

Crucified Violence in History

Memorial Day Weekend

Psalm 33:12; John 11:49

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This past week, we had to bury Nancy's brother, Larry Dornbos. On Monday, as we gathered at the Presbyterian Church in Grand Haven in the lounge to receive friends, there was more than one collage, there were other mementos that were very sensitively arranged, which represented the life of Larry. Two things were very prominent; one was, of course, Larry was a fisherman loving the outdoors, but the other was a reminder that he was a World War II veteran. Being 76 years of age, he was at that prime time for that great war. And, as I looked over the collage and saw his picture, I was reminded of today being Memorial Day, thinking about this service of worship in which we would remember those who served their country, and indeed paid that supreme sacrifice.

Thinking about that, memories came to my mind, and then I had another realization and that is that the memories that come to my mind will not come to the minds of people who are much younger than I am. I experienced the second world war as a child, but old enough to feel something of what the nation was going through. I was six years old, and going to a Sunday evening service in Kalamazoo on December 7, 1941, when the attack on Pearl Harbor, the battle of which is being celebrated in what's supposed to be a blockbuster film this weekend, was announced. I was nine years old, and remember celebrating V-E Day and V-J Day. I had two brothers-in-law who served in the European theatre. As I was thinking about that, I thought how many are there out there who will remember if I say that my brothers-in-law were in the Battle of the Bulge, that terrible, terrible European experience. My sisters were part of that spirit of the nation and, against the wise counsel of my father, they foolishly married boys that were going off to service. And wouldn't a parent say, "Is that wise to do? Couldn't you wait?" Of course, they couldn't wait.

I was thinking about some of the names of battles and some of the famous places, and remembering my old grandmother reading the newspaper and saying, "They've got Rommel on the run." I can remember the tension. I felt some of the fear because we had loved ones over there. I remember the flag with the stars hanging in the sanctuary of my home church in Kalamazoo, and the stars that

hung in the windows of the neighborhood. I can remember it was a time of genuine threat. It was also, I suppose, ironically, one of the best times in terms of the nation and its spirit, and its unity. Sir Kenneth Clark – who has done a wonderful video series on civilization some years ago now for the BBC, also printed in a book – makes a statement which I looked for but couldn't find quickly. He's almost hesitant to say that times of war, as you trace the history of civilization, have been times when the best and the noblest have been elicited from the human spirit, ironic though that is. But, at Larry's funeral before those collages, I began to think about all those memories, and then as I said began to realize there are a few with white hair and a few of us without any hair, who are the only ones who probably can be triggered by that type of thing.

A good friend of mine gave me the book, *Flags of Our Fathers*. It's the story of the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima, the six marines that finally got to the top of the mountain and raised that flag. There was a photograph which captured that event. It's maybe the most famous photograph in the world. If you go to Washington, D.C., you'll see a monument with that re-enacted. One of the six died in the 90s, and his son wrote a story, *Flags of Our Fathers*, and he tells the story about how he never heard from his father anything about that event. Even though his father was a war hero who had been one of those six captured on film, the picture never hung in their home. He told how people would call for interviews and his father would always say, "Tell them I'm on a fishing trip." He would never speak of that event. His son would probe him on occasion, as would other children of the family, but he wouldn't talk.

All he would say is, "The real heroes were the ones that didn't come back." Even though he had been thus honored, he couldn't speak of it. When he died in, I think, 1993 they found in a closet hidden in an office, three cardboard boxes with mementos, in which they learned that their father had received the Navy Cross which I think is the second highest badge of honor one can receive. The family never knew it and, out of the mementos, his son found letters which caused him to begin to trace the story of the other six. Three died in action, two others died of broken hearts and alcoholism. His father was the only one of the six that survived to live a relatively normal life.

Anyway, James Bradley tells the story of his father, John. As I read that, I realized that those who have experienced war in its depth and in its horror do not speak of it. I have a person that I know speaks of his World War II experience continually. He never got out of the country, but the ones that were there have been so deeply impacted by it, that they don't speak easily of it.

Just recently there's been the story, the uncovering of the incident of Vietnam with former Senator Bob Kerry. Somebody, I suppose, a journalist, a writer, who knows - digging into this stuff, causing Senator Kerry to speak after all these years of that Navy Seal operation. Evidence again of the horror of war, of its insanity, of its dehumanizing, of its destruction of the human soul and spirit.

Well, what got all this going was a photograph in the collage of Larry, a handsome young man, which he sent home from Burma where he served as a kid. There he was in this photo, and I looked at him and I've known this, we've all known this, but it just struck me - he was a child. He was a beautiful young boy. And what I suppose impacted me doubly was the fact that he was the age of my oldest grandchild. I thought to myself, dear God, we send our children to fight our wars. We send our children into that insanity. We expose our children to that horror, to that human devastation.

The book *Flags of Our Fathers* was dedicated to the father of John Bradley, and to the mothers who gave their sons. In that dedicatory page, there's a statement from, I suppose, a Japanese woman: "Mothers should negotiate between nations." The mothers of the fighting countries would agree. Stop this killing now. Stop it now. Indeed, we should send the mothers to the negotiating table because I cannot believe, in spite of the fact that I can remember, I cannot believe that we send our children off to war.

So, as I was thinking about that and thinking about today, I remembered that two or three weeks ago when the President suggested that the whole world situation has changed, and that the old kinds of defenses won't work any more, that it's no use having all of our missiles aimed at Russia or China, but that the real threat to our world today are those few rogue nations, and that what we need is a missile defense system in space, I remember in the sermon suggesting that maybe rather than finding a more sophisticated defense system, that this might be the time, seeing that we are overwhelmingly powerful on the world scene today, for our President and our Secretary of State to go to the rogue nations and to sit down with them and to say, "What do you need?" "What are your dreams?" "What drives you?" And, "Can we help you to become a part of a human community?" I said that, admitting that it was a silly idea. Admitting that I don't understand international politics. Admitting that it's a very complex situation. But, I said it out of my own intuition, out of my own deep human spirit. I said, "Why can't we change the feel of the global situation? Why can't we initiate and inaugurate something that might have a positive effect on the lives of the human family?"

Well you know several of you went out the door and suggested that it was a good idea. I get all kinds of stuff at the door, "Wonderful sermon." "You were marvelous this morning." "I was deeply moved." "I could have just as well slept in this morning." "You had nothing to say, what a preposterous idea." All of that, then sometimes you know, when you really nice people want to say something but there's nothing nice to say, you just sort of stand there and stammer. But, there are times when I say something, and I know that it registered, that you have said, too, "You know, that's true. Why can't we do something like that?"

I know that that is highly impractical, that it is idealistic, and I suppose hopelessly romantic. You don't vote for a president that would do that kind of

thing. You don't vote for some one like me for president. I don't know if I would vote for me. It's scary. It's scary, isn't it?

You vote for people like Caiaphas. Caiaphas, the high priest. Two people went down in infamy at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. Pontius Pilate actually made it into our most popular creed - "suffered under Pontius Pilate." But, Caiaphas, not making it into the creed nonetheless has a name that is identified with infamy, for he was the High Priest at the time when Jesus was crucified. Caiaphas was a wily politician. In that situation, the religious and political leaders, were all wrapped up into one person, and Caiaphas was it. Obviously, Judah was an occupied nation. The Roman legions were at the ready. The best they could hope for was to collaborate with the Roman power in such a way that they could carry on some modicum of their Jewish life.

Caiaphas was a leader, the high priest, leader of the Sanhedrin. The Sadducean party was the ruling party. I think Caiaphas would have been a fellow you would enjoy having at a dinner conversation. He was pragmatic. He was a realist. Jesus was causing quite a stir. And that final miracle had really caused a ripple of anxiety in the ruling circles. There was a bit of panic. They were frenzied. What are we going to do? What are we going to do? Caiaphas demonstrated why he was a high priest, not only in a priestly family; leadership rises to the top often. This man, fulfilling the role that was expected of him said, "Look, this is a no brainer. It's better that one man die than that the nation perish. If we let this go on, the Romans are going to come in here and they're going to destroy our holy place, our temple, and they're going to destroy the nation. If we let this man go on, the Romans are going to come in here and there's going to be a lot of blood that's going to flow in the streets. Obviously, you have to do away with him."

In history, that's the way it is. And pragmatic politicians who are responsible and reasonable have to do things that are often unsavory, things that they don't want to do, things they can't put their heart into; it's never a clean-cut situation. On the one hand there is the nation, there is the temple, there's this grand tradition. On the other hand, I'm also the high priest and I've got it fairly well right now. I would rather not have the Romans here, but the Romans being here, I'm still getting along quite well, thank you very much, in my collaborative role.

I'm just reminded of a lady I roomed with in the Netherlands, an older lady who told me that, when the Netherlands was liberated in the Hague, the neighbors went and got the collaborators - the ones who had worked with the Nazis - shaved their heads, and marched them down the middle of the street. Collaborators are not well liked, but what do you do if you are a leader like Caiaphas? You call it the Caiaphas principle, I suppose. It's a principle in which *real politic* continues to take place. It's a kind of reasoning that leads to spending billions of dollars for a missile defense system.

What are we to do? What are we to do? I do realize the depth of darkness and evil that is present in the world. I do realize that human nature is such that it's going

to be a long, long time before there's something like the peaceable kingdom. But I wonder if we aren't at a point in history where we have to say, we can't any longer do business as usual. I wonder if we don't have to call into question reasonable and responsible people who want to lead us in ways that are business as usual. I wonder if the globe hasn't become so small that the world has become a neighborhood, if we are not too tightly bound with one another, if it isn't time for us to think of some other way. How would we think? Well wouldn't we think of Jesus?

The church calendar on Thursday was Ascension Day, forty days after Easter. We run from the darkness of Good Friday, the crucifixion, to Easter Sunday and the brightness, because we would prefer resurrection, of course. Then, forty days later to see him ascended at the throne of power of the universe to know that King Jesus is on the throne ruling. Of course, in that early story as they understood it, as they communicated it, they expected his imminent return in power and great glory, to judge the nations. Those who followed King Jesus, even though they had seen him crucified, believed that, somehow or other, ultimately there would be the triumph, there would be the kingdom and the power and the glory!

It's been 2,000 years, and I don't think that King Jesus is going to come back and make it all right. I don't see any evidence that God has ever done something that intrusive way. It seems to me that God has done all that God can do, and that is to put into our midst a flesh and blood model. The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and he spoke of the compassion and the goodness of God. He lived for justice. He reached out to the lame and the leper, and he challenged the Caiaphas principle. He challenged all the institutional forms of structures that make society possible, but become ends in themselves and become oppressive. And, in thus challenging them, he became a threat to them and he spoke his truth, and held his ground, and didn't flinch, knowing surely that his end would be violent death.

I don't think that God can do more than God has done. And I don't think we ought to live with that illusion that, somehow or other, when it all gets really dark on earth, the heavens will open and the Son of Man will come and the nations will be judged. The nations will be judged, they'll be judged by the righteousness and the justice with which they live. And what, concretely, does Jesus embody? I see it nowhere more eloquently spoken than that word at the cross when he is being crucified when he says, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

They knew what they were doing. They knew good and well what they were doing. They were perpetuating the status quo. They were preserving what was, even though it wasn't ideal. They were holding on to their world, to their privilege, to their position. They were keeping the wolves at bay. They were trying to hold on, to preserve, to perpetuate power and privilege. They knew what they were doing.

But, they didn't know what they were doing, because what they were doing was futile. There's only one thing that will finally work and make a difference, and that is when humankind learns to say, "Dear God, forgive them. Dear God, awaken them. Dear God, through my own self-sacrifice, raise some beacon of love and grace that will turn hostility and hatred and violence into embrace and inclusion and community."

The Psalmist knew it long ago: an army cannot save, a war horse is a vain hope for victory. Isn't it ironic that as we speak the Caiaphas principle is operative in Israel once again? What will happen there? Will Sharon finally have enough? Will the old warrior in him rise up and say, "Destroy them." But, you can't destroy them.

In 1976, I saw immigrant camps filled with those who hadn't been there in 1948, but were born subsequently and were already refugees at the point of their birth. Now there's another whole generation, so what if you wipe out a million or two? Look at the Balkans where they still feud over some battle back in the 13th century. Animals remember and lust for revenge. There's only one thing - only one thing - that changes them and that is the love and the grace lived out by Jesus. It's a scary business. It's a scary business, and it's our only hope. God help us.