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Radical Compassion  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
November 6, 2022  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 12:9-21 and Matthew 13:24-30

So - we've just experienced our Remembrance Sunday liturgy here during worship. We've prayed prayers, we've heard the Last Post and the Reveille, we had our moment of silence. We reflected on our personal past and we reflected on our collective past. Is there more to Remembrance Day than that? Perhaps. Perhaps there is a lot more to it than that.

Of course, it depends a lot on what you came here to celebrate today. Some people celebrate the lives of loved ones lost during war, or lives impacted in important ways by war. Some people see Remembrance Day as a celebration of war. Specifically, a celebration of war victories. Some people may reflect on what our society might look like if the "other side" had won a particular battle. Some people see Remembrance Day as a time to work in new ways toward peace in our time. And some people see Remembrance Day as a celebration of how limited humanity's imagination is. And to wonder why being destructive is so much more popular than being constructive.

Today - given our scripture readings - I invite us to wonder at how Christians should respond to both the opportunity and the threat of warfare. I invite us to reflect on Jesus's words around how to deal with evil. But before we get to the challenging words of Jesus - for yes indeed they are challenging - I invite us to consider something first.

During World War 1, most of the human energy for the early part of the war came from Europe and Russia. In Europe, the main Axis powers were Germany and Austria-Hungary. And the main Allied powers in Europe were France, Belgium, and Britain, with contributions from many other countries of course as the war expanded. But there would not have been World War 1 without instigation from those 5 European countries. And do you know what those 5 European countries held in common?

[image: religions of Europe in 1900]

They were all predominantly Christian. This map shows the predominant

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religions in 1900. Pink is Protestant, blue is Roman Catholic, light green is Greek Orthodox, dark green is Armenian Christian, Orange is Muslim, purple is Buddhist, and Yellow was simply labelled “heathen”. So “Christian” includes pink, blue, light green, and dark green. Let me highlight that.

[image: religions of Europe in 1900 circled]

And remember that 100 years ago, unlike today, when a country was predominantly a certain religion it was almost 100%. There was far less religious mixing in the past. For example, in 1910, 98.3% of Germans were Christian. 94.2% of Austria-Hungarians were Christian. France, Belgium and Britain were predominantly Christian too. In fact, overall, in 1910, Europe was 94.5% Christian. So how did it come to pass that in World War 1, all of Europe was ablaze and countless Christians slaughtered each other? How was it that so many Christians were willing to commit atrocities against each other? Does Christianity have nothing to say on the subject of war? Or killing? Were most Europeans not very good Christians? Is Christianity a religion of word but not of deed? Or was something else going on? Something does not add up, that is for sure.

Because the words of Jesus we read today state that warfare is simply not an option. From Matthew we read that good and evil cannot be separated by humans. That good and evil need to grow together. And that the faithful must wait for God to sort out good from evil at some later time. This requires that we do not take justice into our own hands. And our reading from Romans is even more pointed. “Bless those who persecute you. ... do not repay anyone evil for evil ... do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”. Our readings today say that we should not start wars. And if we are attacked, we should not defend ourselves using military force. How was it that overwhelmingly Christian Europe engaged in massive and brutally destructive war against fellow Christians? Twice!! Whenever I overhear someone saying that Muslims are violent, I suggest that the speaker learn a bit of Christian history. We as Christians have proven ourselves capable of terrible violence, destruction, and complete disregard for human life, even towards other Christians.

Fortunately, there are - and have always been - people who take the words of Jesus seriously. People who actually believe that the words of Jesus not only sound nice,

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but are actually words for people to live by. Mind you, those people often find themselves outside the church. You know, that same church that invented the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and various genocides against many different indigenous peoples. That same church that supports the current genocide in Palestine and other places.

[image: Leo Tolstoy vegan quote]

One example of a person who took Jesus seriously was Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, known to English-speakers as “Leo Tolstoy”. Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901. And I’m sure the church was happy to see him go. Because Tolstoy described himself as a radical anarcho-pacifist Christian. In other words, someone who actually believed the Bible verses we read today. And who believed that one cannot overcome evil with even greater evil. Tolstoy wrote many interesting books, including the famous War and Peace, and Anna Karenina, But Tolstoy is my favourite theologian because of 2 other books you may not have read.

[slide: tolstoy kingdom of god]

Most importantly for me is “The Kingdom of God is Within You”. A book that lays aside Church dogma in favour of a deeper understandings of the teachings of Jesus. This turns out to be a treatise on strict non-violence and a renewed understanding of radical compassion. In the book, Tolstoy takes a scholarly and philosophical approach to compassion, and ends up with the message of Jesus.

[slide: resurrection]

The other book by Tolstoy that impacted me strongly was “Resurrection”, a story about a nobleman. This nobleman over his lifetime came to understand the exceptional privileges he had been born into. And he spent the rest of his life trying to level the playing field for all people. And in the end, the nobleman embraces the spirit of love for all people as described in the sermon on the mount. The climax of the book is when the nobleman understands that compassion for all people is the way to find God in our midst. The story is largely drawn from Tolstoy’s own life. In the book, Tolstoy takes a narrative approach to compassion, and ends up back again with the message of Jesus.

Perhaps you need to be a religious outcast in order to take the words of Jesus seriously.

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[slide: tolstoy quote about compassion]

Tolstoy's writings, particularly *The Kingdom of God is Within You* from 1894 inspired many people - not just me. In particular the book inspired Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was engaged in his own journey towards understanding that love and compassion require non-violence.

[slide: gandhi]

Although Tolstoy and Gandhi never met, they shared a number of letters and other writings. But they also shared their passion for compassionate living. And more interestingly their support for the ministry of Jesus. Gandhi wrote a great deal about his admiration for Jesus. Gandhi was often accused of being a closet Christian because of his reverence for Jesus. But Gandhi had this to say about Christians:

[slide: gandhi on christians]

“I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ”.

Of course, many Christians have taken pot shots at how the church sometimes mis-resents Christianity. I even did my best last week trying to lift up the contrast between Christianity as a religion versus Christianity as a faith. And we will continue that conversation next week. And the contrast between Christianity as a religion and Christianity as a faith is no more extreme than when we are discussing warfare.

You may know G.K. Chesterton because he wrote the fictional detective series “Father Brown”.

[slide: father brown]

But Chesterton should more properly be famous for his ability to explain to Christians what is wrong with Christianity. Chesterton is a lay theologian who left high-Anglicanism and joined the Catholic Church later in life. One of Chesterton's most pointed lines is:

[slide: christian ideals not tried]

“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” Chesterton's statement that “the Christian ideal has been left untried” is perhaps no more true than when we consider the response of Christians to

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warfare. Because Jesus's words about warfare are deeply challenging to us. Particularly today. And through the lens of history we are forced to admit that the Christian response to war has been the same as everybody else's response to war. Christians preach love your enemy. But in practice Christians do not hesitate to kill their enemy. So, the Christian religion has contributed nothing new to the conversation on war. And this is evidenced in our approach to the war in the Ukraine, as one example. Granted, warfare is a difficult problem to deal with. But the point of faith is to help us live better lives. Christianity has been sadly silent on the topic of warfare. Not silent in words. But silent in actions.

And we are forced to admit that many of the most famous people to take the words of Jesus seriously had to do it beyond the bounds of the institutional church.

[image: Jesus flipping tables]

Which - if we think about it - parallels Jesus's own ministry. Jesus was Jewish, but had to operate beyond the bounds of institutional Judaism to bring his ministry to its highest potential. Jesus was constantly fighting with the Pharisees and Sadducees you may recall. Jesus was opposed to the "temple cult" aspect of Judaism. Jesus, and Tolstoy, and Gandhi operated beyond institutional boundaries because those boundaries were too narrow to contain the truth. The truth that God is a God of compassion. And that any god that does not value all people equally is not worthy of our worship.

And that is perhaps our ultimate task on Remembrance Sunday. For us to see beyond institutional and nationalistic boundaries and to see compassion with new eyes. To see each other with new eyes. To see that compassion is not something we should get around to after we fix the world. But instead, to see that compassion - radical compassion - lived out is the only way to actually fix the world.

Jesus tells us to practice radical compassion. How will we do that in our own lives today?

[slide: remembrance day]

Of course, Remembrance day is not just about philosophies and ideologies. Remembrance day is also about remembering people. Actual individuals that we know who for many different reasons decided to enlist and engage in the activity of war. Today,

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we think primarily of those who volunteered to join the military during World War One and World War Two. But you might be thinking of people who fought in other wars too.

I imagine that many of us here today know individuals who fought in one war or another. People we cared about. Perhaps friends. Perhaps family. Perhaps our own spouses, or our own parents, or our own children.

And as we now are being asked to remember them - how will we remember them this year? Will we decide that a few prayers and a few minutes of silence is enough? Will it be enough to go home and look through a photo album. Will it be enough to spend time alone with our memories and perhaps with a tear or two?

Or will we decide to honour the memories of our loved ones who served - and who died - by taking Jesus, and Tolstoy, and Gandhi seriously.

And their challenge to us - in blunt terms - is this. Do we hope, dream, live, and breath into a future where peace is achieved through violence and warfare? Or do we hope, dream, live, and breath into a future where peace is achieved through justice and radical compassion for all people.

We have the right to decide for ourselves. We have the right to dream of a new and better world. We have the right to imagine and live into the kingdom of God right here. We have the right to live lives of radical compassion. We have the right to remember.

We will remember them.

Amen.