

Military Service / COB / 05.29.16

Introduction

- † **[1: cemetery]** My uncle was one of the most interesting people I ever met. I am not sure he finished high school, but he had a lightning fast intellect, was a gifted debater, and probably read more books than all of us put together. When I offered to go for a walk with him and his grown son, they took me on a three hour hike through the mountains, which they apparently were doing every day. He did not own a phone or a car. He invested [some would say wasted] his most productive years in back-room local politics. The first time he met LeeAnn he asked if she would pose for a picture like a centerfold on the hood of our car. And he fought in Cuba.
- My uncle was a US Marine, and he believed in *semper fidelis*, which means “always faithful” or “always loyal.” The way I heard the story, he was in a bar when a fight broke out between some of his fellow marines and some town boys, so he jumped in to support the cause. Surprised that his officer took a dim view of this action, he became disillusioned, as he already was with the zero-combat situation in the years between Korea and Vietnam.
 - So he took off, he took off and went to Cuba to fight alongside Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. At the time, they looked like freedom fighters, and that’s how my uncle fancied himself. After victory, my uncle came back, turned himself in, and went to Leavenworth prison, from which my grandfather managed to extricate him sometime later.
 - This is Memorial Day weekend, which for many of us has come to symbolize the start of our summer rituals, rather than remembrance of those who gave their lives in military service. So I thought this year we would talk a little about the military, as a reminder of what Memorial Day is all about. My uncle did not die in battle, in fact his only military battles were illegal ones from the government’s perspective, but he serves as an amusing introduction to our topic.

Self Defense

- † **[2: Matthew 5]** Let’s talk first about self-defense, because I think there is confusion in Christian circles about whether we may defend ourselves as individuals. Half of my Christian friends think I am crazy to own a couple of guns; the other half think I am crazy not to carry them into the pulpit. Probably few of them have a biblically informed opinion, basing their theology on this issue mostly on their politics. So let’s think about this biblically.
- † Jesus gave a lot of what we would consider counter intuitive instructions, such as in **Matthew 5.39, 44-45 NIV: “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also... But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”**
- Does this mean we should never defend ourselves or defend anyone else? I think the main idea in this teaching was that we should be willing to take a certain amount of abuse if it would help the gospel mission. And Jesus would have his followers have love, not hate, in our hearts.
 - But I do not think this passage speaks to the issue of self-defense. Getting slapped is not a real threat to your safety, only to your pride. Jesus wants us to swallow our pride for the sake of the

gospel and to err on the side of love. But this teaching is not concerned with self-defense in a really threatening situation.

- † **[3: Luke 22]** The first time Jesus sent his twelve apostles on a mission, they were not even to take food or money, let alone a weapon [Matthew 10; Mark 6; Luke 9]. The point of that exercise was to teach them about depending on Jesus and his power to provide for them and empower them in ministry.
- On the other hand, Jesus told the disciples to prepare for a harsher situation once he was gone. **Luke 22.35-36 NIV: Then Jesus asked them, “When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?” “Nothing,” they answered. He said to them, “But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.”**
 - This leads me to conclude, first that it would be wrong to think nothing can harm us physically when we are serving Christ, that we should expect threats to our safety; and second that we should prepare to defend ourselves and protect others who are attacked.
 - **[4: Matthew 5.9]** Of course, Jesus also said in **Matthew 5.9 NET: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.”** Force should be our last resort, but sometimes force is already upon you. LeeAnn studied Aikido and Aikijutsu, which both rely on the force of the aggressor, rather than applying force yourself. I think that would be consistent with what Jesus was thinking. We should always seek peace, we should never be the aggressor, but we should not stand aside if that means sacrificing justice or appeasing evil.
 - The ten commandments [Exodus 20.15] prohibit murder, but do not rule out death in self-defense. If my neighbor’s dog wakes me up with its barking, I should not shoot it [sometimes I have to remind myself of that]; I should resolve the matter peacefully or suffer it for the sake of the mission, but if my neighbor breaks into my house to attack my family, I believe I have a right to defend us, even with weapons.

National Defense

- † **[5: cemetery]** This is a hasty and not thorough treatment of the subject, and I am sure it will remain controversial. Whatever you think of self-defense, it is a distinct [though related] question whether we may defend our national interests in a war.
- My grandfather was a navy lieutenant commander in the Pacific theater of World War II. He didn’t talk much about it. I only remember one story he told, about one day when he happened to be on an island and the Japanese bombed the daylights out of the next island over, which didn’t happen to have any troops on it. My grandfather was like a Cary Grant movie character, always calm, in control, encouraging everyone else. But things must have been ugly in that war, because for the next five decades he would not buy a Japanese brand product.
 - I love reading books and watching movies about World War II, because things seem so starkly black and white, you can tell good from evil, and nobody would deny we were right to stop the Axis powers from taking over country after country all over the world, especially now that we know how inhumane they were to the peoples they conquered and even many of their own.
 - But things were not as clear back then, in the moment. Just as my uncle thought Castro and Guevara were good guys at the time, so also many were unclear whether the US should be fighting in Europe or the Pacific. Many still ask, should governments ever go to war, and should believers be willing to serve in the military?

† **[6: Isaiah 9]** Here are a few thoughts. First, God’s conception of government is to enforce justice and righteousness. Speaking about Christ’s government on the renewed earth is **Isaiah 9.6-7 NIV: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.**

- Jesus will be King in Israel, ruling the whole world from there, and he will establish and uphold justice and righteousness. Those are God’s goals for government. In our era of free-will, which too often is characterized by sinful and evil choices, the government must use force to protect its citizens and uphold justice and righteousness. That means having a police force and a military force.
- **[7: Romans 13]** Consider also **Romans 13.4-5 NIV: For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.**
- From this we see the government enforces justice, even with force such as a sword. Also we are citizens with civic responsibilities to fulfill, except when that conflicts with God’s teachings. So unless the Bible says we cannot serve in the military, we should be willing to serve our country if called upon in that way.
- Going all the way back to when God created people to be his image bearers [Genesis 1.26-29], God’s people were to rule the earth for him, representing him here. So we should seek to represent God with regard to helping the helpless, protecting the weak, resisting those who abuse the rights of others.

† **[8: Luke 3]** My second thought is that John the Baptist, Jesus, and the disciples dealt with soldiers and apparently never told them they needed to get out of their military service.

- When soldiers specifically asked John the Baptist what they should do to live as believers in the true God, Yahweh, **Luke 3.14 NET: He told them, “Take money from no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your pay.”** He said nothing about getting out of the military, even though their army was occupying Israel.
- An argument from silence is never a strong one. But I think it is telling that the Bible does not include any prohibition about military service, and both Jesus and Paul often called Christian workers “soldiers,” which perhaps they would have avoided had they thought being a real soldier was an evil thing.

† **[9: Judges 6]** My third thought is that God has an army of angels, which he used to help Israel, and he commanded Israel to fight as an army.

- As an example of Israel’s army, consider **Judges 6.34-35 NIV: Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms...** The Holy Spirit led Gideon to form an army for Israel, to defend themselves against the Midianites.

- **[10: Joshua]** Before that, God had Israel fight to take the promised land, and God sent an army of angels which fought for Israel in this war. **Joshua 5.13-15 NIV: Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” “Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the LORD [the army of Yahweh] I have now come.” Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, “What message does my Lord have for his servant?” The commander of the LORD's army [of Yahweh’s army] replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.**

- † **[11: Isaiah 40]** My last thought has to do with the end times. The Son of God, the Messiah-Christ we know as Jesus, plans to go to war against all the evil nations when he returns.
 - Looking forward to this day, **Isaiah 40.10 NET: Look, the sovereign LORD comes as a victorious warrior; his military power establishes his rule.**

 - **[12: Revelation 19]** John wrote in **Revelation 19.11-21 NIV: I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. [13: Revelation 19] Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, “Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and the mighty, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, great and small.” [14: Revelation 19] Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest were killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.**

 - There are many more scripture passages that discuss the battles at the end of time, when Jesus will conquer those who are evil and faithless, to establish his kingdom which will be just and righteous. In God’s plan, eternal peace will come about through a righteous war.

- † **[15: cemetery]** Overall, I think scripture suggests we can righteously serve in the military and that the government can justly use force when necessary. So why are there still questions about this, why do so many people feel uneasy when we go to war? We will not concern ourselves about the fleshly protests of people who are not walking with God, but why are so many biblically literate Christians uneasy about war?
 - One reason is that war has a terrible cost. I had another uncle who fought in Korea. He refused to talk about his time in the army at all, except once: when I was seventeen, I made some noise at the supper table about the romantic nature of war, probably reflecting something I had read in a novel, probably dreaming of coming home a hero. That one time in his life, my uncle gave me a glimpse at the pain he had suffered in the war and ever since. It was not pretty.

- War does have a terrible cost, so we have to be sure it is necessary and worthwhile. The army of Old Testament Israel and the end times army of Jesus are certain to carry out God’s will in a just war. We have to ensure our wars are for a just cause that it is worth the killing and the dying. The goal has to be seeking regional peace, enforcing righteousness, or stopping some atrocious evil like genocide, not merely conquest or gain for ourselves, nor for revenge. And it has to be a proportionate response, in which our soldiers have the opportunity to be ethical defenders of freedom and justice, not being asked to kill non-combatants or do other unethical things. A second concern is that we often have doubts that these qualifications are being met.

Martyrs

- † **[16: Acts 7]** Again I would say this is not a thorough treatment of the subject, but it is an introduction to these concepts, and a fitting one given the nature of our holiday. Memorial Day is about those who gave their lives for our country in military service. They died so we could be free. Many of them died so that others whom they had never met could also have the chance at freedom. In our country, we recognize their sacrifice and honor them for it.
 - There is something similar in church history too. It’s called martyrdom. Martyrs are people who gave their lives in the cause of Christ, so that we and people everywhere could experience freedom and spiritual life in Christ.
- † Stephen, the first known martyr of the church, pointed out to his accusers that their forefathers had killed the prophets. **Acts 7.52 NET:** [Stephen said] **“Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold long ago the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become!”** Unbelievers killed the prophets and they killed Jesus. After Stephen’s speech, they killed him.
 - Also in Acts, we learn of the death of the apostle James about fourteen years later. No doubt many ordinary Christians were killed in between, since the persecution was bad enough that it scattered what was left of the Jerusalem church after many had been imprisoned.
 - **[17: cemetery]** In the fourth century, Eusebius, the bishop [or head pastor] of the church in Caesarea, wrote a history of the world-wide church in its first 300 years. As he relates the important events of the church during that time, he notes the many martyrdoms brought about by persecution of Christians. There are so many martyrs in this history, that it shocked and inspired me to read it!
 - The early church apologist, Tertullian, called the martyrs the “seed of the church.” Only by standing for what we believe, being willing to sacrifice, suffer, and even die for what we believe, does the gospel mission go forward. If you read any history of global missions, you will read about martyr after martyr, as missionaries brought the gospel to new people groups.
 - And really, what proves our faith more than being willing to die for it? This firm stance for the gospel cause declares our commitment to the truth of scripture and our hope in Christ that in death we will be delivered to a better place.
- † As Christian martyrs are the ultimate example of faithful believers, willing to die for the cause of Christ and his gospel, so too our fallen soldiers are the ultimate example of faithful citizens, having been willing to die for the cause of this country and what it represents. Today we honor both groups, inspired by their example to aspire to their example. Let’s pray. . .