

Pat Conover: A Just Peace

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Pat Conover

A Just Peace

I feel called to preach about the issues of war and peace today and I am picking up that calling with some apprehension. I know some of you care intensely about this issue and that I will probably offend some or many of you. I hope I am speaking a word inspired by God, but I understand, as you shall shortly hear, that there are several worthy and respectable Christian paths into this difficult subject. Therefore, if I offend you, I hope you will be able to respond by deepening the conversation. I know I upset some of you by moving to this task too quickly. I hope we are in a time when we are more ready as a community to seek God's guidance.

After listening to [Rebecca last Sunday](#), I should begin by confessing that in threat situations I am a fighter and that my totem is a grizzly bear. I have been in many threat situations, many fights – physical and otherwise. I have had wins and losses, gained a lot of scar tissue, and learned to count the costs.

I understand fighting differently than Rebecca. Fighting may be a defense mechanism, as Rebecca discussed it, but fighting can also arise from aggression. Our fighting as a defense mechanism has arisen in response to a world where there are real objective threats between people who are trying to harm or kill each other, and not just disagreements among friends or within community. I need to come clean at the beginning of this sermon and tell you that there are things for which I am willing to fight, and for which I am willing to die. I need to

tell you that I am thankful that there have been people who have fought for us, died for us, so that we can gather this morning for this kind of conversation.

Since I believe that there are times to fight, sometimes to fight violently, sometimes to fight in wars, I have had to think about what constitutes winning and losing and about who gets to bear what costs. Because I was in a lot of physical fights early in my life and went into the army at the age of 17; I had lots of early lessons in redefining situations in the interest of lowering the costs and the seeking of common ground when that was not so obvious. Being on the wrong side of a gun three times has a way of focusing the mind. I graduated early from any personal goals I had about proving my courage to focusing on the relational goals of advancing shalom. Living in fear of the police – as I have in Tallahassee, Florida and Chicago, Illinois – having my phone tapped and otherwise being harassed by the FBI because they thought I was a communist, and especially coming to realize that the United States has fought in wars for complex and even contradictory reasons, have pushed me beyond simplistic answers and have led me to care about advancing shalom even when I wasn't feeling personally vulnerable. I understand that peace is not merely the absence of violent conflict but the presence of justice.

The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with conflict, filled with violence and wars. Too often, we want to psychologize or spiritualize these scriptures instead of dealing first with the on-top level of fighting and war. I want to work with two passages this morning – the Jeremiah passage in our lectionary and the first 3 verses of I Samuel 15, verses that are never in the lectionary. Samuel first:

Samuel said to Saul, "God sent me to anoint you as the king over Israel. Now listen to the voice of God.

I shall punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel

when Israel came out of Egypt. Go now and attack the Amalekites, destroy them and put their property under ban. Spare no one. Put them all to death: men and women, children and babes in arms, herds and flocks, camels and donkeys."

Samuel, the king maker and powerbroker, counsels the purity of revenge, of blood feud, and dares to claim he is speaking for God. Saul carries out the war against the Amalekites but fails to meet the purity expectations of Samuel by keeping the king alive as a trophy of victory and by sacrificing and then eating the Amalekite herd animals. This lack of purity leads Samuel to reject Saul as king in favor of David.

This passage in Samuel caused me a lot of distress as a teenager. You cannot get around it as some mistake of interpretation by fundamentalists. I finally found a whisper of good news in it but that is another sermon. The bad news is that the belief that you are part of a favored people and enjoy a special relation with God can lead to excess and sin, even to genocide. Samuel's sin is not rare. Many religious groups have claimed such special status. It is not hard to understand how Samuel got to where he was. The Hebrew people had wandered as nomads in the wilderness after coming out of Egypt. They were so weak, so tribally disorganized, that they couldn't even defeat other stone age, or copper age, semi-nomads like the Amalekites, much less the iron age agriculturalists like the Baal worshipers, like the Philistines. They finally fought their way across the Jordan River and captured enough land to settle down and grow in strength, killing or driving out the previous inhabitants, gathering the tribes into a kingdom.

Jeremiah was sick of Hebrew kings. The tradition of prophets as kingmakers had deteriorated to the role of royal apologists. Jeremiah was not alone in criticizing the Hebrew kings. Numerous prophets called the kings, not to blood feuds, but to righteousness, to remember what it was like to be out

of power. Such *subversiveness* meant that Jeremiah did some of his prophesying from prison. The passage from Jeremiah that is in our lectionary today comes from a later time after Judah and Jerusalem were defeated but God was still God.

“Woe is upon the shepherds who scattered my flocks and let them be lost,” says God. “I say to you, shepherds of Israel, you have scattered my flock. You have not watched over them; but I am watching you and will punish you for your misdeeds.”

Then God said, “I myself shall gather the remnants of my sheep from all the lands to which I have dispersed them. I shall bring them back to their homes and there they will fruitful, there they will increase. I shall appoint new shepherds to take care of my sheep. Never again shall my sheep know fear or dismay or punishment.”

*“The days are coming,” says God,
“when I shall make a righteous branch spring from David’s
line,
a king who will rule wisely,
maintaining justice and righteousness in the land.
In his day Judah will be kept safe and Israel will live
undisturbed.
The name of the new king shall be the Lord of Righteousness.”*

Though Jeremiah was still thinking in tribal terms, you can also hear the echoes of the call of Moses to universal understandings of justice, a deeper truth than kingship based on military conquest.

Just as the Hebrew kingdom was based on military conquest, so the European conquest of the Americas was based on a cry for land to live on, the same kind of cry for “lebensraum” that the Nazis claimed as the basis for their wars of conquest. The belief that one is somehow favored by God, has a right to kill others or drive them out of their homes, has often been grounded in Christendom by appeal to Hebrew scripture. I

learned the story of Joshua fighting the battle of Jericho as a story of the righteous people of God claiming an ancient promise to land not as a story of self-interested invasion justified by the desire for a better way of life than nomadic herding. In the 19th century, one version of this arrogance in the United States was the Monroe Doctrine, the “manifest destiny” to dominate the hemispheres.

I find it hard to discern the position of Jesus on the issues of war and peace, other than that he cared about justice. He was certainly killed, as was his mentor, John the Baptist, because at least his enemies thought he wanted to ignite a religious based uprising. There are gospel passages that on their face sound like political revolution. Jesus had zealots among his disciples and we know that Peter carried a sword. The recent uprising of the Maccabees was part of vivid memory and Galilee was a place known for harboring enemies of Rome in the wilderness. Thirty-plus years after the death of Jesus such an uprising did occur and, if there were Zealot Christians, their story was lost in the genocide of Jerusalem. The gospels were written or edited after this time of genocide, a time of persecution when it would not be wise to write down openly subversive claims, a time when any hopes of a political uprising were transformed into apocalyptic dreams.

What we do know is that the early church favored pacifism, and particularly favored standing aside from the wars of Rome. Failure to contribute soldiers was one of reasons for the Roman persecution of Christians. This was pacifism of withdrawal, echoed by many Christians today, superceded by pacifism of engagement, of sacrificial service in pursuit of transformation.

In the 4th century, Christians ascended to power under Constantine. Christians entered the armies of the state. They blessed state wars of conquest, practiced conversion by the sword and entered into centuries of battle with each other and

with Islam. Some of the wars between Christian and Moslems in the 11th and 12th centuries were as ugly as Saul's genocide against the Amalekites. However, just as pacifism of withdrawal has been superceded by pacifism of engagement in the best of Christian thought, the concept of crusade as conquest has been superceded by the concept of crusade as liberation of the oppressed. Wars of liberation recognize the lie of crying peace, peace, when there is no peace. In some of the best 20th century examples: Zimbabwe, South Africa, the Philippines; the outcome was not ongoing blood feud but a societal transformation with some room to live for everyone. Better yet, some wars of liberation have succeeded with non-violent tactics – such as in India. Such struggles for liberation have gone a long way toward reversing the colonialism of Europe in Africa, of neo-colonialism of the United States in Central and South America, and of other oppressions.

The Christian principles of a just war were first formulated by Thomas Aquinas and are among his finest contributions to Christianity. The principles were constructed as guidance for a Roman Catholic Church and Empire on the premise that Christian rulers should fight using Christian restraints. There are several important elements of just war principles. I will mention just two: fighting only in defense rather than conquest and the goal of limiting both military and civilian casualties. Turning away from war theories of conquest made it possible, after the Second World War, to turn quickly from fighting to making old enemies into friends through the Marshal Plan. Today we have the possibility of turning Russia from an enemy to a friend.

Just as pacifism and crusade theories have been superceded in the best of Christian thought, so just war theory is currently being superceded by just peace theory. In fact, just peace theory aims at incorporating not only a transformation of just war theory but also transformed pacifism and transformed

crusade theory. Though it is possible to point to historical antecedents, just peace theory came to earliest maturity in the context of the Cold War – the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. It faced up to the madness of mutually assured destruction, the potential for making the whole earth unlivable for human beings and other species. What is the meaning of winning a war when everyone ends up dead?

Confession is not the main point of this sermon, but I dare not go further without a few more confessions. The United States violated just war theory in the Second World War in the fire bombing of Dresden and other German cities and in the fire bombing and nuclear bombing of Japanese cities. We are violating just war principles today in the ongoing bombing and sanctions against Iraq. This does not mean that our conduct in the Second World War or in Iraq was completely unjust, but it does it mean that it was not wholly just.

The particular confession that is currently called for is that the United States contributed to the rise of Al Queda and the Taliban, by one journalists estimate spending about \$5 billion dollars through the CIA to provide modern weapons. We also supported the recruitment of Arab-Americans to join the armies of the Mujaheddein through a center in Brooklyn, a disaster that also led to the murder of a Jewish Rabbi in New York. The goal was to destabilize the Soviet Union and weaken it by creating independent Islamic nations in Central Asia – a goal that was achieved. Asking whether the goal justified the means is not nearly important as recognizing our complicity, which was compounded by abandoning an interest in Afghanistan once the Soviet Union was brought down. Noticing complicity is not the same as blanket condemnation but it is more than righteous posturing as if we represent the force of uncompromised good against uncompromised evil. That kind of talk goes back to uncompromised crusade thinking. Fortunately, such damaging talk from our president does not indicate the fullness of what we are actually doing in Afghanistan, but it remains to be

seen whether new authority to the CIA to engage in secret activities will encourage the same kind of anti-American activity that is part of the CIA's history.

This sermon is about more than the need to wash our dirty linen, more than about fighting for the best ideals of the United States against those who would use the excuse of war to restrict civil liberties at home and justify unbridled self-interest in our foreign policies, including support for the semi-secret violent manipulations of other countries and movements.

Just peace theory is grounded in facing up to the madness that is part of all violent conflicts, all wars. This facing up starts with the recognition of the madness, of accepting the reality that those who want peace and justice do not define many situations. Wars happen when other means of resolving conflict fail. Often this is because oppressors are not willing to negotiate an end to oppression. This year, additionally, we are freshly reminded that religious intolerance can contribute mightily to such violence.

Just peace theory recognizes that even though all wars are, in some sense, mad, they are nonetheless real and, in practice, unavoidable. Christian must refuse to let the presence of madness define their actions. Among other things, they must refuse to allow nations to define wars in the name of self-interest or even of defense. It may be necessary to fight some wars, including especially wars of defense. I believe that to serve as a fighter in such wars can be a Christian calling. However enemies present themselves to us, however our own country tries to define the situation, Christians must also listen for the truths of pacifism, the truths of liberation, must give themselves to the hope for justice. The right to self-defense is relevant. The necessity for acting in the midst of mixed motives is unavoidable.

I am preaching today about vision. In any war situation, both

justice and peace are relevant and are sometimes in dialectic tension with each other. It is often practically impossible to maximize both values at the same time. For my sermon today, the main thing I want to hold up is that both justice and peace are in conflict with narrow self-interest, but in keeping with the larger self-interest of living in shalom. Both are in conflict with a narrow patriotism that degenerates into a nationalism of "my country right or wrong," but in keeping with a deep commitment to the United States as an embodiment, however flawed, of democracy and human rights. Both are in conflict with Christendom, or any other establishment of religion, that can make even the most precious symbols into idols, but points to Christianity and the best of other religions as a grounding for deep dialogue that can support not merely negotiation but understanding.

Just peacemaking is a process that can go on in the midst of all kinds of conflicts and wars and is especially important for heading off wars. It transcends even engaged pacifism by recognizing the reality of war, the reality of madness in our midst, sometimes even our own madness. It transcends even liberation as a form of crusade by recognizing a common humanity beyond the realities of oppression, by pursuing the active presence of friendship rather than the mere absence of alienation. It transcends the just war theory by going beyond the justification of any war while recognizing the realities of war that compromise us all.

Just peace theory lures us to living out of hope and commitment rather than righteousness. When I was on active standby alert to go fight in Lebanon under President Eisenhower I was ready to go and give my life for the United States. Just peace lures me to give my life everyday in the hope that we can go beyond cleaning up the United States and contribute to shalom for the whole world.

We have the story in John 18: 11-12 of the moment when the servants of the high priest came and captured Jesus in the

Garden of Gethsemane. Peter took out his sword and attacked the servants. I could have been Peter and done that. Jesus rebukes Peter and says it is time to drink the cup prepared for him by God. It is harder to give up one's life everyday for the sake of testifying to the shalom of Jesus. I hope I can do that.