiah 2:3-4 (NRSV) ³ Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. 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.
- Romans 12:17-21 (GNT) ¹⁷ If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with a wrong. Try to do what everyone considers to be good. ¹⁸ Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody. ¹⁹ Never take revenge, my friends, but instead let God's anger do it. For the scripture says, “I will take revenge, I will pay back, says the Lord.” ²⁰ Instead, as the scripture says: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them a drink; for by doing this you will make them burn with shame.” ²¹ Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good.
- Theme: Jesus calls us to seek a new reality where conflict between persons and nations is addressed through peaceful acts of love.

Let us pray: God of Possibility, God of Hope: How will you change us because we listen for your word to us in the words we're about to hear? Open our ears and open our hearts, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Our culture often celebrates holidays of the church. Shopkeepers and online retailers have embraced Christmas, of course, and Easter with sales of apparel and candy. Even the eve of All Saints Day, better known as All Hallows Eve or Hallowe'en, has become a huge merchandising opportunity – the average American household spends about \$85 on Halloween candy, costumes, greeting cards and decorations.¹ Restaurants and bakeries even figure out a way to turn a profit on the observance of Lent (think *paczki* and fish dinners). Yes, our society finds ways to take advantage of the observance of religious holidays.

For our part, while the Church doesn't try to *capitalize* on national or secular holidays, we may *note* occasions like Memorial Day, Labor Day, or Independence Day.

But Veterans Day... Veterans Day presents a challenge to the church community. On the one hand we certainly respect and honor people who were drafted into service or stepped forward to serve our nation. On the other hand, the very nature of the purpose of their service – preparing for or engaging in armed conflict – presents us with a spiritual dilemma. We're people of faith seeking to follow the example of Jesus Christ, the one who the prophet Isaiah envisioned as the “Prince of Peace.”² How do we reconcile their preparation for combat with our call to be peacemakers?

The Bible describes figures from both “camps”:

- King Saul was a military veteran; St. Paul was not.
- Joshua was a veteran; Moses wasn't.

¹ <https://nrf.com/resources/consumer-research-and-data/holiday-spending/halloween-headquarters> accessed 11/10/17

² Isaiah 9:6

- Deborah and Jael were veterans; Abraham and Noah were not.

The fact is that the Bible records histories of military conflict as part of the story of the Israelite people's journey of faith. The biblical narrative gives the impression that God intended for war as a necessary component for accomplishing God's purpose for humankind. It's not hard to see the problem that this presents. If we believe that God loves all of God's creatures, how could God prefer one people, one nation over another? Why would God want God's children the Israelites to flourish but allow God's children the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites to suffer military conquest?³

The Bible's apparent justification of war in order to accomplish God's purposes led biblical scholars through the ages to develop a rationale for what has become known as "Just War." St. Augustine in the 7th century and St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century proposed that in our imperfect world, the necessity of war may be forced upon Christians. Certain conditions had to exist to justify engaging in war, such as:

- Every possible means of peacefully settling the conflict must be exhausted first.
- The motive for war must be advancement of good or avoidance of evil.
- The ultimate objective of war must be to bring peace.
- The war must not cause greater evil than the evil to be eliminated.
- Civilians must not be intentionally harmed.
- Prisoners and conquered peoples must be treated justly.⁴

Not all Christians accept the rationale proposed by the "Just War" theory. I was raised in a denomination called the Church of the Brethren. The Brethren, like the Quakers, Mennonites and Amish, embrace a pacifist stance which means opposition to all war. Christian pacifists are guided by the example of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. When Judas led soldiers to arrest Jesus, and someone offered Jesus a sword to defend himself, "...Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."⁵ Pacifists are wrongly criticized for simply rolling over and giving in to aggression, but pacifists actively engage in deliberate strategies of peacemaking, such as "the Swedish and Danish resistance to Nazism in World War II, Gandhi's independence movement in India, the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King [Jr.] in the United States, and the Solidarity labor movement in Poland."⁶

The fact is, our nation's military also engages in peacemaking activities. Troops are sent as peacekeepers to areas treading lightly in the newfound experience of peace. Our armed services provide response in the form of humanitarian and disaster relief around the world; indeed, in our own country I read that 17,000 troops provided essential relief supplies and labor in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.⁷

Now, "Just War" proponents will say that in the real world there will always be a need for military. None other than General George Washington said, "To be prepared for war is one of the most effective means of preserving peace."⁸

³ Joshua 3:10

⁴ http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq_war.htm accessed 11/10/17

⁵ Matthew 25:52 NRSV

⁶ http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq_war.htm accessed 11/10/2017

⁷ <http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/veterans-day-facts> accessed 11/10/2017

⁸ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/g/georgewash146832.html?src=t_war accessed 11/10/2017

But perhaps humanitarian efforts such as the military's contributions to Hurricane Katrina relief point toward a hope-filled future for the role of military service. Consider the two scripture readings we heard this morning:

- Isaiah envisioned a time when war's tools were refashioned into farming implements. In Chapter 2 Isaiah wrote, "...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."
- And in Romans Chapter 12 St. Paul suggested a peacemaker's strategy for engaging with opponents: "'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them a drink....' Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good."

Since November 11th landed on a Saturday this year, some observed Veterans Day yesterday, others on Friday, and some earlier in the week. On this weekend, even if we've done so already, let us pause to recognize and appreciate those in our midst who are veterans of our nation's armed forces, who served in times of war and in times of peace. They sacrificed personal opportunities for the sake of our nation. They were prepared to sacrifice their well-being and even their lives in order to preserve our God-given, hard-won freedom.

And as we offer thanks for what they did for us, we pray that we will celebrate Veterans Day in a different way in the future. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus promised, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."⁹ May we welcome more and more veterans of the campaign for peace in our world, so that we can join that army of God's messengers who sang this victory song: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people!"¹⁰

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⁹ Matthew 5:9 NRSV

¹⁰ Luke 2:14 NRSV (alternate reading)