

# ***“How Do You Stop a War?”***

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## **Scriptures: Luke 6:27-31, Matthew 10:34**

*Luke 6:27 "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

*Matthew 10:34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; 36 and one's foes will be members of one's own household... 39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

## **Sermon:**

This past week, the Russian invasion of Ukraine passed its one month anniversary. In that time, more than 3.7 million refugees have fled their homes, over a thousand civilians (including nearly 100 children) have been killed, and over 1600 have been injured! Images of the death and destruction fill all our media outlets: liberal, conservative, alternative, mainstream, and social media. Cities are being leveled and civilians targeted. It is sad, it is atrocious, it is evil . . . and it did not have to happen! Each day I pray for it to stop and I want it to stop, now!

How far should the international community go to stop it and bring the perpetrators to justice? I've also heard similar questions from some of you and so we will deviate (because I guess we are a bunch of deviants here at FCMF?) from our regularly planned Lenten series to reflect upon what might be some possible responses for God's faithful people in the midst of a "hot" or violent war. Now that shouldn't be all that hard to address in one, 15-minute sermon this morning - right?!

I expect however that my reflections this morning will be both frustratingly insufficient, and wholly incomplete. They are more personal than theoretical and I also know, deep down in my own heart, they will sound fanciful and impractical. I even expect you all to disagree with some or all that I have to say, because, well, by tomorrow, I too may not believe any of it.

First off, let us be clear, what we are witnessing, at least from the Russian side of the conflict, does not observe any of the criteria of a "just war" At least according to the definition constructed long ago by such Christian theologians as Augustine and Aquinas. It does seem, however, to follow the Ancient Egyptian view of a just war. That view basically held that the Pharaoh had the exclusive legitimacy in justly initiating a war, in order to carry out the will of the gods against any non-Egyptians who were, of course, inferior.

The Ukrainian response is certainly closer to adhering to a Just War theory, but early Mennonite/Anabaptist leaders rejected that doctrine and so those criteria are not particularly relevant to me this morning.

Let's start by being clear that what we are witnessing in Ukraine would have been nearly impossible for Aquinas, Augustine, and the 16th century Anabaptist to comprehend. The 20th century seemed to remove any limits of any morality in warfare by introducing to us poisonous gas, blitzkrieg, carpet bombing, atomic weapons, and the "low intensity conflict" and clandestine violence of what we insufficiently called in the West, a "cold war."

And depending upon how you count them, experts speculate that somewhere between 60% and 90% of all war casualties in the past century have been civilians. "War is hell," said General Sherman, who infamously burned the city of Atlanta to the ground during our Civil War. So, before we "do anything," we should keep that in mind as we commit ourselves to the necessity of making war obsolete.

This war did not have to happen. It was a choice, a human choice, and not God's fault! None of the present heartbreaking images of suffering that we are witnessing now was inevitable. Our impulses to empathize and try to bring an end to the suffering is a good and natural human desire. Protection of the innocent is an important Christian value.

But good intentions must also be informed with good information. As they say, the first casualty in war is the truth, so we must be discerning, "wise as a serpent" according to Jesus. Yes, the US and NATO certainly have the military might to stop the invasion of Ukraine and to send those invaders scurrying back across the Russian boarder. Escalation of military involvement, some experts like to speculate, could also lead not only to the downfall of Putin's regime, but to Putin being held accountable for his war crimes.

However, before we get too ahead of ourselves, let's remember that similar promises were made prior to our rush to use military solutions in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Bluntly put, we do not know what will happen following any escalation of military force, but we can be assured that there will be some forms of unintended consequences.

The last thing the international community should do is pour more fuel on an already raging fire! Military escalations are typically seen, at least by their promoters, as a quick way to stop the aggressor in order to build the "peace." They are also seen as a quick response to the impulse that, "We must do something!"

And if you have lots of weapons and soldiers at your disposal, why not use them? However, in this particular situation, we cannot ignore the specter of the possible use of nuclear weapons, which absolutely must be avoided at all costs.

Another thing to keep in mind, is the widely inconsistent nature of our past escalations, specifically regarding whom we decide "deserves" our support and who then must receive our ire.

About twenty years ago I was part of an emergency Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation to the West Bank of Palestine. At that time, the Israeli Defense Forces were in the process of invading and re-occupying much of the West Bank, which had gradually been handed back to Palestinians for self-governance through UN negotiations. That "incursion," as Israel called it, was swiftly condemned by nearly every nation in the world except for the U.S.A.

The recent images from Ukraine are vivid reminders for me of what I too experienced during my two weeks in the West Bank. I saw apartment buildings and homes destroyed by rockets, a bombed-out mosque, ambulances destroyed, government buildings and civilian infrastructure destroyed, the blockade of humanitarian supplies of much needed food, water, and medicines, as well as the lifeless bodies of young children killed by the Israeli Defense Forces.

However, for some reason, the U.S. media seemed far less outraged and consistent in their coverage of those “war crimes”! Both the White House and Congresses were quick to respond by rushing more military aid to Israel in order to replace their spent ammo. And long before this war, the Russian army’s conduct in places like Syria and Chechnya was well known, and in many ways, far worse. Does the fact that Ukrainians are white, European, Christians have any impact upon our impulses to escalate? Probably!

But can we also give peace a fighting chance? Do other avenues exist that we can explore? While the previous century was the most violent on record, it was also replete with numerous and dramatic examples of the use of mass non-violence to end wars, resist tyrants, and to implement meaningful long term societal change.

In our own nation it was the mass non-violent movement that demanded and won civil rights for black and brown people. And throughout the world we saw Gandhi’s crusade for India’s independence, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the removal of the dictator, Pinochet, in Chile, Solidarity in Poland, and the valiant resistance of Denmark in WWII.

Just curious – how many of you know about Denmark in WWII? Well, as Hitler’s blitzkrieg ravaged nearly all the other countries of Europe, the little country of Denmark decided to surrender rather than engage in what would have been a futile and extremely destructive military confrontation with Germany.

Of course, the Nazi occupation of Denmark that followed was in no way any less ruthless than that of any other nation. However, Denmark did avoid the tremendous loss of civilian life and destruction of civilian infrastructure experienced by other nations who did chose “to fight” militarily. But the Danes did not do “nothing” — they participated in various forms of resistance using non-violent (or less lethal) tactics such as work slow-downs and strikes, intentionally producing bombs that wouldn’t explode and radios that wouldn’t work, as well as destroying infrastructure like railroads and communications that were vital to the German army.

And when the Nazis insisted that all Danish Jews must wear the star of David, the King of Denmark, his family, and many Christian Danes sewed stars on their clothes as well in an act of solidarity. In fact, Denmark had the lowest percentage of Jews sent to concentration camps than any other occupied nation. Denmark also became an essential passageway to get Jews to safety in nearby neutral Sweden.

Now I am not saying that Ukrainians should have chosen this option, but I am just putting out there what is seldom considered an option. Ukrainians instead have chosen to fight back using all means available. The militant resistance, at least for now, seems to have halted the Russian advance. But the military escalation thus far has not been able to stop the constant shelling and destruction of cities as civilians suffer the brunt of the grinding pathos of total war.

If we are committed to non-violent alternatives to war, we must first commit ourselves to a pacifism that is not passive! As a Mennonite/Anabaptist community we must realize that there can be multiple forms of faithful non-violent responses. In fact, Mennonite writers and thinkers over the past 30 years or so, have actually identified close to a dozen types of pacifism that are promoted and practiced by Mennonites alone.

For me, my commitment to nonviolence begins with being in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, and understanding that they get to define what is “peace.” Justice must take primacy over “peace” since I am convinced that without justice there can be no true peace. And I’m also open to use of what some might technically define as violent tactics such as labor organizing, strikes, civil disobedience, public shaming of public officials, economic boycotts, and maybe some limited uses of peacekeeping and policing.

But we must also acknowledge that there are many forms of non-violent resistance occurring not only in Ukraine but in Russia as well. How can we more effectively support those efforts?

A few weeks ago, several leaders of nations close to Ukraine actually gathered in Ukraine for meetings. It made me wonder, what if hundreds or thousands of political leaders from all over the world were to take up temporary residency in the hospitals, schools, and shelters of Ukraine?

And we must all remember that the biblical word for peace is actually the Hebrew word, “shalom,” which translates to “the wholistic wellbeing of everyone in a society.” True shalom, then, is more than merely the absence of violent conflict. War and its sibling, militarism, are stupid, lazy, and the least likely ways to help build true peace. Peace is the result of the hard work of bringing to an end those things that cause wars. And if we don’t “wanna study war no mo’,” we must study the causes of war and implement non-violent solutions.

In the current situation there are few, if any, good options. But that is why the work of peace must happen long before the bullets start flying and the bombs begin dropping. If we are uncertain about the escalation of a military option, we can still do something valid to help! We can give generously to humanitarian groups who will eventually get those much needed supplies to those who are suffering, and who will remain to rebuild what was destroyed.

We can open up our homes to refugees and advocate that every refugee, regardless of race, country of origin, religion or whether they are fleeing war, climate change, or economic exploitation and dislocation, must be treated the same. We can demand that our nation spend far more on international relief and development than we do on military or politically-motivated aid.

Hopefully, those images flooding our media should be enough to convince us even more that humankind must find a better way. The alternative, as MLK Jr. once said, quoting another famous American, President John F. Kennedy, just isn’t acceptable:

“Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind.”

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