

Talking About the War: Do Not Be Silenced

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Luke 20:27-40

I have thought long and hard about delivering this sermon. In large part because in challenging both sides of the war debate, I think about eighty percent of you will likely be offended. However, as someone pointed out to me last Sunday my job is not to be popular. We must begin talking about war again. As a society we are all experiencing a tremendous amount of pressure to stop conversations about Canada's participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. When discussing this with a colleague of mine, retired Salvation Army Officer June Dwyer, said, "Linda, Christianity is not a *position*, it is a journey." I hope we can move a little farther on that journey together today.

In our scripture reading from Luke today, the Sadducees really don't want to know what Jesus thinks about the resurrection of the dead. The question they ask is actually designed to be a conversation stopper. The Sadducees are a group that does not believe in the resurrection of the dead. There is no spirit of inquiry, willingness to learn or openness to exchange. Their "what if" question is designed to embarrass or force Jesus into one particular line of thought and therefore to divide the audience, for within it are the Pharisees. The Pharisees very much believe in the resurrection of the dead and are willing to take severe action with those who disagree with them. Of course, throughout the gospel of Luke the Pharisees are no strangers to questions designed to shut up this dangerous man, Jesus. Today's readings points to the reality of a religion divided within a country that was divided. This is not unlike the discourse in our own country when the subject of war comes up. Perhaps this was always so, but it seems to have become dangerously so this last year. Jesus responds to the Sadducees in two parts. He uses an argument of reason and an argument of scripture. Perhaps we can apply both to our discussion today regarding war.

There seem to be two polarized camps when discussing the war in Afghanistan. There is the pacifist movement that says armed response to conflict is always wrong and alternative methods must be used. To raise questions about that rationale in this complex world and to name some of the value of the reconstruction efforts within Afghanistan is to risk being called a "warmonger" or "a supporter of the war" and to be "against peace." These are judgments that are conversation stoppers if there ever were ones. I have personally been on the receiving ends of these comments. There is the other side of the so called war discussion which says that any questioning of the war makes the questioner a "non-supporter of the troops" or "against the troops" or a "lover of the Taliban." That last one is my personal favorite because the one who accused me of that has also criticized me for being a feminist which seems at the very least to be oxymoron. The argument itself is specious. It is like saying that since I love dogs I must therefore hate cats. The sheer force of the bluntness of the argument makes one think twice about speaking any further, though. Even more astonishing is the widespread implication during these last weeks, that to ask a question about our involvement in Afghanistan is to somehow disrespect veterans of the First and Second World Wars. It is more than intimated that to question what is happening in Afghanistan is to make the deaths of those who died in those major wars purposeless.

This is the most powerful conversation stopper I can imagine. How did it come to this? In whose interest is it to stop people from sharing their views about the war? I was behind a car last week that had a bumper sticker saying, "If you don't support the troops feel free to stand in front of them." This is a new conversation stopper with the implication of violent response to any conversation in which military involvement is questioned. These are very dangerous developments because peace in this country, or anywhere else for that matter, can never come unless people are free to discuss with each other opinions about war. Any war.

I am not a pacifist. That does not make me "against peace." I am the daughter of a man who lived through the worst years of deprivation, oppression and terror of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. The liberation of the Netherlands by Canadians is probably why I am literally standing in front of you today. I believe my grandfather and so many other Dutch people chose to come to Canada immediately following the Second World War because of their liberation by Canadians. It was not just the fact that their lives were saved but also the impression of basic decency and humanity demonstrated by Canadian troops. I am an armed forces brat having been moved from pillar to post during my childhood. I was also in the Armed Forces Reserve for a summer when I was at Memorial University. This probably gives me a pro-military bias. Nonetheless there is much that is disturbing to me about our current military involvement.

Once in my last pastoral charge I was called out to the home of a woman whose daughter was threatening her life. The daughter was mentally ill, had a knife and was threatening to use it. I came to the house because the mother had called me and in the rural areas, the minister is often the only professional who lives after hours within the community. It probably was stupid of me to go without asking too many questions. I assumed the police were already there. I found myself in the kitchen with mother and daughter and trying to calm both down. The sound of the police siren coming down the road was one of the sweetest sounds I ever heard in my life. Help was on the way-physically strong, trained help. Yet, this physically strong, armed state sanctioned force carries with it such power that it must always be carefully scrutinized, tracked and open to question at all times. State sanctioned force and increasingly, transnational corporate sanctioned force, is most powerful. Power carries temptation that makes it particularly open to abuse, especially by the state. A couple of months ago there was short lived media attention that described the Quebec Provincial Police undercover activities within the antipoverty and anti globalization protests in Montebello in August this year.ⁱ It turns out that the most violent and agitated protestors were actually the police in disguise as they tried to discredit the movement and create a situation in which arrests could be made. So those who were to protect us from violence were inciting and committing violence. Go figure. The list of such abuse of power is getting pretty long these days including the deportation of the innocent Maher Arar to Syria to be tortured. These were all done by those authorized by the state to use force for our protection as civilians. Such power must consistently and continuously be open to question and scrutiny.

Make no mistake, we need the police. The majority are fine men and women, some who do this work in response to what they believe to be a call by God to do good in the world. I have personally known some of them and have been grateful that they were behind the sirens. Internationally, sometimes we need to hear those sirens. In a post-Rwandan-Genocide-world, Romeo Dallaire, broken for a time in body and mind by his exposure to radical evil, has reminded us that on rare occasions a bit of timely, concentrated military intervention can prevent a much greater evil. To say that military involvement must never happen is naïve and sometimes even dangerous. However, let us never forget that armed

conflict and war is always evil even if, on rare occasion it is the lesser of two evils. The dilemma of discerning when this occurs underlies what is referred to as accepting “the responsibility to protect.” The United Nations and the United Church are currently wrestling with what the criteria for military intervention should be as a faithful response to our responsibility to protect vulnerable populations (such as the Rwandan Tutsis from those Hutus who would massacre them). In any deliberation about armed intervention as followers of Christ we must always acknowledge that God weeps at war. Always. Who are the biggest losers in war? Civilians. Particularly affected are the vulnerable: children, women, the poor. Another devastated loser in war is the environment, the very earth itself. And so, God weeps at war. To glorify war, even on Remembrance Day, or perhaps especially on Remembrance Day, is to mock God’s tears.

To savagely attack anyone who questions the progression of the war in Iraq or the war in Afghanistan as being “anti-troop” or not supportive of the troops and to leave the decisions all up to those on the ground is to fail those troops on the ground. Those men and women engaged in the fighting and the re-building are only ever given the information they need to do their jobs. They are never given the big global picture, are not exposed to news as we are and the information from home is censored. It has always been thus during times of war. Therefore, it has *always been up to the folks at home through their political activities and their voices to speak* judgment about whether the war is ethical, effective and worth losing the lives of some of our finest young people to. The civilians at home have always made the decision about when the war ends and asked who is really benefiting from extending the activity of war. It is the *responsibility* of everyone at home to discuss the war, to debate the war and to inform themselves about all of the issues. To refuse to do so is to fail our troops. *To allow ourselves to be silenced* is to fail them.

At Youth Forum this year a military chaplain came to speak about Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan. He came with videos which were pseudo-recruitment style films. I had some issues with that as did several of the youth, some of whom walked out during the presentation. However, Harry did have quite an excellent point he made at the end of the presentation. At an event in which we were challenging the Youth to live out their faith as followers of Jesus Christ, Harry told them that it is fine if they are anti war, “But,” he said, “You can not just say to yourself ‘I am against the war’ and then make yourself a cheese sandwich and do nothing.” He reminded them that their responsibility is to live out their beliefs. That means that if they are against the war they needed to become politically active, to write letters, join marches and most importantly – to vote. He rightly pointed out that the Armed Forces get their orders from the government. So if they want the war to stop they must make the government interested in stopping it.

In terms of positioning, a telling point is the willingness with which both extreme sides of the debate are able to theoretically sacrifice other people’s children. Perhaps that is what makes God weep most of all. Those who say unquestioning support of the war is essential are willing to reduce all infant and child death and mortality to “collateral damage.” Reputable studies tell us that civilian deaths in Iraq are approaching a million, (*The Lancet*).ⁱⁱ On the other side of the debate, those who would insist on total non military intervention in places like Rwanda, would allow the massacres and genocide to go unchecked in countries gone mad. They would name non intervention as a function of respecting the rights of nations to self determination. In any case, they are other people’s children, right? Imaginary, abstract and disposable children. And God weeps.

So what do the scriptures say about soldiering and war? Let us begin with John the Baptist. Now, John the Baptist is a cranky man. He protests just about everything. When

we meet him at the beginning of Jesus' ministry he is ranting about the Pharisees, the Sadducees and has some advice for soldiers. Does he tell them to stop being soldiers? No, he does not. He says stop extorting, don't lie, do your jobs honourably and be satisfied with your wages, (Luke 3:14). What does Jesus say about soldiering? Well, in one of his more well known contacts he heals the servant of a Roman soldier. The centurion believes in Jesus and does not even feel worthy of asking him in person for the healing. Jesus heals the servant and praises the centurion. He does not tell him to stop being a soldier, (Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 7:2-10). The first person to praise God and declare that Jesus was innocent was the centurion at the foot of the cross, (Luke 23:47). In Mark and Matthew, the centurion was the first to declare at Jesus' death that he was the Son of God, (Mark 15:39, Matthew 27:54). This confession is recorded for all of history. Does the record also state that the soldier dropped his spear and then gave up being a soldier? No. The gospels make no comment on that.

Having said all of that, Jesus also says that we need to turn the other cheek when wronged, (Matthew 5:39, Luke 6:29). He says blessed are peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) and he says that we are to love our God with all our hearts all our souls and with all our minds and that the next greatest commandment is to love our neighbour as ourselves, (Matthew 19:19, Mark 12:31-32, Luke 10:27). In other words when we make war against our neighbour whether that neighbour is in Baghdad or Bedford, we make war against ourselves. When arrested, one of Jesus' disciples, in a rush to defend him, slices off the ear of the slave of the high priest, (Matthew 26:51, Mark 14:47, Luke 22:50-51, John 18:10). Jesus is horrified – as much by the disciple's unwillingness to understand his message of nonviolence as by the violence itself. Jesus proceeds to heal the servant, reattaching his ear. Despite the possession of this great mystical power, does our hero Jesus come off of the cross, Rambo like, grab a sword cut down the soldiers and rescue all those others being crucified on that day? No. Jesus always connected the coming of the kingdom of God which is our responsibility to help usher in, with the ceasing of violence of all kinds. His final radical counter cultural act of non violent resistance was to submit to the cross.

The church since its earliest days has always affirmed, when it has been at its best and most prophetic, that force and violence has no place within the church. That is why this room where we worship together is called the sanctuary. That is why refugees still come to churches seeking protection from the state and it is at least partly why Rwanda massacre victims sought shelter within churches. Perhaps they desperately hoped that those wielding machetes and guns would respect somehow that ancient promise of sanctuary. The church must always remain free from weapons and from the machinery, both material and political, of war.

When I first arrived here a very troubled man from a Central American country came to see me. He was increasingly troubled by his lack of faith and his cynicism about God and religion. As I listened to his story we tried to get at the moment that this began. He remembered it very clearly. He said it happened as he watched a priest bless the tanks in a military parade - these same tanks which would be turned on his people in a civil war. He could not understand how a servant of God could bless the weapons and the soldiers who would take him and his fellow university students to prison to be tortured. He was in jail for two years and survived. Most of his friends did not. The relationship between church, state and the military must always be under the closest of scrutiny. It is the church's role to question, to agitate and to appeal to the ethic of love as described in the gospel. Rarely, perhaps never, does love come at gunpoint.

Do not allow yourselves to be silenced about the war and do not silence others. The bravest thing you can do is being a conversation in which you allow yourselves to be truly open to what the other person has to say. Observe Jesus' response when the Sadducees try to silence him with their elaborate question. Most of us either snap back or become quiet when grilled by people who have no intention of being influenced by our responses. Jesus however answers the question and not the attitude and that is the key. In the first part of his response today he simply points out the inappropriateness of the question, given the difference between life in this age and in the one to come after death. He says death itself makes marriage and procreation essential in this life. However in the age to come there is no death but those who attain the resurrection are equal to the angels; they are the children of God. Who does Jesus say the children of God are? The peacemakers. Apparently heaven is full of them. The second part of Jesus' answer draws on the Sadducees own bible, the book of Moses. These are rules designed to care for vulnerable widows and ensure the lineage of a man's name. Jesus says simply that God is a God of the living and not the dead. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the great Hebrew patriarchs are living, not dead. In this life we are to live to the fullest and respect others right to live to the fullest. In the next life we *live* also because God is a God of life. This is an excellent answer affirming the power of God and the focus of those who would profess to love God.

What is the response of the Sadducees and scribes to this excellent answer? Some of them say, "**Teacher** you have spoken well." Then, they dared not ask him another question. Interesting. You would think if they were so impressed with his answers that they would ask him some more genuine questions. You would think they would begin a discussion. He has spoken well but they are silenced because they are afraid to listen to him anymore. If they truly hear him, truly engage with him, they may have to change their positions and their hearts. It is a dangerous thing, this talking, this questioning, this listening but it really is the only thing that will lead to peace in our time. That is how you get to be a peacemaker. Talking, listening, questioning and acting on your beliefs.

The use of state sanctioned force in our times is a complex issue. The use of force always represents a failure of some sort. Our call as Christians is to work to prevent the need for such intervention. We are called to be peacemakers within this complexity. Today, such a peacemaker might include an antiwar demonstrator or a soldier building roads in Afghanistan. Given today's passage, we might not know much more about the resurrection of the dead or the nature of life after death but we do know who Jesus says does eventually live with the angels: the children of God – the peacemakers. So, do not be silenced, speak your peace.

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ⁱ CBC News, August 23, 2007.

ⁱⁱ **Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey.** The Lancet, Volume 368, Issue 9545, Pages 1421-1428 G. Burnham, R. Lafta, S. Doocy, L. Roberts