

**“Not Peace, but a sword. Not a sword, but the cross.”**

I have a confession to make, one I’m not too proud to admit. Don’t let this get out, but there’s this movie I like. Actually it’s been one of my favorite movies for decades now. No, it’s not *Girls Gone Wild*, or anything salacious like that. It’s *Braveheart*. You know, the 1990s film about William Wallace, the 13th Century Scottish hero who unites his people in a battle for Scottish independence. It really is a magnificent movie, with all the elements that make a great film—visually stunning scenery, moving musical score, larger than life characters, an epic conflict between good and evil. The only problem is that, for all its strengths, this movie perpetuates a powerful and dangerous lie, a lie which runs counter to what we believe as Christians.

You see, *Braveheart* emblemizes the belief that if someone does you wrong, you can rectify the situation by getting back at them, by enacting revenge. It’s not just *Braveheart*, of course. We can see this belief in the plots of plenty of other films, from *Independence Day* to *The Incredibles*, from *Avengers* to *Star Wars*. We can see it in *Mean Girls*, in *Dirty Harry* and even in *Road Runner* cartoons. The popularity of this belief is not limited to the big screen, either; we have a huge bank of stories that follow the same script, stories that celebrate how violence has helped good people (“us”) to defeat bad people (“them”) throughout history. Indeed, this is the story that lies behind family feuds and great conflicts like the Crusades and jihad, and is the governing principle of foreign policy among many countries today, even countries that claim a Christian heritage. For, whenever a nation beats another nation it deems a threat to their security, that nation is operating under the same belief. Academics call it the ‘myth of redemptive violence,’ but we might call it simply the ‘way of the sword.’ Whatever you call it, the lesson it teaches is the same: that peace may only be achieved through the elimination or domination of our enemies.

Jesus, however, refuses to play that game. In fact, he is determined to show his followers a different way. In our lesson this morning from Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is about to send his disciples out to spread the Good News, and he gives them a strong charge and a warning. He warns them that, in sharing the Good News, they are going to face opposition. More than opposition, they’ll be in danger, like “sheep amidst the wolves.” Jesus warns them they will be hauled into court and flogged in synagogues; their own families will be divided and even turn against them. They will be hated by many on account of him. But rather than retaliate, rather than call fire from heaven to destroy the impious unbelievers, Jesus tells them that they are to give witness to a different way.

They are to live according to a different story, a new story that exposes the old story as false and dangerous. Jesus has already let them in on this story, given them a preview, by healing the sick, eating with sinners and tax-collectors, challenging beliefs about who is in and who is not. Yet it was his crucifixion that gives the clearest view of the plot. You see, Rome used crucifixion to expose and pronounce a death sentence on rebels; but Jesus used the cross to expose the emptiness of Rome’s power, even pronouncing a sentence of *forgiveness* on his executioners. Through Jesus, the cross ceased to be a “shock and awe” display of power that Rome intended it to be, and was made instead a “*reverence* and awe” display of God’s glory, of God’s dealing with evil with forgiveness. At the center of this new story that Jesus taught was the news that, in God’s kingdom, peace is brought about not by shedding the blood of enemies. Instead, the King sacrifices himself to make a new kind of peace, a peace brought about through amnesty and reconciliation.

This new story that Jesus offered stood in stark contrast to the other stories of his day, as it does to the stories in our day. His way is the way of the cross, not the way of the sword, the way of redemptive *suffering*, not redemptive *violence*. To be a follower of Jesus, to be his disciple, we see, is then a much different affair than many of us were taught. It is not about being nice, or friendly, or moral, or a good productive member of society. It's about "taking up our cross."

Now, to Jesus' first-century audience, that phrase, taking up the cross, was clear enough, indeed too clear. It meant to carry the implement of one's own execution. But Jesus didn't mean it so literally. Sure, following him might get one killed, but "taking up one's cross" has a broader, deeper meaning. It doesn't mean simply becoming a martyr, dying for our faith; it means dying to self, crucifying our pride, our ambitions, our agendas, our desperate grasping. It means letting go of our fears, surrendering our rights, and accepting loss, shame, persecution, even death, while refusing to inflict it on others. It's this last point that is critical—foregoing our right to retaliate, not hurting others when they've hurt us.

Such doesn't come naturally, I know, 'lifting high the cross' when we want to 'bring down the sword.' When we're falsely accused, when we've been wronged, hurt, our natural reaction is to fight back. When we've been attacked, everything inside us screams to defend ourselves. It shouldn't surprise us then that we Christians haven't always lived up to Jesus' example, waging war against other and against other Christians: the various wars in Europe, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Ukraine and Russia. In fact, given how contrary to human nature it is to put down the sword, it's a wonder we are ever able to do it! It only happens, I suppose, when we are able to see ourselves as part of a bigger story, when we trust that the current unjust order of the world is passing, that it won't endure. That God not only *will*, but *is* bringing the world to rights. It's not up to us, God's got it under control. Only then does not fighting back make sense.

Now, I know this subject is a rather controversial one, especially right now. And I'm sure some of you are rather put off by the idea of forswearing all use of force. You're probably thinking, what about self-defense? What about protecting the vulnerable? Stopping criminals and deterring international aggression? Is there no place for the "sword" there? Well, to be honest, I don't know. The New Testament doesn't give us a comprehensive theology of politics or government. What I do know is how Jesus lived, and how we are to be like him, to follow him in the way of the cross.

Ok...but didn't we just hear Jesus say he came "not to bring peace, but a sword?" If Jesus is the "Prince of Peace," what's he doing wielding a weapon of war? Well, knowing Jesus as we do, we can bet that the "sword" Jesus spoke of is not the sword that soldiers and kings wield. As we see in the book of Revelation, Jesus' "sword" is the Word of God, the unarmed truth of the Gospel. Moreover, according to the book of Hebrews, the Word of God is "sharper than a two-edged sword, dividing the soul and spirit," laying bare all before the eyes of God. This sword, the Word of God, slices through falsehood and serves up righteousness. It exposes evil and flashes truth. It divides all it touches like the prow of ship in the water, separating not man from man, but man from himself. For as the novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observed, "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts."

Yet, it must be said, division and dissention is not Jesus' purpose or goal, but rather an inevitable consequence. For, Jesus' message unveils secret discords and uncovers deep-seated tensions, unmasking our pretenses of human harmony. Even the most natural and intimate of human relations—the family—

cannot withstand his presence. Jesus makes no bones about it: there will be profound conflict between those who accept the Gospel and those who reject it. And when we are confronted with the question of Jesus and his kingdom, we have to take sides.

Clarence Jordan was a Baptist minister who founded Koinonia Farm, an interracial farming cooperative in southern Georgia in the late 1940s. Its purpose was to bear witness to the kingdom of God and to demonstrate to its neighbors that people committed to God's vision could live together in racial harmony. In the Jim-Crow-era of the South, this was a rather crazy idea, a radical attempt to live out the Christian life. And Jordan and the other farmers were repeatedly subject to threats, intimidation, cross-burnings, ostracism, the bombing of their road-side stand, and a county-wide boycott that nearly broke the farm. On one occasion, at the height of this persecution, a truck driver who had been delivering butane gas to the community told Jordan he was quitting: he'd been receiving threats from members of the outside community. The man knew that if he delivered to Koinonia, he would lose other customers. Jordan did not waver. "It looks to me like you're in a spot," Jordan observed. "You're either going to lose some money or lose your soul." The man then related how anyone who cooperated with Jordan would be in real, physical danger. He promised to find someone else who would deliver the butane. Jordan didn't budge. "You mean you'd ask a friend to take a chance you're not willing to take yourself?" In tears, the man relented, and went on to service the farm for some time after.

While most of us do not have to face threats to our lives on account of our beliefs, there may be times when the gospel works as a wedge dividing our inner values from the values of the world around us. I know of a manager in the health care industry who quit her job because, she said, "I got tired of looking for ways to deny coverage to people who needed help. When I questioned my supervisor, he told me I knew where the door was." Another committed Christian was convicted during church one Sunday morning about the divisions between blacks and whites in his town, and so he initiated a conversation with members of the black church a few miles away. That conversation started the ball rolling and now the two churches hold a joint worship service and potluck each month and are committed to working together in ministry. Another, a wealthy, elderly man in a church re-wrote his will after seeing the plight of poor, sick children in Tijuana, Mexico. He provided for his two adult children in his will, but bequeathed a large portion of his estate to an outreach ministry that would help children like those in Tijuana. And for his generosity, the man's son and daughter took him to court! The gospel may not be so severe a wedge for all believers. But those who place the values of God's kingdom over those of the world will find themselves at one time or another at odds with colleagues and associates, with neighbors, friends and even family.

This is a hard lesson, no doubt. And I wrestle with living up to it just as much as any other Christian. But this is the life that Jesus calls us to. Doesn't much seem like something you'd want to go telling others about, does it? In fact, hearing this you may be thinking to yourself, if that's what it means to follow Jesus, I'm not sure I want to sign up! So, why...why would anyone follow Jesus?

Randall Wallace, the writer of the screenplay for *Braveheart*, was asked in an interview why he writes "war movies"--besides *Braveheart*, Wallace wrote the screenplays for *Pearl Harbor*, *We Were Soldiers*, and a Civil War movie, *Point of Honor*. Wallace disagreed with that characterization. He said the movies he makes are in truth "love stories." He explained: "I want to know what you love enough to sacrifice your life for."

That is the very question Jesus poses to us today—"What do you love enough to sacrifice yourself for?" We all make sacrifices: for family, for country, for political independence, for career, for financial security. Those are all worthy goals, but if that's all we love, all we live for, in the end it doesn't leave us with much, with much of a life. As Jesus says, "Those who try to hold onto their life, who try to secure their life on their own, will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Jesus invites us to lose our life by finding ourselves in him, by seeing ourselves as part of the story that has Jesus at the center, not us, by giving ourselves over to the One who gave himself for us. That story beats *Braveheart* any day. Thanks be to God!