

Remembrance Sunday Reflection November 8,2009

Friends, we're here today to remember those who served honourably through the wars of this century, and especially those who were injured and died, as well as those who survived with scars of body, heart and mind. War is terrible – there is not a veteran here who would not agree with that. And yet, again and again, throughout human history, the nations of the world have called their citizens to take up arms. Many have heeded that call, for reasons as diverse as the individuals who have served in our military.

Some young souls seek after adventure; others see the military as a place to find work and an education in a depressed economy; some go because their comrades are going; some go out of a sense of duty and a wish to be of service; others go because they have heard of horrors committed and want to be a part of bringing them to an end.

Regardless the reason, we grieve the times when we as a nation have found ourselves in a situation of war; we grieve the fact that there are times when we have asked our young people, and our not-so-young people, to pay the price of our failure to find peaceful solutions to the world's problems. We grieve, and we resolve to do better. That is why the slogan that has been associated with Remembrance Day for decades is “Never again”. And yet we find ourselves, again, embroiled in war on a foreign continent, and again it is our husbands and wives, our sons and daughters, our friends and neighbours and family members, who are taking on the cost for us all.

We honour the commitment of these soldiers, sailors, airmen and women, peace officers, medical personnel and others who have given their lives and continue to serve at the call of our nation.

In light of our past and our present, I thought that you might find it interesting to hear about a new Peace Policy that has just been adopted by the United Church of Canada, focusing on the *Responsibility to Protect*. Its logic draws heavily on the Just War theory that entered the Christian church by way of St Augustine over 1500 years ago, and it comes out of a growing sense in the world that we cannot allow nation states to have autonomy within their borders when it comes to issues of massive cruelty, abuse and even genocide. This became particularly clear to us during the Second World War with the mass execution of Jews by the Nazi regime; and it has become even clearer in this century where the targeting of civilians has become a standard method of warfare for terrorist groups and rogue governments alike, with widespread murder, rape and abuse becoming almost commonplace. The world has come to realize that just as our communities need a police force to maintain the peace when there are those who choose to exploit or harm others, so the world needs a military force to intervene when nations, governments, and political cadres choose to do the same. Christians in general, and United Church members in particular, are by no means of one mind when it comes to this policy. We continue to struggle with our call to be peacemakers and the longing to see justice done in God's world.

The background information of the 2008 Peace Policy says:

Building peaceful societies is a cornerstone of the world's major faiths. For Christians, it is a gospel imperative expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus, in which our security can only be achieved by ensuring the well-being of the other in our society. Our vision of peace is informed by the biblical understanding of shalom—"the recognition that peace is not just the absence of conflict but the sustainable state of well-being and harmony among people and with creation".¹

In his conceptual clarification of the biblical shalom, J.N.K. Mugambi states that "Justice is so integral to shalom that it is futile to proclaim peace in a society where injustice prevails."² Rooted in the gospel imperative and in this vision is the understanding that justice is a prerequisite for a sustainable peace.

We hear the voice of the prophet reminding us, that what God requires is that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. What does that mean when others are being hurt and exploited?

The Bible has a great deal to say about the exploitation of the weak by the strong. The ideal ruler in Old Testament terms is one who is both peace-loving but ready to defend the weak when called on to do so. The ruler is the protector of the poor, the orphan, the widow, the vulnerable – they protect those who are unable to protect themselves. This is the role of the nation state – and if it abrogates that charge, then with great reluctance and with careful consideration, the rest of the world heeds the call to do something about it. The United Church, after much struggle and not without controversy, has endorsed the following principals set forth by the United Nations:

a **Right authority:** United Nations Security Council authority must be sought prior to any military intervention action being carried out.

b **Just cause:** (i) large-scale loss of life, which is the product of either deliberate state action, or state neglect or inability to act, or a failed state situation, or (ii) large-scale "ethnic cleansing" whether carried out by killing, forced expulsion, acts of terror or rape.

c **Right intention:** The primary purpose of the intervention must be to halt or avert human suffering.

d **Last resort:** Every diplomatic and non-military avenue for the prevention or peaceful resolution of the humanitarian crisis must have been explored. The responsibility to react – with military coercion – can only be justified when the responsibility to prevent has been fully discharged.

e **Proportional means:** The scale, duration, and intensity of the planned military intervention should be the minimum necessary to secure the humanitarian objective in question.

f **Reasonable prospects:** Military action can only be justified if it stands a reasonable chance of success, that is, halting or averting the atrocities or suffering that triggered the intervention in the first place.

The United Church's policy goes on to say that

¹ *Beyond Military Force: Seeking Peace after the Cold War*, (Record of Proceedings, 35th General Council of The United Church of Canada, August 1994), pp. 387-394

² Mugambi, J.N.K., *The Christian Ideal of Peace and Political Reality in Africa* in *From Violence to Peace: A Challenge for African Christianity*, Getui, Mary N. and Peter Kanyandago, eds., (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1999), p.76.

- a “Consultation with affected partners and reliable independent sources provide verifiable evidence that the vulnerable communities affected are specifically requesting international military intervention authorized by the United Nations to halt the suffering;
- b Extensive consultation be conducted with partners in the areas affected for advice and guidance on the appropriate action for the context **before** making a decision (this is already established United Church practice);
- c Any call for international military intervention under the authority of the United Nations be determined on **a case-by-case basis**;
- d Any international military intervention under the authority of the United Nations be in conformity with international law.
- e

Our church has committed to ongoing conversation with its global partners about this policy, about the potential dangers of military intervention and the awareness of how our cultural beliefs and biases can influence how we evaluate these situations.

We are aware that as Christians we are called to a peaceful relationship with our neighbours – to committing ourselves to living out the love of Christ in every choice we make. The sad but undeniable truth is that sometimes we must protect one set of neighbours from another set of neighbours. We do so, hoping that humankind will find a better way, and vowing once again to work for a peace that is not dependent on military might, but comes out of a deep and abiding respect for all life, a commitment to dialogue and to the common values of human cultures and human faiths: compassion, justice, and the integrity of all life.

In my experience of conversations with the veterans who have served our country in wartime, no matter how they look back on the way, one thing they have in common is the commitment to building up what is good in their communities, serving where and when they are needed to make a positive change in their corner of the world. Many veterans have become public advocates for peace; many have shared their stories about their war experiences in hopes of convincing young people that war is not a video game where you can press restart and everyone's alive again. We are grateful for their work and their witness. We have much to learn from those who served, and from those who died. May we not forget, and may their stories drive us to pray and work for lasting peace. Amen.