

## On Choosing the Right Battle

Ephesians 6:10-20

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on August 23, 2015]

### I

When St. Paul describes Christians as soldiers preparing for battle,  
I can almost hear the choir singing the old hymn,  
“Onward Christian Soldiers.”

First century audiences were very much accustomed to the sight of Roman  
legionnaires clad in helmets and breastplates,  
armed with swords and shields,  
marching to demonstrate the power of the Empire  
and to keep public order.

This passage also reflects the struggle of the fledgling Christian movement to  
survive in an environment that was largely indifferent  
but which, at a moment’s notice, could become hostile.

But for modern audiences like us,  
this text is problematical at best,  
embarrassing at worst.

Paul’s armor-of-God imagery does not fit our modern sensibilities,  
and the life-as-war metaphor is sometimes hard for us to swallow.

### II

Is life a war?

Are we in a battle?

Guess what!—Plenty of Christians think so.

A large segment of the Christian population endorses the view of life as a battle  
and the Christian as a holy warrior.

These religious apocalyptics believe in atonement through violence.

As a character in a Walker Percy novel says,

“You keep the cross and the milksoppery of the church,  
and we’ll take the sword of St. Michael.”

These Christians push a “life is war” agenda  
and live with a siege mentality.

Their world is full of enemies that must be vanquished.

The attitude is—

Let’s go to war...

let’s gather up the criminals and execute them all...

let’s ask God to bring down fire on the wicked.

If we are honest, we must admit that we—

good Presbyterians that we are—

find ourselves tempted to join the battalions marching off to war  
against all the things we perceive to be wrong in the world.

After all, the sports world already sees life as a war.

Listen to the language of football and you will hear war language.

And God knows the corporate world perceives business as a war.

Every executive worth his/her salt has read Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War” and  
studied the battle strategies of Genghis Khan.

Oh, yes, we are tempted to believe that life is a war.

“It’s a game,” people cry as kids play sports.

Sure, you can say it’s just a game,

but try telling that to the soccer moms or little league dads.

The escalating violence takes a toll on our way of life as, on average, thirty-one  
persons die of gun violence in this country every single day.

The harm this does to families, communities and our society is incalculable.

According to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, the costs of medical treatment, criminal justice proceedings, new security precautions, and reductions in quality of life are estimated to cost U.S. citizens \$100 billion dollars every year.

The lifetime cost of medical care for all gun violence victims in the United States is estimated at \$2.3 billion dollars,  
with almost half borne by taxpayers.

Everywhere we turn, we are haunted by the echoes of the prophet Habakkuk:

*“O Lord, how long will I cry to you, ‘Violence, violence,’ and you will not hear?”*

### III

And yet the fact is that the Christian church has all too often eagerly resorted to violence itself and become allied with military power.

It began in 312 C.E., during a war between two Roman generals, each of whom claimed to the throne of the Empire:

Constantine, son of the emperor who had died,  
and Maxentius, son of the former emperor’s predecessor.

Constantine’s army was encamped at the Milvian Bridge, on the outskirts of Rome.

On the evening of October 27, as the armies prepared for battle, Constantine had a vision:

the cross and the words “In this sign conquer.”

He ordered his troops to paint the cross on their shields and, of course, the next day, they prevailed, capturing and killing thousands of Maxentius’s troops, and Maxentius drowned in the Tiber River.

Until that time, Christianity had been an underground movement, an outlaw sect, worshiping in secret, frequently persecuted by the state.

After the Battle of Milvian Bridge, the new emperor, Constantine, ended the persecution and ruled that it was no longer illegal to be a Christian and follow Jesus.

He was baptized on his deathbed, and his successor, Theodosius, made Christianity the official religion of the empire.

The cross became the official logo on Roman shields.

Soon victorious Roman legions were marching defeated Barbarian tribes into the closest river for Christian baptism.

Some historians think that it was the worst thing that could have happened to Christianity.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall traces the long tension within the church between those who lived by the Constantinian model,  
the cross on their shields,  
the church ultimately acting like a nation state with real power—  
financial and military power—  
and those who believed the church's task is to live the values of Jesus,  
which are often in conflict with the policies of the empire.

Historians point to the Crusades as an example of the tragedy of Constantinian Christianity.

Thousands and thousands of Christian soldiers traveled from Britain, France, and Germany to the Holy Land to do battle against its Muslim occupiers.

The Crusades failed mostly, thousands were killed in battle and untold thousands more died of the plague.

During the Fourth Crusade, frustrated, angry Crusader armies sacked the Christian capital of Constantinople, the city named for the emperor who conquered by the sign of the cross, the seat of the Eastern Church.

That event deepened the divide between Western Roman Christianity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity which continues to this day.

## IV

It is the way of the world, my friends,  
 and it has too often been the way of the church:  
 atonement through violence.

The Old Testament “eye for an eye” mentality can be seen at every level of our society.

It’s in the road rage that plagues our streets.

It’s in our overcrowded prisons,  
 domestic violence shelters,  
 and chemical dependency units.

It’s in the human trafficking that turns young boys and girls into sex slaves.

It has infected our political discourse and is seen in the belligerent cries and threats of violence against political leaders.

It is manifest in the racism that is always bubbling just beneath the surface and spilled forth in places like Ferguson and Baltimore.

Over and over we see professed Christians “marching as to war” in our own country.

Starting with Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City 20 years ago, we have seen incident after incident of religious violence perpetrated by far-right religious fanatics.

If you need a broader example of what happens when religion puts on its armor and declares holy war, get your passport out and go to the Holy Land to live in a place like Hebron or Bethlehem.

There you will find a contemporary example of the “eye for an eye” theology—  
 as both Palestinians and Israelis act on the basis of retaliation theology.

Violence begets violence.

## V

But listen: Is there another way?

Have people chosen the wrong battle to fight?

Listen to what Paul says (v. 12):

*“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*

It is too easy to literalize Paul’s words and march to war against evil.

The fact is, the actual enemy is unseen. The actual enemy is invisible and bigger than we know. The real enemy is in our minds and in the spirit of our age.

Do you remember the story of John Steinbeck’s sharecropper?

He wanted to know who had foreclosed his farm. It wasn’t the local banker, because he was responsible to the home office; and it wasn’t the home office because they had a board of directors; and it wasn’t the board of directors because after all, there were thousands of stockholders.

Conclusion: nobody was guilty, because everybody was guilty; the system was guilty.

Now translate that illustration to 2008, when the world economy was nearly brought to ruin by the deceitful practice of marketing sub-prime mortgages to people who couldn’t afford them, then bundling up those mortgages into securities and then selling them and as supposedly safe investments.

The wisdom of Paul’s words is clear:

*“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and the powers and the rulers of the world.”*

In a world where evil is seemingly all-powerful,  
we must remember our history and our Gospel:

**Jesus rejected violence.**

Jesus offers us the basin and towel of a servant,  
the cross as a symbol of sacrifice,

and a mother hen gathering her brood under her wings.

Here is atonement through redemptive suffering.

It faces us with two choices:

Submit to the violent spirit of our age, or...

Take up the cross of sacrifice and follow the suffering Servant.

It will take much courage to buck the rising cries of violence.

Those who follow the road of redemptive suffering must be prepared to suffer themselves.

The war spirit always draws lines in the sand,  
 dividing between friend and enemy,  
   conservative and liberal,  
   Republican and Democrat,  
   Christian, Muslim, and Jew.

People become so certain that God is on their side.

When Abraham Lincoln was asked about God being on the side of the Union, he famously replied:

*“Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right”*

Remember the story from the Book of Joshua—

*“Once when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?’ He replied, ‘Neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.”* (Joshua 5:13-14)

We should always be careful about thinking that God is on our side.

If anything, scripture is clear about whose side God is on.

God is firmly on the side of the poor and the homeless...  
   the lost and the oppressed...  
   the widows and the orphans...  
   the dispossessed and the powerless.

## VI

So, sisters and brothers, there is another way...  
   not the way of war,  
       not the war of division,  
           not the way of shouting down those with whom one  
           disagrees—  
   but the way of the cross  
       the way of victory through redemptive suffering.

**If we as Christians insist on going to war,  
 let us make sure we choose the right battle to fight.**

Stop demonizing those who disagree with you on the secondary issues and go to  
 battle against the things Jesus fought against—  
 ignorance and fear...  
           homelessness and poverty,  
           hunger and sickness,  
           racism and war.

When Paul says, “Put on the whole armor of God,”  
 he does not mean literal armor and literal weapons,  
           but the armor of the spirit and the weapons of grace.

Use these weapons to wage peace and reconciliation,  
           not violence and discord.

Stop looking for easy targets that allow you to huff and puff and put on a show  
 without taking any real risks.

There is real evil in the world.

There are real risks we must face.

It is so easy to pick a fight with a “straw man”  
           or to consign someone you don’t like as being “of the devil.”

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

Stand firm in the face of evil.

Gear up for battle, but remember,  
it is a different kind of battle.

It is marked by truth—always the first casualty of war.

Its advance is marked by salvation—  
healing and wholeness for all,  
rather than shock-and-awe destruction.

Its Gospel—its good news—is peace.

Its primary weapon is the Word of God—which alone can judge the thoughts and intentions of the human heart.

Its most effective weapon is always prayer.

As Paul writes...

*“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication...  
Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to  
make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel for which I am an  
ambassador in chains.”* (Eph. 6:18, 19-20)

## VII

Here’s the story of another preacher who also knew who the real enemy was and had the courage to stand firm in the face of it:

When the government of South Africa cancelled an anti-apartheid rally, Bishop Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town.

The walls were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns, bayonets and batons, ready to close it down at any moment.



Then, when all is said and done,  
    when evil has done its worst,  
        we will still be standing...  
                singing...  
                        even dancing.

**Put on your armor and join the winning side!**

Amen.

Sources:

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