

## Living and Dying by Swords

If ever there was a time to fight back, surely this was the time. Jesus and his friends were surrounded by an armed mob. Their traitorous former compatriot, Judas Iscariot, had definitively identified Jesus as the man the Sanhedrin wanted brought in. Armed men held the Teacher. Surely, now was the time to draw sword and fight for the right.

But Jesus would have none of it. He had really meant it when he told them, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Now he said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

It has become a common metaphor in the English language: Live by the sword, die by the sword. Today, we have heard the story of those terrible last hours of Jesus’ pre-Resurrection life, of his betrayal, arrest, trial, torture and death. I am sure that all of us, in hearing the familiar story have found ourselves wondering, would I have done any differently than the disciples? Would I have followed Jesus to the end or would I have run away, too? Would I have allowed myself to be taken without resistance, as Jesus did, or would I have abandoned the Master’s teaching and drawn sword, like Peter? The question of “what if?” becomes a question of “what now?” Do we, like Peter, live by the sword?

There can be no doubt that, as a society, Americans live by the sword. We are currently involved in war in Iraq, a war that fails the test of Just War theory, and the current administration continues to hold out war with Iran as an option it is considering. For all that the war in Iraq has become unpopular, let us remember that it was widely supported by the American people when it began and approved by substantial majorities in both houses of Congress by members of both parties. We Americans are all too happy to go to war when we think we have something to gain and not too much to lose.

America lives by the sword. Even if the United States had no soldiers in the field, we would still be contributing to the world’s armed conflicts. The Congressional Research Service reports that in 2005, government to government arms sales accounted for \$44.2 billion dollars in the U.S. economy, a figure that does not include commercial sales made directly by an exporter. Of that amount, \$30.2 billion in sales was to the developing nations that can least afford them and are least stable. We blithely sell weapons to both sides of conflict in volatile regions. In the three years 2002 to 2005, we sold \$5.2 billion worth of arms to Egypt, \$4.2 billion to Saudi Arabia, and \$2.5 billion to Israel, again not including commercial sales. Sales to developing nations did drop to \$14 billion in 2006 but don’t worry, we’re still doing great business. In 2006, Russia sold only \$5.8 billion in arms to developing nations; the United Kingdom, \$3.3 billion worth and Germany, \$1 billion. The United States produces 53.4% of the world’s weapons and by some standards, it’s good business. In his 1989 book, The Price of Empire, former Senator William Fulbright wrote, “Violence has become the nation’s leading industry. It is not an enthusiasm for war but simple economic self-interest that has drawn millions of workers, their labor unions, and their elected representatives into the military-industrial complex. To those who build them, weapons mean prosperity, not war. For the industrialist, they mean profits; for the worker, new jobs and the prospect of higher wages; for the politician, a new installation or defense order with which to ingratiate himself with his constituents...”

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Few, if any of us here this morning, can say that we have not benefitted from the United States role as arms merchant to the world. I grew up in a household funded by the construction of fighter jets and attack helicopters, save for 4 years in the 1960s, when my father worked on the space program. Two of my dear friends of longest standing still work in the military-industrial complex, one in a field politely known as “skunk works” – the top secret development of fearsome weapons. The economy of our area is famed for its reliance on the fortunes of Boeing, now one of the remaining giants of the aerospace defense industry. For any of us to advocate a closer adherence to the peaceful teachings of Jesus will require a willingness to ask our families, friends and neighbors to do things very differently indeed.

America lives by the sword. Despite continued world-wide outcry for nuclear disarmament, some 25,000 nuclear weapons still exist, with about 95% held by the United States and Russia. Despite the research by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning group, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, that even a “limited” nuclear war could cause sudden and persistent climate change leading to crop failure, massive famine and epidemic disease, the United States spends \$110 million a day on maintenance and development of nuclear forces. Former President Jimmy Carter, whose Carter Center works monitoring compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to which the United States is a signatory, recently wrote, “We... strongly condemn the recent abandonment by the United States of those agreements previously negotiated and its failure to pursue other restraints.”

America lives by the sword and America is dying by the sword. Nearly 4,000 Americans have died now in Iraq, along with untold numbers of Iraqis and officially uncounted thousands of American GIs who have returned home with shattered bodies and troubled minds. And those are simply the direct casualties. What if some of that money going to the current war or nuclear build-up had gone to American infrastructure instead? Could we have avoided a collapsed bridge in Minneapolis? Would properly maintained and reinforced levees in New Orleans have breached in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, leaving hundreds dead and thousands homeless? How many homeless die on the streets every year, how many people go without medical coverage, how many schools are failing, because precious financial resources are tied up in the business of death rather than life? President Dwight Eisenhower said, “It happens that defense is a field in which I have had varied experience over a lifetime, and if I have learned anything, it is that there is no way in which a country can satisfy the craving for absolute security – but it can easily bankrupt itself, morally and economically, in attempting to reach that illusory goal through arms alone.”

America lives by the sword and America is dying by the sword. Not all of the weapons produced in our country are sold to other countries. Some stay right here, with devastating results. The United States leads the world in the rate at which our children die by guns. From 1996-1997, the rate of 15-19 year olds in the U.S. dying from gunfire was 20 per 100,000. By contrast, the rate in Canada was less than 5 per 100,000; in the United Kingdom, it was less than one. A recent report found that for children and youth under 15, “the firearm homicide rate in the United States was 16 times that of the average for other industrialized countries, the firearm suicide rate was 11 times higher, and the unintentional firearm death rate was 9 times higher.” Mary Nelson, president emeritus of Bethel New Life, a faith-based community development

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corporation on the west side of Chicago, wrote recently of the gang and gun problem in her city. "Last week a spate of four deaths in our Chicago high schools was blamed on gangs and guns," she writes. "Last year, the public high school killings totaled 27, and already this year 18 have been killed. As one commentator said, "It's war on our Chicago streets and in our schools." Kids held up signs saying, "Stop Killing" and "Can't you see we want to grow up?""

America lives by the sword, America dies by the sword, even American dreams are about the sword. Our children's ability to access violence in movies, television and video games is staggering. Here in Washington State, the legislature was the first in the nation to limit sales of certain violent video games to those over 17. Violence so permeates our culture that the work of our finest film artists, our most acclaimed movies, have extreme violence as their theme. The Vatican's daily newspaper recently decried the violence in the Oscar-winning films, "No Country for Old Men" and "There Will be Blood." When the artists of our generation have no vision to offer other than that of violence, surely our spirits are at risk of dying by the sword.

Followers of Christ have raised the alarm. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote in 2006: "For many years, I've been involved in the peace business, doing what I can to help people overcome their differences. In doing so, I've also learnt a lot about the business of war... It is an industry out of control: every day more than 1,000 people are killed by conventional weapons. The vast majority of those people are innocent men, women and children... The world could eradicate poverty in a few generations were only a fraction of the expenditure on the war business to be spent on peace. An average of \$22bn is spent on arms by countries in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa every year, according to estimates for the US Congress. This sum would have enabled those countries to put every child in school and to reduce child mortality by two-thirds by 2015, fulfilling two of the Millennium Development Goals... We must end impunity for governments who authorise the supply of weapons when they know there's a great danger those weapons will be used for gross human rights abuses. Great strides are being made towards ending impunity for war criminals. It cannot be acceptable that their arms suppliers continue to escape punishment. No longer should the peace business be undermined by the arms business." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate.... Returning violence for violence multiples violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Only love can drive out hate. Only light can overcome the darkness. That is why Jesus came and it is why he went to his death without a fight. Like the Psalmist, who understood where true security comes from, Jesus didn't believe in swords. Psalm 20 says, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." The prophet Zechariah had foreseen this gentle Messiah, this Prince of Peace, in his prophecy that was cited by Matthew in our first reading this morning: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will take away the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be broken, and he shall command peace to the

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nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.” It is Jesus’ love, God’s wondrous love that will be the end of violence in our lives and in God’s beautiful creation. It was Jesus’ love that took him to the cross to die. It is Jesus’ love that will drive out death and death’s handmaid, violence. This week, we commemorate the dark time, the time of the triumph of violence and death in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. But the time of violence and death is over. It ended on Easter morning and it ended forever. Let those who will continue to align themselves with Death’s dead kingdom, but as for us, my brothers and my sisters, let us choose life, abundant life, in our words, in our thoughts and in our deeds. It is God’s will and it is God’s gift. We do not need to clamor after the modern equivalent of horses and chariots to be saved. We have what we need for true life – the example and the sacrifice of the Prince of Peace. Let the call go out, from this place and from every place where the Body of Christ is gathered, to end all wars, to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Put down your swords! We choose the cross of Christ and not the sword of violence. For the love of Christ, which brings the only true peace, thanks be to God!