

September 7, 2014

TEXT: Matthew 5:9,21-24

TITLE: Foundations of Faith: On War & Violence

For the next three weeks, we will be looking at our faith foundations – the rules that shape how we live, the foundations upon which we build our churches and our lives together. Where do we find these faith foundations? We find them in scripture, in the example of Jesus Christ, and in our heart – when God’s Spirit moves within us to see glimpses of what is right and loving and just. Faith foundations need to be examined periodically so that they are there in our active consciousness, ready to guide us when a word of faith needs to be spoken when things are rough and times are hard.

Thirteen years ago this week, on the Sunday after the planes flew into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and the field just east of here, I don’t believe I preached a particularly good sermon. People everywhere were in shock and they flocked into churches to be together for prayer, and at some level, for some answers to the questions “Why?” and “How was this possible?” I barely remember my own words that day. I spoke about Jesus and his walk to Calvary carrying the cross and finding ourselves on a similarly hard road now. I didn’t speak about anger and revenge, although those emotions were present in the sanctuary and deep down in many hearts. I had no definitive answers to offer or assurances to give that America would be fully safe or peaceful ever again. When tragedy happens, it is very hard to find the right words to say – and almost impossible to know for sure what to do next. It is then that we fall back upon our foundations and pray they support us as we get up off the ground and try to walk by faith once again.

Just five months after the horrific battle of Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln came to help consecrate a national cemetery there. The past Governor of Massachusetts, Edward Everett, gave an oration of over 2 hours about the noble soldiers and martyrs buried in those fields. Then after a hymn was sung, Lincoln stepped forward and spoke for about two minutes – reminding the people that no words can truly dedicate, consecrate or hallow this bloodied soil; and while the world will not long remember what is said here, it will never forget what they did here. He asked the people that day to ensure that these dead had not died in vain and that our nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom so that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth. In a few words, Lincoln helped a nation stand firmly upon its faith foundations.

When confronted with wars and threats of wars and all manner of violence, the bible rules are surprisingly clear although sadly seldom followed. Exodus 20:13 – the Sixth Commandment says it best: *Thou shalt not kill* or in some translations, *You shall not murder*. That commandment of just a few short words is extremely hard to follow in our modern times. We say, “Thou shalt not kill”, and hear the response, “Yeah, well, what about Hitler or Bin Laden or if someone you love was being threatened? Could you honestly stand by and do nothing?”

Invariably if someone gets into your face by mentioning Hitler or extreme examples that would justify violence, they are not looking for a real answer from you. They simply are trying to feel better about the ways they are already committed to breaking the Sixth Commandment in today's violent world. I can't be too hard on folks when they try to justify wars and killing others. I've been in that place, as have most of us. The biblical commandment not to kill, to be a Christian pacifist, seems like an impossible ideal. But it isn't impossible – not if we understand it as it is meant to be lived out and trust it as a foundation of faith.

First, an initial correction. Pacifism is not passive. The word “pacifism” is fairly new. It first appeared just over one hundred years ago, coming from a French word meaning to “make peace.” But unfortunately to our English-language ears, “pacifist” sounds similar to “passive” and so lots of people excoriate pacifists as weak souls unwilling to fight for their freedoms, or cowards whose inaction means someone else has to go to battle for them. Back when William McKinley was president, trouble arose between America and Spain. McKinley had seen the dead bodies piled up in the Civil War, so he prayed for peace. But Teddy Roosevelt, his Undersecretary of the Navy and soon to be the next U.S. President, had never seen combat. He loved war. Roosevelt actually said, “Every man who has in him any real power of joy in battle knows that [feeling] when the wolf begins to rise in his heart. He does not shrink from blood and sweat; he revels in them, in the toil, the pain and the danger.”¹

War feels manly, strong and righteous, but it is anything but that. After Roosevelt's war against Spain came the horrors of World War I – trench warfare and mustard gas – then World War II, Hiroshima, Korea, Vietnam. And still the list goes on – from soldiers drafted to today's reservists sent away from their families to Iraq and Afghanistan; from hand to hand combat to roadside bombs and drone attacks. Yes, people have fought nobly in times of war, yet that fact is true for some on both sides of the battle lines. To “make peace”, to be a Christian pacifist, is very hard yet it is just as noble if we commit as strongly to it as others have committed to weapons and warfare.

The ways of violence are both comprehensive and cumulative. Violence is a mindset, a way of life too easily accepted on our streets or in our homes or in State Department strategy rooms. Violence has a price tag but also a profit margin. Weapon systems are developed, and once developed, need to be sold, deployed and used. Arms races threaten nations with bankruptcy or, at least, re-direct scarce funds from building up things to blowing up people. The comprehensive reach of the military industrial complex has a cumulative effect too. Past violence causes present violence and necessitates future violence. Air strikes today against the Islamic State are mostly to destroy the weapons we put in Iraq in the first place, and with no end to this vicious cycle of violence in sight.

If violence is comprehensive, cumulative and corrupting, then Christian pacifism must be just as comprehensive and cumulative and compassionate. Yes, it is hard work but it is the answer given to us over and over again in scripture. The Sixth Commandment says, “Thou shalt not kill.” In Matthew 5, Jesus took that commandment and went even further: “It was said in ancient times ‘*you shall not kill*’ and ‘*whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.*’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you are liable to judgment.” Suddenly we see that the companions to the negative rule “Thou shalt not kill” are the positive rules “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44) and “overcome evil with good.” (Rom 12:21).

Jesus embodied Christian pacifism. He actively challenged the powers of violence and evil in lots of ways. He offered healing to those whom the world disdained and treated as worthless casualties in the battles of life. He restored the outcasts and bravely spoke truth to power in the temple and to the throne. He prayed “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” He lived as a witness to peacemaking and established counter-cultural communities of resistance that now have spread throughout the world. In fact, for the first 300 years of the church, believers refused to carry weapons or serve in the military, if possible. Jesus did not come to help us get along in this world; he came to overcome the world – to show us a better way, a different way, a God-centered, neighbor-loving way of peace that transforms all understanding.

Pacifism is not passive; it is incredibly active. It is much more than just refraining from violence. It is living out that double commitment to “love God and love our neighbor.” John Calvin, our Presbyterian forefather explained the Sixth Commandment this way: *God forbids us to hurt or harm [someone] unjustly. Why? Because God wills that this [person’s] life be dear and precious to us.* Martin Luther’s catechism says that the law not to kill ultimately means “we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.”² And his modern namesake, Martin Luther King, Jr. has memorably said: *Violence is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy... Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

War and violence never determine who’s right, just who’s left (Betrand Russell). Each day we rise and walk by faith through this life. Remember that we walk upon a foundation that is God-given, Christ-redeemed, and Spirit-renewed if we walk as peacemakers in a hurting world. If we walk as pacifists in a violent society. If we actively make peace, protect peace, and trust the Prince of Peace to lead wherever life takes us.

AMEN

¹ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit*, (2013), p. 222.

² Patrick Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation*, 2009, p. 264.