

War and the Call of Grace

Rob Gieselmann, Pent 20A, Sept. 21, 2014

From each according to his ability, *to each* according to his need. Karl Marx. Perhaps both God and Jesus are Marxist. Jesus tells this terribly *uncomfortable* parable, in which each worker receives the same wage, regardless of work performed. God directs each Israelite to gather the hoarfrost *manna*, and it doesn't matter how much you gather – a little or a lot – you end-up with the same amount as everybody else. Everybody is equal – in God's frightfully egalitarian world. And that's just plain wrong.

I was reading the Gospel according to John – this past week, as part of my personal devotion. *When* I came upon Jesus' arrest, I noticed something I'd never really paid attention to before. Jesus – it is true – was a passive non-resister, very Ghandi-like, in his arrest, but Peter, it says, *pulled out his sword* and cut somebody's ear off ... Now – I'd heard that all before – But what I'd not really thought about before was this: Peter had a sword. On his person. Like he carried it all the time. A man prepared for battle. Just like so many Christians ever since – Killing in the so-called name of God. War.

Did you know that since the beginning of the twentieth century, our country has been at war almost half the time?

Philippine American War (1899-1901) 2 years

Border War (Mexico) (1910-19) 9 years

WWI (1917-18) 2 years

WWII (1941-45) 4 years

Korean War (1950-53) 3 years

Vietnam War (1953-75) 22 years

Grenada (1983) 1 year

Persian Gulf War (1990-91) 1 year

Afghanistan/Iraq (2001-14) 13 years

Fifty four years –

I turn 56 soon, and we have been at war more than half the time I've been alive.

For each of these wars, as far as I know, the public has protested or debated the war openly. Before WWII, people argued that we shouldn't fight someone else's war. *Vietnam* – would-be soldiers fled to Canada. *Iraq/Afghanistan* – people questioned whether WMDs really existed. I remember the *Persian Gulf War* – when people complained that we shouldn't fight for oil.

It may seem as though questioning is unpatriotic – *and we should support our soldiers* – but questioning may be the *most* patriotic thing one can do. It is your duty to disagree. Or to agree. To discover, and to debate.

And my question is: Why aren't we debating this new war more? Yes – I have heard a few timid voices, barely audible, beginning to question – But mostly ... Well - where is your

debate?... In coffee houses or at home, in church or at the water cooler? Public debate. Is your *responsibility*.

Free speech isn't just a right. You have a moral responsibility, a civic duty, to speak up. To – be in dialogue publicly with your elected officials. Public policy is forged by debate – and public debate is a crucial part of deciding trifling matters, such as, whether to declare war.

Are we complacent? Or worse – are we *afraid*? Of terrorism and 9-11 and brutal beheadings? Maybe we don't disagree publicly because we have become immune to war, and its effects. People dying in Iraq or Syria are not really people at all – they are just numbers – But rest assured, even if American soldiers never set foot on the ground, air strikes will kill somebody's children.

In one episode of The West Wing, Toby – the communications director for the president – lobbied an African American congressman, to persuade him to support a particular military action. The congressman didn't actually oppose the action – but he refused to vote for it – at least until the President would consent to a vote on the draft as part of the measure.

The draft? Asked Toby. The draft. You see, it's the black kids who die every time we go to war. The kids in my district, not those in Josh's all-white [Connecticut] neighborhood. My inner-city kids. They're the ones who enlist the most – so they can pull themselves out of poverty. They're the kids who die...In disproportionate numbers.

Now I don't know whether this is true – but somebody's kids are going to die when we go to war – whether on our side, or on the other. War isn't nice. And I have to ask,...*Are we prepared for that?*

*Since Christianity became the national religion of Rome in the early 300s, the appropriateness of Christians at war has been hotly contested. Peter carried a sword, and very few Christians take the position of complete passivism.

St. Augustine in the 400s articulated what has come to be known as the *Just War Theory*; seven principles that define whether a particular war is moral for Christians. To this day, most western governments – including our own – frame the case for and against war using Augustine's Just War Theory.

The points are:

- Just Cause –
- The injustice of the aggressor must significantly exceed that of the responding party
- Competent authority – war declared by recognized political authority
- Right intention –
- Probability of Success
- Last resort
- Proportional response

For example – in the Persian Gulf War, the crucial question was whether our actual motive was to defend Kuwait against an immoral aggressor, or to protect the flow of oil. In other words, did we have the right intention? So - why aren't we debating some form of these points with regard to air strikes and possible ground invasion in Syria and Iraq? Have we become so accustomed to being at war – that we are immune to its horror?

*The Israelites wandered forty years through the wilderness. Forty years, and it is not because, as some people like to joke, the men refused to stop and ask directions – but perhaps, as others say, because it takes 40 years – one full generation – to unlearn inculcated bad habits...To unlearn the habit of slavery, and to learn the habit of freedom. I wonder whether it will take us 40 years to unlearn the habit of war? And when will we get those 40 years?

Now, let me be clear. I'm not against the airstrikes. Nor am I for them. I just don't know, yet. I *need* your public debate.

*Upon hearing Jesus' parable in which the landowner pays all workers the same rate – most people are incensed. It really *isn't* fair. The early workers worked harder, and under worse conditions. They *deserved* more money. But Jesus is compelling, and insists that you think differently – that you differentiate between mere justice, and living on a higher plane. Jesus and God are not Marxist – they are *generous*.

Each time the landowner passed the town square, he didn't see **men** who were lazing about not working – he saw children who would go to bed hungry that night; Because their fathers had not worked that day, and could not afford to buy food. Maybe the landowner prayed: *Give us this day our daily bread*. And felt wrong about asking for himself without giving to others. He hired them all, and paid them all enough to feed their families that night.

I don't want any more beheadings. I don't want any more evil. I'd like to obliterate terror from the face of the earth. These objectives are good and valuable. But I can't help but wonder, about the children who at the end of the day will certainly die. As we execute justice. The Christian must ask the moral question: *might there be some other way?* And how will we discover, the answer if we never debate the question?