

"A PRAYER FOR PEACE"  
January 20, 1991

TEXT: Romans 8:37 "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

Since I have already changed both a hymn and the Scripture Lesson, most of you should not be too surprised to learn that I have changed my sermon topic, too. And I think you can all guess why. The theme for this morning's service was established six or seven weeks ago; and a lot has happened since then. Too much not to respond to it.

I must confess, however, that this is almost certainly the hardest sermon I have ever had to preach. For today is no ordinary Sunday. We come here this morning, all of us with deep concern for the events of the past few days. But that does not mean we all feel the same about them. I am confident, of course, that none of us really wants war, least of all those who, like myself, have loved ones in the Persian Gulf. I am sure we all desire peace, but we may not all agree on how to get it --or how to keep it.

No doubt the easiest thing to do would be to go ahead with the topic I had planned. But, if we can believe what we see and hear, a great many people are frightened and confused. As they try to understand what is happening, and why, they look to their leaders for help. And, as spiritual leader of this congregation, I have a responsibility to contribute what I can. I wish I had some simple answer to give you. But the truth is, I do not. And I do not think anyone else does either. And I would urge you to be suspicious of anyone whose answers are too glib, too pat. There is simply too much that we do not know, and too many different opinions.

For starters, there is the question of whether we should have gotten involved in the Persian Gulf at all. What American interests were at stake? Was it merely a matter of oil, as the protesters contend or was there some more important issue? I know that even in this church there are those who have differing answers to these questions. And across the land, the differences are enormous.

And, then, there is the matter of sanctions. Till last Wednesday evening at least, we Americans were seriously divided about whether we had given sanctions enough time to work and whether we had any more time to spare. The long and heated debate in Congress dealt mainly with those issues. It may be a

moot point now that war has broken out, but those differences still divide us.

And, finally, there is the matter of war, itself. What should be the Christian attitude toward that? We know, of course, that Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." (Matthew 5:9) But that may not help us much. All of us want peace. The question is, what is the best way to get it. John Ruskin wrote, "You may either win your peace or buy it: win it by resistance to evil; buy it, by compromise with evil." Do we stand a better chance for peace by fighting or by refusing to? I know well-meaning Christians who honestly differ in their answers to that.

During World War II, I belonged to a Congregational Church in a suburb of St. Louis. The minister there had four sons; two were conscientious objectors, and two were fighter pilots. I have always felt that each of them made his decision only after many hours wrestling with his conscience. And I respect all four of them.

But not everyone feels that way. One of many tragic things to come out of the war in Vietnam --and, if we are not careful, out of this present conflict-- is the divisiveness which developed between those who supported the war and those who opposed it. In all candor, I must tell you I supported that war, as I support Operation Desert Storm, because I believe with Douglas William Jerrold that "We love peace, but not peace at any price . . . Chains are worse than bayonets."

Nor, does it really matter whose chains we are talking about. One of the better known German pastors during the time of Hitler would later say, "When the Nazis came after the Jews, we did not protest because we were not Jews. When they came after the Communists, we did not protest because we were not Communists. When they came after us, there was no one left to protest." When I look at the history of World War II, and when I see the total ruthlessness of Saddam Hussein, I have to believe that we must stop him now before he becomes any stronger and, God forbid, before he acquires nuclear weapons.

That is my opinion, but, at the same time, I respect those who honestly disagree. And, if we can not somehow live and work together here, how can we ever hope to have peace on a world-wide scale. The Bible clearly teaches that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28) That oneness has to begin somewhere. Whether or not we agree on Operation Desert Storm, we can all begin here and now by respecting the rights and opinions of others.

A second thing we can all do is to pray for peace. Not long ago I read about a sign in the office of a high school principal. It said, "In the event of nuclear attack, fire, or earthquake, the ban on prayer is temporarily lifted." Now, Operation Desert

Shield is none of those things, but it is close enough. And St Paul writes, "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." (Romans 12:12) There is not a lot that you and I can do, but we can at least do that.

And we can also pray for those who find themselves in harm's way. Not just for our own service men and women, but for Kuwaitis and, yes, Iraqis, too. I am glad to hear that our tactics so far reflect the desire to avoid any unnecessary casualties. Again I remind you of Paul's words: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) If we allow ourselves to hate the Iraqis or to think of them as less than human, what more are we than Saddam Hussein?

And, finally, beginning now we can all work for a true and lasting peace when this is over. In his message to the American people after the surrender of Japan, General Douglas MacArthur said, ". . . I thank a merciful God that He has given us the faith, the courage and the power from which to mold victory. We have known the bitterness of defeat and the exultation of triumph, and from both we learned that there can be no turning back. We must go forward to preserve in peace what we won in war."

Whatever our feelings about the present conflict, certainly none of us wants to see it happen again if we can possibly prevent it. Someone has said, "Peace, like every other rare and precious thing, does not come to you. You have to go and get it." And that means all of us. It is not enough just to pray for peace. We need to become peacemakers as well.

We have to recognize that Peace, like happiness, is always a by-product of something else. A by-product of justice and compassion. Lyndon Johnson and I did not often agree. But I can not dissent from his assertion that "The world cannot remain divided between rich nations and poor nations, or white nations and colored nations. In such division are the seeds of terrible discord and danger in the decades to come."

Starting right here, in our families, our churches, our neighborhoods, we must sow the seeds of love and compassion, of justice and fair-play. And, by the Grace of God, what we sow here may grow, like the mustard seed in Jesus' parable, till it shades the whole world.

To quote President Johnson once more, "I know that vast problems remain, conflicts between great powers, conflicts between small neighbors, disagreements over disarmament, persistence of ancient wrongs in the area of human rights, residual problems of colonialism, and all the rest. But men and nations, working apart, created these problems; and men and nations working together must solve them."