

“Third Way To Wage War”

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Memorial Day*

I Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

[The Apostle Peter said,]

Christ was put to death as a human, but made alive by the Spirit.

And it was by the Spirit that he went to preach to the spirits in prison.

I Peter 3:18^b-19

O God,

Whether people just disagree or someone acts aggressively without provocation,
we know all too well there is strife in this world.

Teach us how to act with integrity, to stand up for justice without injury to others,
as we help you build up the Beloved Community of your Kingdom.

Amen

In recent weeks, I have attended war memorial events, recalling the sacrifices
of those who answered the call to duty in World War II –

especially to liberate the Jewish captives during the Holocaust,
and most recently, our special Memorial Day service
remembering those who served in Vietnam.

We want to believe that anytime our people are called into action,
that it was for a good cause – that they fought and were wounded, or died
to make it a better world for those who survived.

We have a new generation of veterans returning home –
who faced the traumas of war as those who have done so
throughout history and, perhaps in new ways
that only they have faced.

We must never glorify war – we must always see it as a failure of our ability
to achieve national goals *without* violence.

Current events remind us that it is still a very violent world.

Our country is especially prone to be drawn into new conflicts –
even as it draws down from the War in Afghanistan.

The deteriorating situations in Syria and Ukraine – and now Nigeria,
cry out for the kind of intervention that the United States
has demonstrated skill in being able to perform.

It remains to be seen, however, what will happen – whether or not
the rebels in Syria will topple that government, or
the pro-Russian rebels will dismantle Ukraine as a nation, or
the Nigerian girls will ever be rescued from the Islamic terrorists...

Willard, p.2

It is hard to imagine anything, but violent force in response to the challenges facing each of these regions...

One thing is for sure – violence begets violence.

A violent act is never the last word in a conflict – short of total annihilation, that is.

Conflicts between people can *only* end with reconciliation.

There are some individuals, groups, and even nations who would never be won over by reason.

Boko Haram is an example with their determined opposition against the rights of women.

For the time being, this sect has the power to move at will and strike viciously throughout the region –

often targeting poor and vulnerable people in rural villages.

Boko Haram has tried to legitimize their actions as a rebellion against the Nigerian government because it is corrupt and its military is as inept as it is brutal.

This charge of political corruption is accurate and as a result has prevented more American intervention

in the form of sending troops, weapons, and training.

As deserving of contempt and retribution as Boko Haram may be, the Nigerian government bears a lot of responsibility for this crisis...

The danger of violent retribution – no matter how just the cause, is that the hero risks being transformed into the mirror image of the hated enemy.

But the question is never whether or not, one should respond to human evil, but how to do so creatively.

Anyone who has ever tended a garden knows that if you don't pull weeds early, they will take over the garden.

The same thing applies to human society –

if neglect is allowed to go on, it will be a bigger job later on.

Even a little bit, done by many people, can accomplish a lot.

God does not generally require a lot from us –

just a little, just to do our part wherever we are on life's journey.

For some people – like Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Malala Yousafzai – a lot was expected and accomplished.

Such people are called to be spiritual warriors, who must be as brave, skilled, and determined as soldiers, yet without bloodshed.

Willard, p.3

Unless we are otherwise called to play such a role,
our job as believers is to do what we can and remember it is not all up to us.
We have to know when it is up to God and to call upon God for help...

The image of God working through Christ is often not
“gentle Jesus, meek and mild”.

The Apostle Peter said,

‘And it was by the Spirit that he went to preach to the spirits in prison.’

I believe this passage is a reference to what is called, ‘The Harrowing of Hell’.
This is represented as an icon for Easter Sunday in Eastern Orthodox churches
which portrays Jesus stepping across an abyss
to rescue human-kind from spiritual death.

Often in such an icon, Christ holds his cross in one hand,

while reaching out to Adam & Eve, pulling them up out of their graves.

In another version of this icon, Jesus is breaking down the doors of Hell
staving them in with his cross to free the spirits imprisoned behind them.

No Gentle Jesus, meek and mild about it!

Yet the text says that,

‘... it was by the Spirit that he went to preach to the spirits in prison.’

So, it was by Jesus’ words that this liberating action took place –
the power of words.

This is also represented in the Book of Revelation

that speaks of Christ on a white horse, defeating the enemies of God
with the sword of his mouth.

Another image that comes to mind is the cleansing of the Temple

in which Jesus overturns the tables of the money exchangers,

and then admonishes them all by saying that the Temple is a place
for people to approach God through prayer and
should not become a ‘den of thieves’.

Bill Moyers – known for interviewing trend-setting, creative people,

spoke at General Synod in 2007, when the United Church of Christ
celebrated the 50th Anniversary of uniting four Christian traditions.

He described the UCC as *‘part of the progressive awakening’* of churches
that took a stand on civil rights and has worked to ensure the availability
of wealth and opportunity to all our citizens.

He noted that 11 signers of the Declaration of Independence

were from church traditions that were ancestors of the UCC –
and the words of that document proclaimed,

‘the radical notion of equality in the sight of God and under the rule of law.’

Willard, p.4

Bill Moyers goes on to tell how he was sitting in Riverside Church – which is affiliated with the UCC in NYC's upper West Side, and randomly opened the Bible to read about Jesus' cleansing of the Temple ...

*I closed the Bible, and sat there, and that morning,
I didn't hear what ... [the preacher] was saying.
Because I was turning the text over and again in my head,
absorbing the image of Jesus striding through the Holy Precinct
that had been transformed into a market place or stock exchange,
upsetting the dealers, scattering their money across the floor,
bouncing them forcefully from the temple,
indignant at a profane violation of the sacred – Jesus threw the rascals out.*

He made the connection that the Son of God was concerned for the children of men & women, the desperate plight of the poor, the civil rights of those who are pushed to the margins, the liberation of women, unnecessary wars – Jesus set himself over and against the powers of Domination.

At the time, American troops in Iraq were being involuntarily extended when there was at least one death every day, usually by the terrible improvised explosive devices used as land mines, Bill Moyers reminded us of our troops' grim reality, by saying we need to summon 'the Jesus who drove the money changers out of the temple of Jerusalem, and it is this Jesus called back to duty who will drive the money changers out of the temples of democracy.'

Barack Obama was a presidential candidate that year and he was going to speak that afternoon, but if Bill Moyers was running and if it was up to everyone in that huge auditorium that day, we would have voted for him or crowned him king with the ovation he received!

Another powerful image of Jesus as liberator comes from the Gospel of Mark, after the Transfiguration and coming down the mountain to find the disciples arguing with scribes about casting out a demon from a desperate father's child.

It is a dramatic scene where Jesus commands the demon to come out of the child and despite its resistance, the demon was driven away.

Willard, p.5

As they all entered the family's home to celebrate,
Jesus' disciples asked why they couldn't exorcise the demon;
And Jesus tells them – in words to this effect,
“Such an enemy as this cannot be driven out by anything
except prayer and fasting – faith and hard work.”

This is in keeping with what Walter Wink has described as Jesus' Third Way –
neither violent fight nor cowardly flight,
but to engage the enemy creatively and nonviolently.
Like the demons that Jesus exorcised, human evil is not to be tolerated,
but plucked out like a weed before it takes root and takes over
the whole garden of one's community.

In Dr Wink's book, Engaging The Powers – the third volume in his series
about the powers and principalities that dominate this world,
he speaks of spirits that correspond to
the spirit of a nation or corporation.

Human beings can be co-opted to think such a spirit represents God –
as one might describe the spirit of Nazi Germany or Communist Russia
or Boko Haram.

We must also be discerning about what some people call the Spirit of America –
For example, does Wall Street speak for America's highest ideals
beyond the bottom line?

To tell the difference we have the measuring stick
of our own Declaration of Independence, the Bible, and prayer.

Prayer helps to keep our hearts open to possibilities we have not anticipated –
prayer helps to keep us open to the impossible, or what we would otherwise
think of as impossible.

Prayer keeps our hearts open to love, to the Spirit of love and truth,
the Spirit of God.

When we pray – it is not simply us doing the praying.
Remember that imperative of 'God, help me!', 'God, bless us!',
“Thy Kingdom come!” without saying 'please' –
These are imperatives that God speaks through us.

Prayer serves as a very practical way to get as many of us “online”
to call God into action – through us.

As we intentionally seek God's presence, we are given tasks to do and
the clarity to do them.

Willard, p.6

Like the great Apostle Peter – despite his impulsive bravado,
he was rendered confused when Jesus was arrested in the garden;
Yet in the months that followed Christ's resurrection,
Peter found his voice and his purpose,
and courageously took his stand as Christ's disciple,
before the authorities – that is to say, the powers of Domination.

Not all of us are asked to be martyrs for the cause –
just to help where we can.

That can even be in little ways like pulling up the weeds of prejudice
in the garden of one's neighborhood before they get too big or too many.

It can be as simple as teaching children to read,
helping God to break the chain of poverty
that leads to addiction, prison, and death.

Join the fight! Strike a blow!

Enter the combat against our common enemies of ignorance and fear

*The Son of God goes forth to war, a kingly crown to gain;
his blood red banner streams afar: who follows in his train?
Who best can drink his cup of woe, triumphant over pain,
who patient bears his cross below, [they follow] in his train.*

*A glorious band, the chosen few on whom the Spirit came;
twelve valiant saints, their hope they knew, and mocked the cross and flame.
They met the tyrant's brandished steel, the lion's gory mane;
they bowed their heads the death to feel: who follows in their train?*

*A noble army, men and boys, the matron(s) and the maid(s),
around the Savior's throne rejoice, in robes of light arrayed.
They climbed the steep ascent of heaven, through peril, toil and pain;
O God, to us may grace be given, to follow in their train.*

Amen

*Our lesson today from 1st Peter 3:13-22 is meant as a word of encouragement
in the struggle against the powers of this world,
confident in one's relationship with God through Christ...*

[The Apostle Peter said,]

13 Who will harm you if you are zealous for good?

14 But happy are you, even if you suffer because of righteousness!
Don't be terrified or upset by them.

15 Instead, regard Christ as holy in your hearts.

Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it.

16 Yet do this with respectful humility, maintaining a good conscience.

Act in this way so that those who malign your good lifestyle in Christ
may be ashamed when they slander you.

17 It is better to suffer for doing good (if this could possibly be God's will)
than for doing evil.

18 Christ himself suffered on account of sins, once for all,
the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous.

He did this in order to bring you into the presence of God.

Christ was put to death as a human, but made alive by the Spirit.

19 And it was by the Spirit

that he went to preach to the spirits in prison.

20 In the past, these spirits were disobedient—

when God patiently waited during the time of Noah.

Noah built an ark in which a few (that is, eight)
lives were rescued through water.

21 Baptism is like that. It saves you now—

not because it removes dirt from your body

but because it is the mark of a good conscience toward God.

Your salvation comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

22 who is at God's right side. Now that he has gone into heaven,
he rules over all angels, authorities, and powers.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

John 14:15-21 [CEB]

[Jesus said,]

15 "If you love me,

you will keep my commandments.

16 I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion,
who will be with you forever.

17 This Companion is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world can't receive
because it neither sees [her] nor recognizes [her].

You know [her], because [she] lives with you and will be with you.

18 "I won't leave you as orphans.

I will come to you.

19 Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.

Because I live, you will live too.

20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father,
you are in me, and I am in you.

21 Whoever has my commandments and keeps them
loves me.

Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father,
and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

John 14:15-21 [RSV]

[15] "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

[16] And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with
you for ever,

[17] even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither
sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

[18] "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.

[19] Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me;
because I live, you will live also.

[20] In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in
you.

[21] He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he
who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself
to him."