

MINISTRY IN A TIME OF WAR

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It's not my usual practice to talk about personal things when reporting to the presbytery. But the subject today opens a door for me to reveal something of my prior life. That subject is ministry in a time of war, and my own war experiences have influenced what I will say. So please forgive the somewhat autobiographical nature of this report.

The practice of ministry changed on September 11th. The context of pastoral ministry changed in every congregation in the nation on that day. In the face of the massive evil of terrorists, our ordinary church squabbles don't carry the same weight they did on September 10th. So we need to reflect seriously on the demands of ministry and the role of the church in the midst of war. Pastors who have been busy praying and caring for parishioners suffering from cancer and divorce and addictions and depression and a host of other things that affect individuals and families must now add to their tasks of ministry caring for people touched by war in our homeland as well as the extension of that war to Central Asia. And that means everyone in our congregations.

And at the same time, pastors must be mindful of other innocent victims of war, such as Afghan civilians who were in the wrong place when bombs fell, refugees who can find nothing to eat and no place to hide, and people all over the world whose economic livelihoods have been devastated by terrorist destruction and the military response to it. There is no more difficult context for Christian ministry than in the midst of war.

Many pastors in this presbytery can remember what ministry was like during earlier wars. But some of our younger ones have never had to struggle with the moral and theological implications of protracted armed conflict. The Gulf War and the regional conflicts in Africa and the Balkans have been either too brief or too distant to affect the way pastors and church members go about doing ministry in this country.

Three decades have passed since the Viet Nam War forced pastors and church members to wrestle with issues of conscientious objection, fighting communism, pacifism, just war theory, draft resistance, and participation in antiwar protests. For the last two decades our denominational efforts have focused on peacemaking as a way of life distinct from the subject of armed hostilities. Peace is not the absence of war, we have proclaimed, it is wholeness in a just society.

But things are different now. In their effect on the American psyche, the 9-11 terrorist attacks are more akin to Pearl Harbor than any other war related occurrence during the 60 year interval between these two traumatic and electrifying events. These attacks may prove to be even more galvanizing of the national spirit than Pearl Harbor, because they happened not at a distant frontier of America but in the heart of the largest city in the country and in our nation's capital. As a student of the rhetoric of peace and war, I note that the fervent martial language our national leaders are using today has not been heard and so broadly accepted since World War II.

As a student of generational theory, I note a war-related chronological divide among pastors. The dividing line is somewhere in the mid-1950s. Those born after 1955 were too young to have been challenged by the Viet Nam War. By the time the oldest of them reached age 18 the war was essentially over and the draft was no threat. They were spared the tempering and soul-searching that their older peers went through.

Pastors born earlier than the mid-fifties were influenced in many ways, for good or ill, by the conduct of that war. Our seminaries during that era were full of students who were there to avoid military service. Young and seasoned pastors alike struggled with what to say about the war from their pulpits. A number of military chaplains during the Viet Nam War were forced into excruciating struggles of conscience over how they wanted to respond to the spiritual needs of soldiers versus what their superiors ordered them to say and do.

My military service was not as a chaplain, and the extent of my church involvement during those years consisted entirely of a few troubling encounters with chaplains. But looking back, it is clear that my experiences in the Mekong Delta made me a Calvinist. I discovered there that good people are capable of great evil.

As a graduate of the ROTC program at ASU, I was an idealistic and naive twenty-one year old when I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the US Army Military Intelligence Branch. The Army sent me through some excellent schooling to become an Intelligence Research Officer and to learn the Vietnamese language. Learning that language was a great gift which has enriched my life ever since. Along the way I volunteered for service in Viet Nam and became a Prisoner of War interrogator, leading a team of American and Vietnamese soldiers attached to an infantry brigade. We followed the infantry on their operations, often traveling with them into hostile areas. Anyone they captured came to my team for interrogation.

I could speak for hours on my experiences as an interrogator, but a lot of what I would say is not suitable for polite company. But here are a couple of milder confessions. One afternoon I got an order from Brigade headquarters to go over to the evacuation hospital to interrogate a Viet Cong who had been wounded during capture. When I got there I found him lying naked and catheterized on an operating table. While blood spurted out of his abdomen, two surgeons tried to save his life. I stood there in silence trying to think of something worth asking him. He died.

Later I was on an operation in Go Cong Province, and two 14 year old boys were brought in for interrogation. They were members of a singing and propaganda cell. They carried no weapons. Their voices were their weapons. On a whim I stood them up in front of all the other prisoners and guards and interrogators and ordered them to sing us one of their propaganda songs. They were so scared they couldn't raise their voices above a whisper. To this day I cannot read Psalm 137 without a stab of guilt: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept...For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'" In this case, I was the Babylonian forcing children to sing one of their songs in captivity.

Well beyond these mild accounts, I have seen first hand some terrible atrocities of war, done by friend and foe alike. I have seen the depravity that all humans are capable of. War is not glorious. War is an awful business. War scars the souls of everyone touched by it. But sometimes it has to be waged. There are times in this broken world when the only pathway to peace is through a field of violence.

When only oneself is at stake, turning the other cheek can be a powerfully Christ-like gesture. But if turning the other cheek becomes the death knell for countless other people, then fighting may be necessary. Sociopaths and religious fanatics don't respond to reason and diplomacy. That doesn't make war noble. That doesn't make it holy. But it does mean those who are called upon to do the soul searing job of fighting a war on behalf of the rest of us deserve our prayers, our support, and our gratitude.

In time of war, people in our congregations and our communities need the comfort, wisdom, and care of their pastors and churches more than at any other time. This is especially true when the warfare is in our own homeland and not only overseas. Those of us who answered the call to ministry of Word and Sacrament in a time of peace must now use both words and sacraments as instruments of healing and forgiveness in a time of war.

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper has played an important part in my own healing from war. In 1983 I was on the staff of the Market Square Presbyterian Church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. On World Communion Sunday that year I stood before the congregation and raised a loaf of bread. As I looked out over the congregation I saw veterans of World War II, Korea and Viet Nam, and I saw people who had been anti-war protestors, and I saw Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. As I broke the bread I said, "*Chua Jesu noi: de la than the ta...*" Jesus said, this is my body, broken for you. As I said the words of institution in Vietnamese, I knew that many people in that sanctuary had been broken by war, either in body, mind or spirit, yet we were all gathered around the table, very much alive to the healing and forgiveness of the one whose body was broken for us on a cross on Calvary. It was a profound healing experience for me.

While I was serving there, the Market Square Church sponsored a group of Cambodian refugees who had fled the Khmer Rouge holocaust in their homeland. Though they were not Christian, a number of them attended worship at Market Square, perhaps out of a sense of gratitude. Several young Cambodians attended a junior high retreat in an old barn on the other side of the river, at which our Director of Christian Education engaged the kids in a discussion about death. This was just before the closing worship, where I would officiate at communion.

She asked the assembled group to talk about their experiences of death. Young Americans offered stories about how they felt when the family dog died and when grandpa died and their parents wouldn't let them go to the funeral. When it was their turn, the Cambodian kids talked about watching while their parents were executed by the Khmer Rouge.

These Cambodian youth had not been baptized, and according to our Book of Order, they were not allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper. I must confess to you that I ignored the Book of Order, and as they came forward to receive the bread and dip it into the cup, I felt the healing power of Christ surrounding these refugee orphans and filling everyone in the room with Christ's presence in a way we had never experienced before.

Whether we wish it or not, friends, our nation is again at war. People of faith may argue whether it is a just war. I believe it is a necessary war. In any case, war brings pain and suffering and sacrifice and loss. It is good to pray for peace in such a time, but realistically, peace is not likely to come any time soon. So what can pastors and church

members do during war that is faithful to the Prince of Peace as well as supportive of those who must do the fighting?

One answer comes from where we focus our energies. This may sound like heresy to some of you, but now is not the time to spend our efforts calling for peace. Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us there is a time for peace, but it also confirms that there is a time for war. Peace will come -inevitably. Until then, we need to do the work of healing.

In the months and years ahead, some of our family members will be killed or wounded in battle, and we will grieve. Members of our churches will struggle with all sorts of contrary and troubling thoughts and feelings. How can one be a good disciple of Christ while wishing destruction on our enemies? Can one be a true Christian while carrying a heart full of rage toward Osama bin Laden? Service people will struggle with guilt over collateral damage. There are no purple hearts given for the psychic wounds that soldiers bear, but such wounds go deep.

Pastors will face repeatedly the need to enter into their healing work through gut-wrenching confessions and Christ-filled assurances of pardon. And I'm not speaking here about cheap grace but the dearest kind of grace, wrung out of the tears of God. All you who have read Bonhoeffer know, at least intellectually, the high level of faith and courage required to participate in acts of violence to achieve a greater good and save many lives. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's case it was his involvement as a Christian pastor in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

What the struggles of conscience will be among the people in this room I can't say, but many of you will find yourselves agonizing over theological and ethical dilemmas born out of this war on terrorism. War has a way of testing our most precious beliefs. Sometimes those beliefs do not survive the battle, but what rises in their place is usually stronger and more profound. War also has a way of breaking our hearts. Don't expect to get through the time of trial unwounded.

Pastors today must prepare their hearts to listen to all manner of troubling experiences from members as well as strangers who wander into the church seeking a word of grace. It's time to read up on post traumatic stress, not only to provide pastoral care to returning soldiers but for all manner of people traumatized by the events of September 11 and subsequent developments. Also, look for ways to include liturgies of healing in Sunday and special services of worship.

Not only pastors, but all church members will be called upon in the days ahead to become healers on behalf of a wounded nation and fractured planet. Let us then dedicate ourselves to the care of spiritual wounds. And remember what Jesus demonstrated from the cross. Forgiveness under girds healing. Forgiveness is the first step toward resurrection.

God grant us all the faith, strength and courage to persevere through this season of war. God bless you all. God bless our nation. God bless our world.