

Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Matthew 5:1-12
November 5, 2023

Today is our Remembrance Day Sunday, when we remember the victims of war and all the veterans who went to war to defend Canada or another country, or who have served as peacekeepers. Many of these veterans paid a great price. Some didn't come back. Some came back broken, in body, spirit or mind. I've never been to war. I really can't imagine what it might be like, either as a soldier, or as a civilian caught in the middle of it. I spoke to one of my professors once about his experience in World War II. He was the navigator in a Lancaster bombing crew. He told me he had been one of a group of nineteen men training to be navigators. Only three of them survived the war. That was all he would say about it. I also remember in Prince Albert in the 1990s, some veterans coming in to talk to me about the Remembrance Day service. One recounted how he and other young men who served with him in World War II were only 18 years old when they saw action in Holland. "We were just kids," he said. Some didn't come back. Some came back with physical scars. He himself had raised a family and become a grandfather. But he still remembered what it was like to go to war. They all paid a great price.

And the experiences of victims of war? Leslie helps with English language classes at the Global Gathering Place. Many of the students in the class have fled places torn by war. Most come from much warmer climates. How do they like it here, with our harsh winters? It's fine. What do they like about Canada? As one said: "There's no bang bang." In other words, no war. That makes all the difference.

As we are all too aware these days, we live in a world torn by war and violence. There was the invasion of Ukraine, still ongoing, and now Palestine has exploded. In the midst of this, Jesus calls us to be peacemakers.

When the United Church was formed, many of its leaders were pacifists. The horrors of World War I were so bad that many Western Protestant leaders at that time renounced military violence completely. If you read the United Church magazine from back then, *The New Outlook*, you'll find editorials talking about outlawing war. I think that is a wonderful idea. I would love to convict Vladimir Putin of breaking that law and put him in prison. But I don't know how you do that. As it turns out, neither did they.

When Hitler came to power and his intention to wage war became obvious, many of these leaders, not all, but many, let go of their idealism, and recognized that with Hitler in power, war was inevitable. As long as there are people, there will be conflicts. And where there are conflicts, there will be wars. In the midst of this, Jesus calls us to be peacemakers. We can't end war once and for all. But we are called to work for peace.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor says that there is an inevitable tension that comes from an ideal that cannot be fully met in reality.¹ The tension between the ideal and reality can lead you to give up on the world or give up on the ideal, or to be unrealistic. Jesus calls us to seek peace. But we can never establish peace in a final sense. There will always be conflicts and wars. So we live in this kind of tension. The

¹ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: House of Anansi Press Limited, 1991), 76.

temptations are to become cynical, either by giving up on seeking peace, or by calling the world evil and giving up on it, or ignore the hard realities that give rise to war, and to offer simple solutions that help no one.

But Taylor goes on to say that “people can sink lower, as well as rise higher.”² We may never fully reach the ideal. But we can draw closer to it. Instead of trying to ignore the tension between an ideal and reality, we are called to live in it. We don’t have to establish peace in any final sense. But we are called to try to rise higher, to work for peace.

I grew up in Kingston, Ontario. When I was young I had a Globe and Mail paper route. I got up at six in the morning, six days a week, to deliver Globe and Mail newspapers. The Viet Nam war was on then. Every week or so there would be a crude map of the war in the paper. It was all over the news on the radio and television as well. This bombing and killing went on and on.

In 1972 there was a famous picture taken of a nine-year-old girl, running naked down a highway with other children, after they had been burned by napalm. A South Vietnamese plane apparently mistook them for the enemy and dropped napalm on her and the others. Her picture became a symbol of the horror of the Viet Nam war. Her name was Phan Thi Kim Phuc. She lives in Toronto now. She still has scars from the burns she suffered that day. But no one is dumping napalm on her now.

The horrible conflict that was the Viet Nam war finally ended. There are many reasons for why the United States withdrew from Viet Nam. One of them is that people, from public figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., to private citizens, stood up and said that it was wrong and needed to stop. Nations can sink lower, as America did when it got into the Viet Nam war. But nations can also rise higher. America did that when it withdrew from that war.

Back when I was young, after I finished delivering the newspapers, it was breakfast time. Our family usually ate breakfast together. The radio was always on with the morning news. Back then, most mornings we heard about the troubles, the violence in North Ireland. It started in 1968 and ran for thirty years. 3,600 people died. 30,000 more were wounded. We used to hear about it morning after morning as we ate breakfast. A car bombing in Belfast. Elsewhere a kidnapping. Then there was the kneecapping and the snipers. The reports on Mondays were usually the worst, as the perpetrators had a couple extra days over the weekend to do their thing.

One day I learned that my Dad was going to Ireland for work. I told him he shouldn’t go. “You might get killed,” I said. Dad didn’t say much. That’s the way he was. He had to put food on the table. If work said he had to go to Ireland, he would put us before his personal safety. He was gone for about two weeks. He sent me a postcard. On it he mentioned some of the places he had been to. And he wrote this one line: the people here don’t look very cheery. That sort of summed it up.

Nowadays I still listen to the radio while I eat breakfast. But no one mentions Ireland any more. The violence has stopped. It took years, but people finally stopped it. People and nations can sink lower, as Ireland did in the troubles. But they can also rise higher, as Ireland did when it managed to end the killing. Joan Brown likes to tell us that Ireland is beautiful. I’m sure she is right. I wouldn’t say it is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of the kingdom of heaven. Joan might. But I would say, Ireland is a

² Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 77.

lot closer to the kingdom of heaven now than it was when I was young. People and nations can sink lower. But they can also rise higher. That's what Jesus calls us to try to do. That's what Ireland did when the violence ended. And trying to rise higher, trying to make peace, wherever we can, in any way that we can, is how we honour the sacrifices that Canadian veterans have made for our sake.

Four and a half weeks ago I went to St. Joseph's High School to hear Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire speak. He was in charge of the United Nations Mission in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide there. 800,000 people were killed in one hundred days. Dallaire is famous for disobeying the order to withdraw his forces during this time. Instead, he and many of the soldiers he commanded stayed to protect the people who had sought refuge with them.

Dallaire came back from Rwanda a broken person, traumatized by what he had seen. He told us when he spoke that night that he has attempted suicide five times, and he still has to take nine pills a day. He has a sense of humour about the pills. He's done a lot of therapy etc. But he gave the credit for pulling him through to his wife and her love. He spoke well that night. He had a lot to say.

Partly, he talked about his time in Rwanda. There was another group of UN soldiers there, and some people had sought protection from them. The UN ordered these soldiers to withdraw. They did. After the soldiers left, the people who had sought protection from them were all killed. A larger group of people had sought protection from Dallaire and the soldiers under his command. Dallaire said that he knew that if they withdrew, these people would be killed too.

Then came the telephone call. It was a UN official, ordering him to withdraw his troops. As Dallaire described it, he didn't really think about his answer when he gave it. It just came out of him. His Roman Catholic upbringing, his training as a soldier with a duty to protect people, his training as a peacekeeper, it all welled up from within him in a one-word response: NO. The UN official repeated the command. Dallaire repeated his answer. The UN official hung up on him.

Ten minutes later the telephone rang again. It was the UN official's chief of staff. This chief of staff explained to Dallaire that he was in direct contravention of his orders, that his soldiers had no responsibility to obey him, and so on. Dallaire told us that as a professional soldier and commanding officer, he didn't need to hear this. He knew it all already. Finally the chief of staff ended his speech and said to Dallaire, "Do you understand this?" Dallaire said "yes." Then he hung up on the chief of staff. He had a chuckle in his voice when he described hanging up on the chief of staff. I think he feels good about having done that. He should.

Then Dallaire said, he went to speak to his officers, and he told them what had happened. He explained that they and those under them were free to go. He said a few did go, but most stayed. So there they were, with a large number of people looking to them for protection. Dallaire said one evening, he was sure they would be attacked. He could feel it. But the attack never came. Because Dallaire and his soldiers disobeyed their orders and stayed, the people who looked to them for protection survived. People can sink lower. We can also rise higher, as Dallaire and his soldiers did then.

Dallaire also said that before he went to Rwanda, he was stationed at ValCartier, Quebec. He was in command of five thousand soldiers there. He knew those soldiers, who they were and what they could do. He said that when he was in Rwanda he

requested that more troops be sent. None were. He said that if Canada had sent those five thousand soldiers to Rwanda, they could have stopped the genocide. But they weren't sent. When I heard that, as a Canadian, I felt ashamed.

Peacekeeping is not easy. It can go wrong or not work. When we try to be peacekeepers, we can get hurt, as Dallaire was. Or we may not come back. But if you asked Dallaire, would he do it again, despite all the psychic scars he bears, his answer would be very simple: yes.

Jesus said: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. If we want to remember the victims of war, we will listen to Jesus. If we want to honour our veterans, we'll try to rise higher. We'll work for peace: in our homes, in our communities, around the world. Amen.

Rev. Don Schweitzer