**Honor and Glory**

**Text: Psalm 146:7-9**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Many years ago I visited Fort Sumter. That’s the garrison in South Carolina that rebel forces attacked on April 12, 1861, thus igniting the horrible conflagration known as the American Civil War. Our tour guide was fascinating. He was informative and passionate and it was the best talk at a historic site that I’d ever heard. He ended the tour this way:

“In the American Civil War, over 640,000 men were killed. And they died simply for honor and glory. Now I ask you: Is honor and glory reason enough for 640,000 men to be killed?”

Several of us said, “Excuse me? I believe the Civil War had something to do with ending slavery?”

“Oh no,” he said. “The American Civil War had nothing to do with ending slavery. It was all about honor and glory.”

A debate ensued, which convinced no one to change his mind, but the man did have a point: honor and glory are not reason enough to go to war; at least not when you view the world from the perspective of biblical faith.

And yet, tragically, the vain pursuit of honor and glory has taken far too many of God’s children, from far too many nations, to an early grave far too many times over the course of history. It was such vanity that ignited the time bomb that became World War I. Tensions had been growing between the great powers of Europe for decades, and the nations had made extensive plans for the day when one of them might be attacked. When that day came, in the summer of 1914, the diplomats were busy trying to diffuse the situation, while the generals were all excited as they set their glorious plans into motion. Barbara Tuchman in her book *The Guns of August* describes in fascinating detail how the diplomats had almost reached an agreement that would’ve averted war, but the generals were so overjoyed at the early success of their mobilization plans that they convinced the various monarchs that it was too late to stop the military machine. The honor and the glory of the generals sent 20 million men, women and children to their deaths.

No, honor and glory, in and of themselves, are not reasons to go to war. If a biblical argument is to be made for taking up arms, one must appeal to a *higher* norm.

But let’s be clear: the biblical norm is *peace*. Biblical peace is not just the absence of war; it’s the presence of *all* the world’s people living together in God’s Kingdom of love and justice. “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift-up sword against nation, neither shall they learn way anymore.” So said the prophet Isaiah (2:4) when war was about to break out between his nation of Judah and its neighbors. “Come, behold the works of the Lord,” says the Psalmist (46:8-10). “He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire.” And Jesus seals the deal by teaching us to love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us. Don’t kill them, *pray* for them. He said, “Do not resist an evildoer; if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek also” (see Matthew 5:38-48). As St. Paul said, “The fruit of the Spirit is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness…gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

The early Church tried to live according to these biblical principles. Pacifism was the norm among Jesus’ followers for the first few centuries of the Christian era. But you have to remember that the first Christians expected Jesus to return soon. You can tolerate the oppression of the evildoer and the slaughter of the innocents if you think that Messiah is about to come back as a mighty warrior and defeat evil forever. And even now, when we’re no longer sure that Jesus will be coming back any time soon, these principles of non-resistance still have some practical value. The late evangelist, Tom Skinner, told the story of being in an elevator with a guy who pulled a gun on him and demanded his money. Now Tom Skinner was a big dude. He was the leader of a street gang before Jesus found him. If Skinner had had so much as a pocket knife on him, he could’ve done some serious damage to this petty crook. But when the guy pulled out the gun and demanded cash, Skinner pulled out his wallet and said, “Sure, how much do you want?” Then he pulled off his watch and said, “You can have this too.” About that time the elevator door opened and the crook ran into the hallway shouting, “Get me out of here; this dude is crazy!”

Jesus said, “Do not resist an evildoer, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek also.” If the world was perfect, individuals, nations and the whole inhabited earth could live according to these rules.

But we don’t live in a perfect world. And the Bible is concerned not only with peace and gentleness, but with justice and righteousness. As today’s scripture says, “God executes justice for the oppressed…the Lord sets the prisoners free.” God “watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (Psalm 146:7-9). It takes some tough love to do these things in the real world. And tough love in a sinful world has to be backed-up by arms. Tough love in a sinful world demands that nations be prepared to defend the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the oppressed; going to war as a last resort.

We seek to live by biblical norms, but we do so in the real world: where biblical norms must be backed-up with military might. To be used as a last resort, to be sure; but sometimes it comes to that. For example:

Revisionist historians tell us that slavery in the United States was starting to die out in 1860, but there’s little evidence to support that notion. Indeed, the Mexican-American War was fought in the 1840’s to acquire *new* territory into which slavery could *expand*. The South was controlled by an entrenched oligarchy of aristocratic slave holders, and nothing was going to set the prisoner free from the bonds of slavery except the gleam of the bayonet and the point of the gun. Well I remember my dad weeping as he described the horrors of war in general and the Civil War in particular. But sometimes it comes to that. President Lincoln did what he had to do in order to live out the biblical norms of justice and equality upon which this nation was founded.

Adolf Hitler was bound and determined to impose his racist ideology and oppressive rule upon the whole world – *for 1000 years* – in his misguided messianic delusion of grandeur. It was 80 years ago this very weekend that Nazi thugs destroyed Jewish businesses and synagogues throughout Germany in what became known as Kristallnacht, or the Night of the Broken Glass. It was becoming clear that the man would stop at nothing to further his evil designs. And when the nations attempted to appease him through peace treaties, it only encouraged his aggression. The western allies, whose cultures had been nurtured by biblical faith, had no choice but to take up arms.

Sadaam Hussein ruthlessly invaded a much weaker neighbor when he sent his Iraqi troops into Kuwait in 1990. He saw an opportunity to acquire oil wells and gain access to the Persian Gulf. A coalition of 35 nations saw bare-knuckled aggression that had to be stopped. Norms of justice that are affirmed by Christian, Jew and Muslim alike compelled this coalition to go to war.

An old ward politician in my home town once said “You can’t run Chicago like a Sunday school.” If that’s true of one city in a nation that has at least some respect for the rule of law, how much more is it true in a world where ruthless leaders who have *no* respect for the rule of law are prone to bully others into submission. Even folk singer and antiwar activist Pete Seeger once sang:

“There’s just one thing I must confess:

I’m not really a pacifist.

If they invaded this land of ours,

I’d be the first to take-up arms.”

You can’t run the world like a Sunday school. Peace, justice and gentleness are the norms of the Bible, but in the real world justice must sometimes be defended by military action. Brave men and women who are prepared to defend justice must run toward the fight and uphold the rule of law. It has been that way for thousands of years, and it will remain that way until Jesus finally does return. War is *always* the last resort, *never* to be used unless *all* efforts to resolve a conflict peacefully have failed. Rules of engagement must be followed and civilians must be protected whenever possible. Because war is hell, as anyone who’s ever been engaged in combat will tell us. But sometimes – to quote from the Man of La Mancha – sometimes one must be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

But the threat must be real. A ruthless tyrant and a wily terrorist are a threat to the nation. But several thousand unarmed civilians, including women and children, making their way to our southern border for reasons similar to those that brought many of our forbearers to these shores, surely are not. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” it says on a certain statue in New York Harbor. Not a bad description of my great-great grandparents when they arrived in the U.S., and not a bad description of the members of that caravan making its way through Mexico. Sending 5000 troops to the border to somehow stop this so-called invasion does nothing to reflect the glory or honor the greatness of America. Scripture says that God *watches over* the stranger; God *upholds* the orphan and the widow. These are the ones to be *defended*; not the ones to be defended against. One can understand why they might be seeking refuge in a land which is committed to – in the words of the Preamble to the Constitution – “establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” The U.S. Army was created to protect these biblically-inspired norms, not to be deployed in a political stunt.

The biblical norms are peace and gentleness, as well as justice and righteousness. In the real world these norms must sometimes be defended by military action. But we who seek to live by these biblical norms, even in this imperfect world, we are guided by a future hope. The vision of Isaiah and John and Jesus, the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, where pain and death are a thing of the past and the nations shall not learn war anymore, this is the future toward which history is moving; the dawn that is even now breaking into our midst. Yes, we need brave souls who will run toward the fight, even as all of us are moving inexorably toward the light.

God made this clear to me last Tuesday. I made a quick trip to Denver on Sunday to pick-up one of the family cars. The adult kid in Denver didn’t need it as much as the adult kid who’s moving to Nashville, so Stepdad answered the call to fly out west and bring the Kia home. Truth be told, it didn’t take a whole lot of persuasion. So it’s Tuesday morning and I’m headed east out of St. Joseph, Missouri at first light. It’s pitch black in my rearview mirror, but ahead of me there’s a beautiful strip of blue on the horizon, tinged with red and getting lighter by the minute. And it occurred to me that history is kind of like that: the providential hand of God is leading us toward the light, leading us into the future, leading us toward that hope for the day when all God’s children will know the blessings of liberty and justice and peace. But even as we all move toward the light, there’s still the need to defend against the darkness that threatens us from the rear. There’s still the need for something like a rear guard action to protect the pilgrims as they move forward. That’s kind of what military action is within the context of the grand scheme of things. So we honor those who are willing to run toward the fight, even as we all move toward the light.

But it’s a rear guard because the flow of history is moving forward. It’s a rear guard action because the decisive victory has already been won. Jesus fought that crucial battle when he was nailed to the Cross and rose from the grave. Because he has won that decisive victory over sin and evil and injustice and oppression and death, the outcome of the epic struggle is not in doubt. This is the future foreseen by the prophet Isaiah, depicted by the Revelation to John, and present even now wherever the children of God lay down their arms and walk together as sisters and brothers.

Because, you see, it’s not about the honor and glory of nations. They are but a drop of water in the vast ocean of God, says Isaiah (40:15). It’s not about the insatiable desire for honor and glory demanded by princes and rulers, in whom we are told *not* to put our trust. No! It’s about the victory of justice and righteousness; it’s about the triumph of gentleness and peace. It’s about the *only* One to whom honor and glory is due, and that is the Prince of Peace, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. We are marching in the light of the Lord, as the Children’s Chorus sang last night. We are marching toward the light of the Lord. To him and him alone be the honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen!