

Pre-emptive Good

A Sermon Concerning America's Plan to Attack Iraq

Preached at Hanover Street Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

Romans 12: 9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of god; for it is written, 'vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 16: 21-26

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?’

Matthew 10: 1, 5-16

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. . . These twelve he sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”“ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment than for that town. 'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.'

I'll begin my sermon with a story that Alice brought home from a Session meeting of the church in Durham, North Carolina, where we worshipped. The Session was considering whether it should purchase pew cushions with money that had recently been given for that specific purpose by a dearly departed member. The congregation aspired to simpler living and giving more to mission, so pew cushions seemed extravagant. Nevertheless, most of the elders wondered if it were proper to resist the will of the honored deceased. Doesn't a person have the right, they said, to dictate how money that they will to the church should be spent? Doesn't respect for them bind us to obey their wishes? The interim minister, a wise old North Carolinian woodsman, said: "Well, suppose the dearly departed wasn't giving money for pew cushions. Suppose instead that the gift was a stuffed moose head. And suppose the dearly departed wanted that moose head to be displayed at the front of the church, just below the cross. What would you say then?" Well, nobody even hesitated. "We'd refuse," they all said. "It wouldn't be fitting." "Good," he replied. "You have just established that there are some limitations to obeying the will of a highly regarded person. There are boundaries for reasonable complicity, aren't there?" "Now what you have to do," he told them, "is explore the boundaries in this case, and see whether you feel morally obligated to comply with the wishes of this honored person, or respectfully decline."

This sermon is about exploring the moral boundaries of complicity to respected persons' opinions and wills. But the issue of my sermon isn't seat cushions or moose heads. The issue is war; and not war of the type to which Americans are accustomed, that is, war in response to an aggression already suffered; but rather, pre-emptive war, a first strike intended to prevent an anticipated aggression. I take up this subject not only because it's been on the front pages of our newspapers lately, but also because several apt and ringing phrases from the Romans reading this morning give me pause about whether I should comply with the will of President Bush for America to wage pre-emptive war. Let's listen to those phrases again: "Bless those who persecute you," writes the Apostle Paul. "Bless and do not curse them . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all . . . If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

As I ponder those words from scripture, I find it hard to accept Vice President Cheney's argument that we have a moral as well as pragmatic obligation to strike down Sadaam Hessein before he develops the capacity to strike us down. Paul's words urge us as followers of Jesus not to pre-emptive violence, but rather pre-emptive good. Do good to your enemies, he admonishes us. That is how you will manage to defeat evil, not by becoming like your enemy, only shrewder.

Remember that Peter launched a pre-emptive strike the night Jesus was arrested. He took up a sword to kill those who were coming to arrest Jesus. Jesus denounced this pre-emptive violence. "Get behind me Satan!" he said. "You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Well, I suppose Mr. Cheney would say that somebody had better set his mind on human things, else satanic Hussein, armed with nukes, will make September the eleventh look like small potatoes. I suppose Mr. Cheney might grab another verse from our Romans text to admonish this hesitant citizen: "Do not claim to be wiser than you are." Mr. Cheney might say: "What do you know of military intelligence? What do you know of defense strategy? Do not claim to be wiser than you are, preacher! Mind your care of souls, and I'll mind my duties to defend you. Perhaps the able debater, Mr. Cheney, would turn to our gospel text for ammunition: "Jesus said he was sending his followers out amidst wolves. Well, somebody's got to mind the wolves, and that's my job. Stand back and let me do it!"

If that's the kind of rebuttal Mr. Cheney would make, I'd answer him this way: "I respect the difficulty of your work, Vice President Cheney, and the gravity of the situation we're all in. But, hear me out. When I was a young man, Mr. Cheney, I wrestled with the morality of bearing arms. I listened to Jesus' peaceful way, listened to it thoughtfully and reverently. I also listened to your line of reasoning: Somebody's got to mind the wolves. Yes, somebody does. And, as a young man, I couldn't let somebody else do that for me. I decided it was my duty. So, I went to Uncle Sam's counter-insurgency school. I learned how to set ambushes and avoid them, how to use plastic explosives, how to fire all manner of weapons--ours and the enemy's, and how to call in gun ships that vomit a steady stream of phosphorus and lead with a ghoulis belch. Eventually I learned, Mr. Cheney, that warring isn't like playing chess, because there's a big difference between being above the board and being on it. If you're the one moving the pieces around, you have options. But if you are a piece on the board, there are no more options. It's kill or be killed. In war, ethics be damned. The senseless horror of combat makes a mockery of any attempt to justify warring, once the killing starts. Waging war may seem noble to planners sitting at their desks; or, if not noble, at least morally necessary. But if you're a piece on the board, it's simply a beastly business to be endured.

So, Mr. Cheney, with all due respect to you and President Bush, I tremble at the prospect of America starting such beastly business. As our history has shown, once the shooting starts, critics of our country's war efforts have been labeled unpatriotic. But, you said recently that you welcome questions about the saber rattling. Thank you. This patriotic Christian does have questions.

Thomas Aquinas started a moral tradition in Western Christianity called "the just war theory." Now that I have experienced combat, I don't hold much stock in that theory anymore, but since any debate about the advisability of your war plan is likely to be conducted among Christians with reference to that theory, let's consider it a moment.

Above all, that theory says that for a war to be just, it may only be waged in self-defense, which usually means in response to an aggression already suffered. Mr. Cheney, you are arguing for a first strike to prevent an anticipated aggression. Although the just war theory does condone such pre-emptive war for self-protection, the theory requires the first striking nation to prove that a suspected aggressor does in fact have a plan for attacking. Merely possessing weapons demonstrates only that a nation intends to defend itself with them. Does America's possession of weapons of mass destruction prove that it intends to attack another nation or nations with them? We Americans would say, certainly not! Well then, even if Sadaam Hussein does acquire such weapons, that would not prove that he has a plan to attack us with them. And unless America can uncover such a plan, and make that public, she does not have just cause for launching a pre-emptive attack. The just war theory also raises other questions about your plan for war, Mr.

Cheney. First, for a war to be just it must have a reasonable chance of succeeding. Deaths and injuries incurred in a hopeless cause are not morally justifiable. The stated goal of the Bush administration's proposed war is to permanently remove Sadaam Hussein from power. America waged war in Afghanistan allegedly to remove one person, Usama Bin Laden, but he is still on the loose. What makes us believe that we will be more successful in waging a second war on another nation to get rid of one man?

The just war theory also requires that the weapons used in waging a war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Civilians are not permissible targets for war, and every effort must be taken to avoid harming them. Just this week an American army spokesperson was quoted as saying he had every confidence that Sadaam's Royal Guard could be defeated in the field, but what if Sadaam escapes and holes up in Baghdad? Will Americans need to fight house to house, sustaining and inflicting hundreds if not thousands of deaths and injuries to get at one man? The prospect is dreadful, and morally unjustifiable.

Finally, the ultimate goal of a just war is to re-establish peace. The peace established after a war must be preferable to the peace that would have prevailed if the war had not been fought. Otherwise, the war cannot be deemed just. Mr. Cheney, you have yet to explain how America would foster a more peaceful and stable regime in Iraq, if America did succeed in removing Sadaam. Look what's happened in Afghanistan. Although Karzai, the present head of state, is cooperative, it remains to be seen whether he has the support of the populace, and can long endure without continuing American protection. Would a lasting peace in Iraq also need to be secured by American troops, and if so, how much support would such a foreign-enforced peace receive from the rest of the Arab world?

These misgivings about a first strike against Sadaam would be mitigated if America had moral support from the United Nations, and especially from Arab nations who are likely to consider a first strike an infidel abomination. But, so far America has few supporters, even among its historic allies. Nevertheless, President Bush seems ready to use his power as Commander in Chief to wage a morally suspect pre-emptive war. America is ready to go it alone if she has to, he says. Remember that President Bush issued an executive order to forbid cloning, because he said it would lead us down a slippery moral slope. Yet, he seems unconcerned about setting the astonishing moral precedent of America waging a pre-emptive war without patent proof of an impending aggression against us. That's a slippery moral slope if ever there was one! What if other nations were to strike without being provoked, and try to justify their actions on the basis of just such suspicions and flimsy allegations? Wouldn't we Americans be among the first to cry "foul"?

Fellow citizens, brothers and sisters in Christ, what are the boundaries of our complicity to the will of President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and their learned advisors? I began this sermon with a humorous example to demonstrate that there are clearly reasonable boundaries to complying with the will of respected persons. What are our boundaries in this case? This isn't a humorous case. It's deadly serious. Our nation could start a war that would be the world's undoing. We pawns on the board may not be experts, but God gave us minds and consciences, and God help us if we don't use them. What bothers me most these days is not the administration's saber rattling, but Americans' silence concerning it. It is not disrespectful to pick bones with people in an effort to keep from making the world a battlefield of bones. Our Epistle reading this morning urges us as Christians to exercise pre-emptive good. Feed our enemies, we are told. Do good to them. This is how to change enemies, not by bludgeoning

them. Perhaps Mr. Cheney would retort that I am being too idealistic, too innocent--all dove and no serpent. Well, I didn't come up with this stuff, Mr. Cheney. I'm just passing it along. Your argument isn't with me. It's with Jesus and Peter and Paul and all the other Spirit-filled people who finally dug God's wisdom that we can't overcome evil with might. That's impossible. It only begets more resentment. No, we can overcome evil only through pre-emptive good, the way of the cross. What does that mean for us today, my fellow Americans? Shall we keep silent, or speak up? What are our boundaries of complicity?