

Sermon for Veterans Day Sunday

Year C

November 11, 2007 Randal B. Gardner

Permit me, please, to offer two stories this morning.

The first comes from about 1600 years ago, near the end of the Roman Empire. For the first 350 after the Resurrection of Christ the Church held to an unwavering commitment to pacifism. During the three years preparation for Baptism soldiers who sought to become Christians were taught that while they didn't need to resign from military service, they would have to swear to give up carrying a sword. That created, as you might guess, a quandary. A disarmed soldier is not much use to his commander, and as a result most converts in the military left the ranks or suffered imprisonment for their decision to be baptized.

However, by the years of the late 300's Christian faith had moved from being persecuted to being the official religion of the Empire. A different quandary arose as bishops and Christian citizens now had not only their own faith to consider, but also their care for and stewardship of the wider society. The Western Empire was in the first stages of decline, and barbarian invasions threatened citizens across Europe and North Africa.

The violence, destruction, inhumanity and dread these invasions caused could no longer be considered the Empire's problem as if they were not also the Church's problem. Bishops and church councils began to consider the circumstances under which the faithful could take up arms, and the beginning statements of the Just War doctrine were crafted. A leading theologian of the age, Augustine, a bishop in North Africa, crafted the arguments that have been at the core of Just War doctrines ever since.

The Just War doctrine focuses on two elements of war — the justification for taking up arms and the conduct of the war itself. For violence to be just it must be for the sake of defending people or correcting an injustice. In 1993 the US Catholic Conference of bishops reiterated this, stating, "Force may be used only to correct a grave, public evil, namely, aggression or massive violation of the basic human rights of whole populations." Justifiable war must also be under the governance of authority, under some kind of governing entity that can be identified and with whom negotiations for peace can be conducted. Before engaging in war there must be a determination that success is likely, requiring decision makers to sue for terms of peace before engaging in the destructiveness of battle if battle is likely only to increase suffering and loss. Finally, the violence of war is justifiable only if it comes as a last resort.

The conduct of a Just War, our ancestors argued, required discrimination between combatants and civilians, with violence directed only at those who had taken up arms. Such violence must be proportional to the wrong needing to be corrected, and the violence of battle must be waged with the minimum amount of force necessary to achieve success.

Augustine himself considered wars to be inevitable, even according to divine will for humanity. Still he knew that the origin of war was rooted in sin, and the pervasiveness of sin leads to the pervasiveness of injustice. War, he concluded, is necessary if societies are to take seriously their stewardship of justice; but the reality of war must be

born with a heavy heart, and the destruction of one's enemy must be felt as grief before the joyful relief at victory can be truly claimed. Vengeance, the psalmist says, is always reserved to the Lord; but justice requires ongoing pain, struggle and sacrifice among those for whom justice is the only acceptable standard.

Thinking about War theologically, wrestling with how it reveals our darkest impulses and greatest fears, seeing how it inspires heroism and sacrifice, finding in it an abiding hope for peace and justice is not easy. Every age has to rethink and reexamine the balances used to weigh justice, every scripture that calls us to be peaceful. In every age since Augustine the church has had an uneasy participation in war, but always in the hope for, and in the imagined possibility of, lasting peace.

My second story comes from the 1840's when a border dispute with Britain brought our two nations to the brink of our third major war with each other in less than 80 years. The dispute concerned how a boundary would pass through or around a set of islands in the Strait of Juan de Fuca between Washington State and British Columbia.

On the largest of these islands, San Juan Island, a handful of Americans had begun to build farms in spite of the fact that the island was mostly under the control of the Hudson Bay Company and British troops. The governors of the Oregon Territory and British Columbia encouraged their citizens to be more and more aggressive in claiming the island's land, and both called for increasing military presence on San Juan and the other islands in the archipelago.

The simmering pot nearly overboiled when an American farmer shot a pig owned by an employee of the Hudson Bay Company. Tensions mounted. The Governor of Oregon called in three companies of soldiers to the island, and the Governor of British Columbia called in three warships with 400 marines. Both Governors were agitating for battle as the way to stake their claims, but the military forces were under the commands of General Winfield Scott of the US Army and Rear Admiral Robert Baynes of the British Navy.

Both Commanders had been battle tested, and both had been decorated as military heroes. Their experience with war tempered their enthusiasm for it, and both held their forces in check until they could arrive in person. Admiral Baynes is known to have been appalled at the increasing clamor for war, and said that he had no intention to "involve two great nations in a war over a squabble about a pig." Scott and Baynes issued stern orders that no one under their command was to fire a first shot, and in spite of the goading between the lines of troops that discipline held. In the end the two persuaded their respective governors to agree to a joint occupation of the island until the boundary dispute could be settled in an international court.

The Pig War had all the potential to expand into another costly war between the US and Britain but for the wisdom and patience of two seasoned veterans. Having seen battle, they knew what destruction could spread beyond the wisest planning, that loss and injury in a time of violence could inflame passions into acts of revenge and prejudices of hatred.

Veterans who have seen battle know the cost of war, and theirs is a wisdom we ought to heed most carefully whenever a question of war moves toward a decision. Theirs is a love of country and of fellow servant that is built on a hope for peace rather than on a romantic glorification of war. Theirs is a sacrifice of honor, not of pride.