

Thinking about War in the Light of the Trinity

Romans 5:1-11

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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In the cycle of the church year, today is Trinity Sunday. In the 25 years I have been a pastor, I have always insisted on preaching on the Trinity, and I'm not about to stop. At the same time, this is the Memorial Day weekend, and I don't want to forget about those who died in war—least of all the World War II vets like my Dad, who got to take one of those free flights to Washington to see the World War II memorial. So I have been trying to hold the two ideas together in my mind all week. What does believing in the Trinity say to us about war? How do the gods we imagine we fight for compare with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

As Christians, we approach most national holidays with caution, because we do not want to fall into worshiping our nation. Caesar is always threatening to claim our hearts, and we do not want to find ourselves like those Jews who stood before Pilate affirming “We have no king but Caesar!” We are those who claim Jesus rather than Caesar as Lord and we remember that ultimately, as Paul put it “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20).

And when we come to a holiday that honors those who have fallen in war, we want to be careful that we do not honor war. In Japan a few weeks ago there was a major controversy because the new Prime Minister and his party leaders chose to pay homage at the Yasukuni Shrine which honors soldiers who fell in World War II, including some who were war criminals. Most leaders of Japan have chosen not to participate in ceremonies there, and it has been the Christians as well as the pacifists who have cried out in opposition. They do not want to see the militaristic spirit of wartime Japan honored or held up as a model for Japan today. We don't see that kind of ambivalence in America because we never think of anyone on our side as having committed war crimes as, and because we never think that any of our wars were fought for our own economic self-interest.

You can decide for yourself whether ambivalence might be an appropriate response to our history, but my point about Japan—and Germany, too—is that nations who have repented of “bad” wars have a very clear sense that war is evil. Countries who win wars are in danger of forgetting that. We even talk about “the good war,” and what we mean is that we entered the war for altruistic reasons, to save lives, but the truth is that there is no such thing as a good war.

Those soldiers and sailors and airmen we honor on Memorial Day are the *victims* of war. We use the language of heroism, but it is not quite true that they laid down their lives. The monster called war chewed them up and spit them out. They are the victims of war as clearly as those who died in the World Trade Center on 9-11 are victims of war. And the enemy all the dead have in common—beyond the Germans or Japanese or Koreans or Viet Cong or Al Qaeda—is war. War itself is the enemy and those powerful persons and institutions that lead nations to sacrifice their young to war's bloody maw are the great murderers of history.

Christians have always stood against the evil of war, in doctrine if not always in practice. For the first three centuries of the church, the default position for followers of Jesus was pacifism. Yes, there were Christians in the military from early days, but the presumption was that anyone following the Lord who taught us to love our enemies would not take up the sword unless he was already in that station of life when he came to faith. After Christianity became the state religion the ethics became more complicated, because the Roman army was now *our* army

and we couldn't leave defending the nation to the pagans. While the church found ways to compromise on the question of soldiering, just as in the 4th century they also found ways to compromise on the question of whether Christians could be rich, the church never got to the point of approving of war. "Just war" theory was developed at that time, but the theory did not claim that war is just. It said that there may be extreme conditions when war could be justified as a last resort, when all other means of dealing with the conflict have been exhausted. In order for a war to be just, it had to be fought to right an injustice, not simply for "the national interest." It had to be fought with peace as its goal. It could not be waged against civilians. The weapons used must not cause greater harm than the injustice being opposed. In a just war, church scholars said, there should be an ethic of reciprocity: we treat enemy soldiers with a modicum of respect and restraint in the hope that they will treat our soldiers the same way. Whether any of those conditions have been met by wars in our lifetimes is an open question. But at the core of Christian thinking—even among the just war theorists—is an abhorrence of war as something at odds with God's purposes for the world and the ethics of Jesus.

And yet there is "holy war" in the Bible. I want to suggest something that fundamentalists today find abhorrent: that the Bible is not all level ground and equally useful for our instruction. It was a commonplace in my father's generation of Southern Baptists to teach "progressive revelation," the idea that God revealed more and more of himself over history, culminating in the revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. Many Baptist and Anabaptist statements of faith have said that explicitly. The Southern Baptist statement of faith I grew up with said clearly "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." The fundamentalists took that line out in 2000.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a clear example of progressive revelation. No one who wrote any part of the Old Testament had any such idea. Even the writers of the New Testament had only the most general notions that God could have a threefold name and reveal himself in three ways. It was left to Christians chewing on the New Testament for 300 years to come up with a formula for expressing the nature of God not in story but in a philosophical definition.

In the beginning there was just God, but even the concept of monotheism was the result of development. The most primitive level of understanding God is nature religion—worshiping the sun god, the rain god, the fertility god—in which God is just the spirit or energy behind natural phenomena. Strangely many people today are returning to this most primitive level, one seen sometimes in the Old Testament in the practices of Israel's neighbors.

The next level was tribal gods. We understand that there is a God who is separate from nature and can intervene in human affairs, but it is *our* God, the God on our side. In parts of the Old Testament you see this still reflected, when the Israelites claim that our Yahweh is bigger than your god. Indeed, the first thing Yahweh had to do to become the God of Israel was to show that he could best the gods of Egypt. But later—at least by the time of the prophets—it is made clear that the gods of other nations are not real; they are man-made, with no more power than the idols that represent them. There is only one real God, and there is no other.

If you think that each tribe has its own God, war is seen as a kind of struggle between rival gods. If you take the step up to monotheism, you get away from that struggle, but you face another temptation: To assume that the one true God is on your side, to crush all infidels. Muslims would certainly say that Islam is the purest form of monotheism—that Christianity is tainted with notions of three gods. I would say that Christianity has a notion of God tempered by the idea of Son and Spirit, that reins in some of the danger of radical monotheism. Even within Judaism, in the later prophets you see a movement from simply insisting that there is only one

God to declaring that the one God is the God of all the nations—that God’s purpose is to redeem the nations as well and to bring peace on earth. That is a step up from the monotheism that sees one world government under God as the goal, so that monotheism becomes a rationale for empire.

The doctrine of the Trinity says that God is more complicated than that. It has its roots in our experience of Jesus Christ. We come to know Jesus and worship him, and we recognize that there is more to God than simple monotheism or even the history of Israel suggests. It would have been one thing if God had come to earth as a general, or even a prophet on horseback, leading his troops in the way we see in the book of Revelation. That would be consistent with one-god-for-everybody militarism. But what we experience in Jesus is God become a servant, God made weak, God suffering for us. Then God in flesh opens his mouth—and listen to him! He is very clear that not to kill is not enough, we are not to hate. He says that we are to bless those who curse us, to forgive all who wrong us, to offer the other cheek to those who slap us, to love our enemies. I don’t know how you can listen to Jesus and not hear him saying that some of the things in the Old Testament that make God the Father sound like a warrior God were wrong. He’s trying to move us beyond tribalism and hatred. He’s teaching us that violence—on a personal level, or on the national level of rising up against the Romans—is a no-win strategy.

But beyond all that Jesus taught, the most powerful statement he ever made he made by dying for us on the cross. A Christian is someone who understands the nature of God to have been defined by the cross. The cross is the clearest picture we have of how God feels toward us humans—and the kind of love he wants us to show. This is where Romans 5, the passage we read as a lectionary text for Trinity, helps us. The whole purpose of the cross was to make peace. We have peace with God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. How was that peace achieved? Christ died for the ungodly, while we were still sinners, even while we were *enemies*. God is a God of reconciliation, and the central thing he did to reveal himself and save us was an act of reconciliation. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and he has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

If the God of creation and the God of Israel are the same being we came to know in the historical person of Jesus Christ, we can’t imagine God as the one who leads us into battle to defeat our enemies. He seems to be more like the God who would go the enemy and offer his life in exchange for peace, as a kind of ransom. If Jesus and the Father are one, as he said, our notion of God has to change. I don’t see how that can’t change our understanding of how God feels about war. God is reconciling love.

Then there is the Spirit. We talk about the Holy Spirit because we want to say that we have experienced God not only in creation and history, not only in the person of Jesus, but in our own lives and in the church. The Spirit is God here in our midst. Romans 5 says “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” You can’t distinguish the Spirit from the experience of love. The Spirit is at work in everyday relationships—with brothers and sisters in Christ, with our families, and even with our enemies. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit reminds us that every human being has a spirit to which the Holy Spirit speaks. There are no zombies, no spiritless monsters in any nation’s army or even among terrorists. Each enemy combatant has a spirit that is being touched and drawn by the Spirit of God. When we kill them we kill spiritual beings.

When the church fathers in the fifth century began to write about the Trinity, they recognized that they were writing about the inner life of God, something even more mysterious than my own inner life is to me. Augustine compared the Trinity to the relationship of memory,

understanding, and will in a human being, who is still one being. Father, Son, and Spirit are three parts of one whole, but each of them is the whole being as well. What is it that unites Father, Son, and Spirit? The fathers saw that it was important that God was not monotheistic in the sense of the philosopher's god—not monolithic, not merely absolute. God was always relational. God was always a community of love, love flowing within the Godhead among the three persons of the Trinity. What holds Father, Son, and Spirit together in unity is love, the ever-giving, ever-humbling, ever-honoring love that God has poured into us by his Spirit and demonstrated by his Son. That's what we mean when we say "God is love." Not just that God is loving, but that God *is* love, that you can't get any deeper into God, any closer to God's essence, than love.

If that is the God revealed to us in the Trinity, I don't see how God can be the one who leads us into battle. God, it seems to me, is the one who reconciles and creates eternal peace. Today we honor those who died in battle, but we honor them as victims of a terrible evil, something God never intended. Let us, like St. Francis, ask God to make us instruments of his peace.