

November 5, 2017

To End All Wars

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Isaiah 2: 3-4

In August 1914, British author and social commentator H.G.Wells published an article in London newspapers called “The Sword of Peace.” It begins with these words: “The defeat of Germany may open the way to disarmament and peace throughout the earth” and ends with this hopeful thought

I believe German Imperialism will be shattered and it may be possible to anticipate the end of the armaments phase of European history... The way will be open at last for all these Western Powers to organise peace. That is why I ... have not signed any of these ‘stop the war’ appeals ... Every sword that is drawn against Germany now is a sword drawn for peace.

When it was published later that year, the publisher changed the title to the now ironic, *The War that will End War.*

Has any statement ever been more wrong?

I honour the eleventh of November for two reasons: Firstly, because it is a day set aside to honour the fact that there are men and women whose call to service is to stand in the gap, to risk life and limb in places I don’t want to go, doing things that I don’t want to do, so that me and mine can sleep safe and secure. Secondly, though, I honour the eleventh of November because of what it teaches us about how the world interacts, and what disciples can do to set ourselves apart.

Armistice day, as it was originally called, commemorates the peace of Versailles – the peace treaty that ended the Great War. And while the peace of Versailles accomplished lots of things, the end of war is not one of them.

Expecting war to end war is like expecting to get skinnier just by eating cheeseburgers.

But it is precisely that lunacy that gives worth to the act of remembrance. We remember because Remembrance Day isn’t about war. Remembrance Day is about retribution. War is just how it manifests at one insane end of the spectrum. But it’s a problem we confront every single day, in a hundred different ways – and the question that drives us back to the act of remembrance over and over again is this: how then shall I live?

Let me first acknowledge that our collective sense of retribution comes from a good place; it lives in the same part of the brain that from which we derive our sense of justice, and the two are intimately linked. Every act of retribution stems first from an act of injustice that we witness. When the injustice feels personal, our brains trigger a retributive response. Where this gets messy is that the centres of the brain that handle

retribution are located inside the pleasure centres of the brain. And as soon as we make the move from seeking justice for justice's sake to seeking justice so we can get a quick hit of dopamine, the seeds of a problem are sown.

Retribution just can never possibly satisfy the demands of justice because at its core, it's a subjective picture of reality. Imagine the person sitting next to you decides to pick up a hymnal and hit you with it. Once you get over the initial shock of getting hit with a hymnal in church, what's your first reaction? For most of us, we pick up our own hymnal and hit them back. To your mind, you know justice has been served because you got a little hit of dopamine when you hit back, so you're ready to get back to the whatever you were doing before you got hit with a hymnal. But to the person sitting beside you, their brain is telling them that you hit them way harder than they hit you – an injustice has been committed and an itch needs to be scratched.

In the world of Isaiah, this was the norm we know as *lex talionis* – the law of retribution. This law takes an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Punishment in kind for the crime committed. But while it may seem a tidy system, it doesn't solve the subjectivity at the root of the problem. The Law of Retribution can't understand how hungry I was when I stole that bread to feed my family or how much I needed whatever it was that I took. And so by its own nature, the law creates systemic injustice. Jesus' answer was simple. His disciples operate under a different system. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, give them your left as well." Jesus represents a fundamental dismantling of the law of retribution – not just in his teaching, but in the cross as well. In the act of remembrance, we recognize the implicit weakness of the system we are called to reject anyway.

So the 11th of November for Disciples of Jesus is a day that sees the world beg for a new way to be human. That this day is enshrined in the laws of our country gives the church a powerful opportunity to witness to the way of living that Jesus not only taught but modeled.

Forgive others because Love is the final fight. Theologian and American Civil Rights leader John A Perkins put it this way, "Dream of a fight for something bigger, something more important and worthwhile. We need to fight for justice and peace, for the walls between us to come crashing down... [and] Love is the final fight." To love others, to live out the most basic ideas of the Christian Faith is always going to require us to start from a place of forgiveness; because forgiveness is the cure for retribution. When I choose to forgive you, I become the one to bear the cost of the injustice I've perceived, and in doing that I negate the risk of escalation because the subjectivity of the injustice is written off. Forgiving others is the only way to avoid the retribution's escalation.

Forgive yourself because God's already forgiven you. How much of our animus, our anger, and our pride can trace back to something someone said to us once upon a time, that gave us the idea that we're not good enough, not smart enough, not wealthy enough or not successful enough? It's human nature to lash out at others when we feel pressure, but in remembrance, Jesus is calling us to a new way to be human. Our fears, insecurities, and worries drive us so often to be less than just in the world around us but the Gospel of peace is this: God has overcome the world. There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ. In Christ, you are good enough, smart enough, wealthy enough, and successful enough. Christ has forgiven you and this was not something Christ had to do. God was under no obligation to save us, yet he does. And because God chooses that, God chooses you. And God doesn't make mistakes. You are enough.

And when we have, we become free to hear Jesus words "do this in remembrance of me" and find in them new meaning. The table's invitation is not a clarion call to remember a time when our world acted a certain way, or to be nostalgic for a time when the church had an institutional voice. The table's invitation is a call to remember that we inhabit a world of violence and injustice, where God stepped down into history to show the world its value, and we killed him for it. It's a call to remember that discipleship likewise invites us, come and die. The table is just a table, but remembrance; that is an altar suitable for our whole life.

Amen.