

No War With Iran!
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Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. —Jesus

Ancient Witness: Luke 19:41-44

As we approach Independence Day this week, I always remember William Sloane Coffin's great quote: "There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country."

Twenty-one years ago I preached a sermon about the morally unjustifiable war against Iraq. It was a war in which half a million people died—mostly innocent civilians. The reason for the war, alleged weapons of mass destruction, turned out to be a fabrication, unquestioned and reported by a willing press. I boarded buses with students from Xavier University and the University of Cincinnati, and we headed to Washington, D.C. to raise our voices of opposition to that war. As is too often the case, we entered into the war first, and then sought a justification second.

And it reminds me of the words of Jesus who wept and cried, "If only you had recognized the things that make for peace. But they are hidden from your eyes!"

Six years ago, the first Trump administration brought us to the brink of another disastrous war with Iran. Instead of avoiding the horrors of armed conflict, this administration appeared to be provoking violent confrontation.

In 2015 Iran signed a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the U.S., China, France, Germany, Russia and the U.K. In this accord, Iran agreed to limit their nuclear power program and allow for intense inspections to verify its compliance. In the deal, Iran would redesign a heavy water reactor that could have generated significant plutonium waste and also agree to strict limits on their uranium enrichment program. In other words, the agreement closed the pathways to nuclear weapons.

By most accounts, this deal was working. Iran was denuclearized and in return, it was freed from the sanctions that had wreaked havoc on their economy. In 2017, more than 80 non-proliferation specialists signed a joint statement saying that the JCPOA "has proven to be an effective and verifiable arrangement that is a net plus for international nuclear nonproliferation efforts."

However, despite this, President Trump pulled out of this agreement and started imposing harsh sanctions on Iran, wrecking an international agreement that was preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The administration promised the new sanctions regime, which they called "maximum pressure," would bring Iran to its knees and force it to renegotiate the deal.

Amazingly, the U.S. administration warned Iran to abide by the old deal even though it had backed out! U.S. administration officials also claimed that the 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) allows the President to skip congressional approval before using military force, even though, according to our Constitution, only the Congress has the power to declare war. The AUMF was designed to go after those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, but the administration tried to exploit its broad language. So, the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to repeal the AUMF, but the Senate, needing 60 votes, failed to repeal it.

And a week ago, after Israel launched unprovoked military attacks and initiated a war with Iran, the President unilaterally bombed nuclear facilities in Iran. There was no congressional approval as such an act of war would require according to the Constitution. A king can start a war; our president cannot. Once again, he invoked the AUMF, but even our own intelligence claimed there was no imminent threat and Iran was nowhere close to being able to make a nuclear weapon. So, we are now on the precipice of a war that, it seems to me, would clearly not be just.

Now, in our Christian tradition, there's a long history of pacifism. In fact, the early generations of Christians before Constantine were almost all pacifists. While I'm not a pacifist, I respect it as a high moral perspective. The other main Christian perspective has been the Just War Theory. Now, I'm not saying that Just War Theory is perfect but more of a *minimal standard*. With its roots in the 4th century (Augustine) and 13th century (Aquinas), it tries to reconcile three things:

1. killing is wrong
2. nations have the duty to protect its citizens
3. sometimes this requires a willingness to use violence

There are certain criteria that all must be fulfilled if we are to say that a war can be morally justified:

Just Authority

In the U.S., a representative democracy, for example, there needs to be a democratic decision-making process. Congress, representing the people, not the President, decides. This means there needs to be transparency and no deception. Has this happen in this case? No.

Just Cause

A just cause would be something such as self-defense or protecting the innocent. (Being attacked by Japan is an example of a just cause, in my view.) The intention cannot be to restore national pride or to seek revenge. Is there a just cause in this case? No.

Last Resort

A war should not be started unless all political, non-violent, diplomatic measure have been exhausted. Would a war with Iran be the last resort? No.

Proportionality

Any good achieved by going to war must outweigh the destruction and death that would be caused by war. Would a war with Iran where over a million people would die be proportionate with any good achieved. In my view, no, clearly not.

Discrimination

This means limiting excessive and unnecessary death and destructing, but any war with Iran would surely mean that the dead and injured would, like the Iraq war, be overwhelmingly innocent civilians. Would a war with Iran be able to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants? No.

When it comes to the Just War Theory, a minimal standard, entering a war with Iran fails miserably on each count to be considered a “just war.” Like the Vietnam and Iraq wars before it, it fails the ethical test. And in my view, we are obliged to oppose it.

By all measures of our Christian tradition, entering into a preemptive, unprovoked war cannot be morally and ethically justified. It will lead to senseless, avoidable death and suffering; it will risk horrendous escalation; and it will bankrupt our treasury, bringing more hardship upon the poor, the working class and the middle class in our country.

As the former President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously said,

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

And we’re seeing in real-time this theft, as we commit ourselves to billions of dollars for war while congress cuts Medicaid and food stamps for the poor causing death and suffering for many people here in our nation.

Former President Jimmy Carter once said that President Trump expressed to him a concern that China was “getting ahead of us” economically. Carter said that he told Trump that much of China’s success was because of its more peaceful foreign policy. Teaching a Bible study at this church, Carter asked, “Since 1979, do you know how many times China has been at war with anybody?” He said, “None, and we have stayed at war.”

Carter then said the U.S. has been at peace on 16 of its 242 years as a nation. Counting wars, military attacks and military occupations, there have actually only been five years of peace in U.S. history. He then referred to the U.S. as “the most warlike nation in the history of the world,” forcing other countries to “adopt our American principles.” This is a remarkable statement coming from the former President. In addition to waging wars, the U.S. has also invaded or bombed dozens of countries and supported many right-wing coups and dictators, including the brutal Shah of Iran in 1953.

And so it's important that we learn from our past mistakes and hold ourselves to a higher standard.

As Jesus mourned over Jerusalem, his spirit weeps over the United States today.

Jesus is weeping for the nation's leaders who do not know the things that make for peace.

Jesus is weeping for a religion that gathers in his name that worships not a God who is love but worships the conquest and domination of others.

Jesus is weeping for Christian Zionists in congress who want to usher in the apocalyptic destruction of the earth to violently establish their rule of God.

Jesus is weeping for the distortion of the gospel and for greed, power and fear masquerading as the word of God.

Jesus is weeping for a Christianity that sees the kingdom merely as a future event, a heavenly reward, and not as a present reality here on earth.

May we, too, weep over our own warlike tendencies. May we know the things that make for peace. May we recognize the presence of God—the holy voice within—calling us to another way.

Look, I know there are many of you who share my grave concerns. And collectively, we ask for God's strength and guidance. As people of faith and as citizens, we need to be engaged and to speak out now, before it is too late.

And it seems to me we need to remind ourselves of the horrifying realities of war, and that it must never be entered into lightly and cavalierly. This nation has had a pattern of justifying warfare much too easily. We have not valued the bloodshed of our sons and daughters enough. We have not valued the lives of other men, women and children enough.

This time, let us say, "No!"