

July 10, 2005
Matthew 26:47-56
Exodus 14:21-31

Technologies of Peace

Rev. John M. Caldwell, Ph.D.

This is the second sermon on a topic that you have chosen: war and peace. A good place to begin might be the fourth chapter of Genesis in which Cain kills his brother Abel, beginning a long a sorry history of people killing each other. Now we might think that this story, coming as early in the Bible as it does, suggests that killing each other--like being male and female, like living and dying--is something that is simply part of the human condition and a very basic part of it, at that.

But, like a number of other things set out in the first few chapters of Genesis this is a vast oversimplification. The fact is, we humans do not like killing each other, especially at close range.

Not many animals kill their own kind easily, and for good reason--it's a bad survival strategy. Wolves, for example, are lethal and effective hunters of animals much larger than they are. They live in packs with clear dominance patterns in which they are constantly jockeying for position. But they very seldom kill each other, and then mostly accidentally. We don't like to kill each other, especially face-to-face. It's a very deep, very strong, and very healthy aversion.

This presents a problem for politicians and generals. The basic challenge for every army in history has always been: How to get basically nice people like us to kill when we are told.

There are basically three strategies, three techniques, three technologies for getting around this basic human niceness. The first strategy is posturing. The louder, bigger and badder we can *act*, the greater the chance that an enemy will think better of tangling with us and slink away.

It's "Speak loudly and you may not have to use a stick at all." This is what wolves do most of the time and it saves them from killing each other.

When I read the Iliad by Homer--the story of the ten-year Greek siege of the city of Troy--about ninety percent of it seemed to be posturing: Trojans and Greeks taunting each other. You know: "Your mother was a hamster, and your father smelled of elderberries." That sort of thing. The Trojan War seems to me to have been only slightly more deadly than a professional football game. So that's one way to get around our reluctance to kill each other.

The second strategy is to take away the "up close and personal" part of killing up close and personal and develop weapons that kill at a distance. It's much easier to overcome our resistance to killing when we're dropping bombs from 20,000 feet or firing cruise missiles from 100 miles away than if we are trying to kill some ten feet away who is looking us in the eye.

The third strategy is to go after the aversion to killing directly. An old way to do that was to convince recruits that killing was a deep duty to all that they hold sacred, that they are killing for God, killing as God's instruments in God's cause. In other words, to declare a holy war.

This is especially effective if the enemy comes to believe that they are facing, not only an army, but an angry and violent god. The Egyptian defeat at the Sea of Reeds turned into a rout when they saw their unexpected difficulties in chasing the Israelites as an act of the Israelite God. "Let us flee from the Israelites, for Yahweh is fighting for them against the Egyptians!" That's the old way - and it still works.

The new way to do that is psychological. It seems that during World War II, the During WWII, Brigadier General Marshall, Chief Historian of the European Theater of Operations, discovered from post-combat interviews that only about fifteen to twenty percent of all front-line infantry ever fired their rifles at exposed enemy soldiers. That is, there was a "refusal rate" of about eighty percent. Other research has shown that this refusal rate has been fairly constant through modern history.¹

So after WWII, basic combat training was changed. What military trainers discovered was that it is possible to overcome our innate aversion to face-to-face killing with the proper conditioning. What you do is to set up training situations in which *simulated* violence is rewarded. One little change made a big difference: they changed the shape of rifle targets from bull's eyes to human silhouettes that fall down when struck by bullets.

The changes worked. In Korea the refusal rate was down to forty-five percent. In Vietnam it fell to about five percent, where it's been for all our wars since.

Of course all of these strategies and war itself are very costly. In the first place there is the \$446 billion we spent on the military just during the last year. Then there is the damage to young people that must be done in order for them to become soldiers who will kill on command and at close range. And then there is the cost to those who have to use their training, to say nothing of those whose wounds are visible, to say nothing of those whose wounds are fatal.

What Christians must understand is that over all of this--the development of technologies for killing, the strategies to get people to do what they never were meant to do--over all of this there hangs a curse. And it's not some judgment of an angry God, some punishment meted out by a stern judge for failure to observe an arbitrary law. It is the simple consequence of the path we choose when we choose to go to war, whether that war is between two brothers in a corn field, or between two civilizations in an oil field, or between the students of a traveling preacher and the temple police sent to arrest him in a garden at night: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Violence begets violence that inevitably boomerangs. Jesus, in this curse, pronounced the doom of the Roman Empire. There is no peace through victory, as the Empire asserted. The Empire was wrong, fatally so. *Every* Empire is wrong when it offers peace through violence. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."

These words come to us in the middle of a war. There are some who believe that our part in this war is justified and there are others who hotly contest that. There are folks who are calling for a holy war, others who argue that this is a just war, others who argue that this war does not meet the standards of a just war, still others who argue that no war is just.

We can leave the debate to them. The Church does not have to involve itself in those controversies. We have an alternative vision to offer, because we are not looking for victory, we are looking for the reign of God, and violence is not one of the values of that realm.

Jesus had a choice in the garden. He could have responded to the violence of the mob with violence of his own. He could have summoned twelve legions of angels, he tells us--that's 60,000. I don't know about what sort of firepower the average member of the heavenly host wielded but I'm guessing that 60,000 angels was more than enough to obliterate the mob that came to arrest him.

He could have done that, but that's not what he did, because "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."

¹Dave Grossman, LTC, "Evolution of Weaponry," <http://www.killology.com/:2000>.

Instead he confronted the Domination System² of his day--that interlocking reality of political, military, and spiritual violence--he forced it to show itself for what it is, stripped of any pretence of justice or decency. He absorbed its violence in his own body and there he destroyed it.

He never treated his enemies as if they were subhuman and he never ceased to believe in their God-given dignity. He never violated their humanity. He was the non-violent preacher of a non-violent gospel. And we are his followers and his heirs.

Someone will say that non-violence won't work, that it's useless against Nazis or Communists or Islamic fundamentalists or whoever the enemy of the day happens to be. I'm going to ask you to consider four things as my answer to that objection.

First, so what if it non-violence is useless? Are we called to be successful? Or are we called to be faithful?

Second, imagine if Jesus had taken the violent resistance route and become the leader of a rebellion. There were lots of them in Roman Judea. The Romans understood rebellion and they knew what to do, because rebels played the Roman's game. No one understood violence better than the Empire.

We know exactly what would have happened, because that's exactly what *did* happen: the rebellions failed. All of them. If non-violence isn't practical against bad people, it's certainly no more of a failure than violence.

Third, imagine all the money and lives that have been devoted to the development of technologies of war. Imagine if we had taken even a tenth of that wasted wealth and invested it in developing technologies of peace. Imagine if we gave defense department grants to universities to discover the principles of peace and the technologies necessary to put those principles into practice.

Fourth, non-violence *is* practical, far more often than violence is, at any rate. You know the story; I've told it before: How in apartheid South Africa there had been a fresh crackdown on dissent. So Archbishop Tutu offered activists his cathedral as a meeting place. And as they were meeting, security police came into the nave and ringed the meeting with menace. Archbishop Tutu stood up in front of the nave and addressed the police, inviting them to join the winning side.

It wasn't armed violence that defeated apartheid but non-violent resistance under the leadership of people like Desmond Tutu and Methodist Bishop Peter Storey.

In our own country's history, non-violent resistance has been the only way forwarding the on-going civil rights struggle. Walter Wink tells a story about a night in Selma. There had been a group of young civil rights workers who had been surrounded by mounted state troopers then ordered to disperse and when they didn't (because they couldn't) the police waded in with clubs. Then the police held back the ambulances for two hours while the injured suffered.

This news was carried to the Ebenezer Baptist Church by one of the ambulance drivers. In Wink's words:

²Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* New York: Random House, 1998, 11. Wink developed this notion mostly from New Testament texts concerning "powers and principalities" and has refined it into a powerful tool for analyzing our present political/economic/spiritual struggle.

The crowd outside the church seethed with rage. Cries when up: 'Let's march!' Behind us, across the street, stood, rank on rank, the Alabama state troopers and the local police forces of Sheriff Jim Clark. The situation was explosive. A young black minister stepped to the microphone and said, 'It's time we sang a song.' He opened with the line, 'Do you love Martin King?' 'Certainly, Lord!' the crowd responded. 'Do you love Martin King?' 'Certainly, Lord!' 'Do you love Martin King?' 'Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!'

Right through the chain of command of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference he went, the crowd each time echoing, warming to the song, 'Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!' Without warning he sang out, 'Do you love Jim Clark?' The sheriff?! 'Cer-certainly, Lord' came the stunned, halting reply. 'Do you love Jim Clark?' 'Certainly, Lord'--it was stronger this time. 'Do you love Jim Clark?' Now the point had sunk in: 'Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!'

The Reverend James Bevel then took the mike. We are not just fighting for our rights, he explained, but for the good of the whole society. 'It's not enough to defeat Jim Clark--do you hear me, Jim?--we want you converted. We cannot win by hating our oppressors. We have to love them into changing.'³

And there it is: that's the technology of peace we have to offer to this war-sick and violence-weary world. We have love: the non-violent, life-changing, enemy-converting, death-defeating, world-transforming, reign-of-God-bringing, hope-giving, peace-making, justice-doing love of Jesus who taught it...and lived it...and gave it to us.

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