

Proper 26 2006
1 Kings 17:8-16
Ps. 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

As the widow passed the collection box for the poor she dropped in just two small copper coins, not even the value of one penny. None of the important people paid any attention to her. She was only a poor widow, but Jesus saw her and praised her because she gave all that she had. The other widow had only a small amount of meal and oil to make some bread for her son and herself...then with nothing to eat they would simply starve to death. Elijah asked her to share what she had and she did. Afterwards the meal and oil did not run out just as the prophet had said. Both widows acted on faith, giving all they had and God declared it more than enough.

Today we honor our veterans. Wars fought for the cause of justice. Justice is a hard concept and just war is even harder to reconcile today with the weapons we have. Just war theory claims two standards to justify the use of weapons to achieve a just cause: jus ad bellum and jus in bello. Jus ad bellum consists of seven principles, which need to be met to justify war. These include a just cause, be waged by a proper authority, with a right intention, undertaken only if there is reasonable chance of success and if the total good outweighs the total evil expected (proportionality), and as a last resort for achieving the goal of peace. Complementing these principles are those relating to the conduct of war, jus in bello, which focuses on two concerns, discrimination – the avoidance of intentional harm to non-combatants – and proportionality of means – the requirement that only such force be employed as is strictly necessary to secure one's objective. These principles do not in themselves define a just war but help us to examine historical background and actions taken for the "cause of peace and justice."

Looking to the Bible for guidance, we find Jesus teaching us to love our neighbors and our enemies. We remember that in the sermon on the mount, Jesus is explicit in his instruction to not take another person's life, and when Peter draws his sword to strike the soldier the evening of Jesus' arrest, Jesus admonishes Peter to cease his defense with the warning; he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.

The early Church Father, Tertullian and Origen in the third century viewed shedding of blood as unlawful. They believed prayer was the appropriate Christian response to injustice. These attitudes to war changed with the Edict of Milan (AD 313) when Constantine converted to Christianity and merged Christianity and Roman Authority as Church and Empire, not as separation of Church and State as we practice it in the US.

Augustine in the fourth century moved beyond earlier teaching arguing that the task of the Christian is not to withdraw from the world but to live within it, advocating for justice, working for peace, using force only if necessary to right an injustice. Augustine saw in the Old Testament justifications because it seems that at times in that history, God commanded war. Augustine saw war as a consequence of sin. It is right to act as the Good Samaritan for one harmed and in need of help. Imagining a heavenly city, Augustine encouraged actions that corrected injustice, that defended the vulnerable, that

acted in a responsible ways, such as self-defense, rather than proactive pre-emptive action.

Justification is an exercise of reason and as such is always subjective. The danger is that it is often the case that each side in a conflict believes in the justness of its cause. The examination of any just war requires an analysis of the leader's motives. The right intent is to promote a good and avoid a greater evil. One may well argue that the Holocaust in Europe against Jews, Gypsies, socially marginalized groups, is a greater evil than military intervention. When Germany invaded Poland and attacked England, the justification of last resort was clear. Reasonable efforts at peaceful resolution were unsuccessful. From our position of retrospective judgment, the cause of the Allies seems right, in keeping with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

In honoring the men and women of our armed forces on Armistice Day or Veterans Day, we honor those who gave everything for the cause. On the 11th day of the 11th month at 11 o'clock in the morning, 1918, the armistice to end the "war to end all wars" was sounded. The carnage of a foreign conflict fought "to make the world safe for democracy" stopped, but it was not the war to end all wars. The memorials we build to honor the dead – the parades – the wreaths at the tomb of the unknown soldier – the scenes of fields of crosses marking thousands of graves, tell us that we honor those who gave everything for the cause of justice and peace. We who have enjoyed the benefits of peace are grateful for those who risked their lives on our behalf, but there is also some degree of ambiguity about having our sons and daughters – our grandsons and granddaughters – go forth in the same way – to risk all for our sense of justice and peace. We can't help but wonder if there will ever be a "war to end all wars" and if peace and justice can come on this earth.

We may find it difficult today to justify war with the clarity that hindsight offers for previous wars, but that does not mean that the individuals who go to serve the country should be dishonored, even if the cause and means are questionable. Yesterday the Frederick News Post had an extensive series of articles on the members of the armed services suffering post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD) after returning from Viet Nam, the Gulf War, and Iraq. The trauma of war, the fear of being in harms way every day and every night, the exhaustion of being on guard, the uncertainty of life, the reality of death, weigh on the soldier today, as no doubt it did in past wars. Veterans returned from WWI and WWII with honor, with the thanks of their fellow citizens, with the integrity fighting for justice brings when the end result is peace. Soldiers who returned from Viet Nam found it more difficult to hear the taunts, jeers, and protests – when they had done what they perceived as their duty, served faithfully, risked their very lives, were faced with conflict at home and too often rejection of their effort. We can honor the person's gift even if we find the justness of the war lacking. Viet Nam was not the grand victory of WWII but the soldier put his or her life on the line – it was all she or he had.

Until we correct the injustices that spawn cells of hostility, we cannot have peace. For women and men elected to public office this week, we must hold them accountable for the common good. For our nation, we must learn to listen to one another, to work together for the common good. For the church to speak out for justice and reconciliation and to discern a path away from war toward peace we must see the world through the eyes of Jesus. Each of us can make the same commitment that the widow made – though

we have different gifts, we can be equally committed to Christ and the incoming kingdom of God on earth.

One of the central questions we face as Christians in any age of conflict and war is how we understand the kingdom of God. If we think it is all up to God to come again to judge the earth we may fail to see our co-responsibility in the process. If on the other hand we view the kingdom of God as being inaugurated with Jesus and his commissioning to go into all the world proclaiming the gospel as an ongoing work for the kingdom we have work to do as God continues to bring about the kingdom.

Extreme pacifists find in Jesus the model of refusal of all violence, including self-defense. In our day, the Amish demonstrate the pacifist position. Justice provides a lens to examine war in the modern era. Addressing root injustices that cause or intensify modern conflicts, Christians respond to the gospel imperative to love your neighbor.

“The message of the Son of God who dies upon the cross, of a God who transcends history and is yet in history, who condemns and judges sin, but suffers with and for the sinner, this message is the truth about life.” (R. Niebuhr, 1937). The ideal of love and the practical goal of justice create the tension in which we live. Peace is the product of a just social order.

Jesus did not condemn the wealthy who made large offerings – but he called attention to the widow who gave so very little and that was all she had. In this story as throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, the violated, poor, widow of no particular importance to anyone else in the temple that day had Jesus’ full attention and gratitude. Jesus praised her for giving all that she had to God. The story is not about caring for the widow and orphan as much as it is about how important they are to God. These two widows show those of us who stand in different, safe, secure, privileged places what life before God looks like. The widows offer a poignant homily to those with ears to hear.