

**A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on  
October 16, 2022**

### **LIVING WITH POWER**

***Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Romans 13:1***

Last Sunday I shared with you the history of the conversion of Constantine. In the year 312AD, Constantine won a famous battle to take control of the Roman Empire. The Christian Church, which had been a persecuted minority, in a few short years became the favored religion in the Empire. Last week we explored how success threatened the purity of the faith.

A second great challenge brought by the conversion of Constantine was the Christian faith's relationship with power. Many modern writers have regretted Constantine's conversion. They believe this led to the fall of the Church because it became wedded to power. They point to many examples of the Christian church and faith being used to lead people into war. I think of the early newsreels of troops from both sides of World War I being blessed by Priest's with holy water as they marched off to a needless conflict. Almost 20 million people died in that war between so called Christian nations. Some blame Constantine as leading to this misuse of Christianity.

While I do not believe that Constantine's conversion led to every subsequent abuse of the faith, it did force Christians to rethink the relationship between faith and the use of power.

Before the conversion of Constantine, Christians largely rejected the exercise of physical power. They looked to the example of their Lord. Jesus only used spiritual power to seek to transform lives. Remember many Jewish people thought the true Messiah would come as a political and military leader. They prayed for a Messiah who would raise an army and kick the Roman overlords out of Israel.

Jesus rejected this understanding of Messiahship. He told us his kingdom was not of this world. In fact, he willingly went to the cross on behalf of others. He understood power in suffering at the hands of others. He came to demonstrate a different kind of power, the power of self-giving love.

This was the understanding and model followed by Christians for the first three hundred years. These followers of Jesus lived on the margins of society, seeking to model the love that Jesus brought to the world. It is probably surprising to you that one the controversial issues during the first three hundred years of the Christian movement involved soldiers. As the faith spread around

the Empire, members of the Roman Legions were attracted to the message of Jesus. This caused a quandary for the leaders of the Church. Can people who use force, lethal at that, be allowed into the Church without leaving the army. Some leaders taught that active soldiers could not join the church and others believed they could become part of the movement.

The questions about power all changed when Constantine became a Christian. Christians who had previously lived in the shadows, now found themselves to be government officials, Emperors and Generals. How were they to exercise power as a follower of Jesus.

It was during this time of dramatic change that Augustine become the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine is the most influential western theologian in Christian history. One of his major accomplishments was trying to make sense of a Christian relationship with power. He wrestled with the question of a Christian's relationship with the use of force.

Augustine began the process towards understanding what has become known as "Just War Theory." Augustine knew the brokenness of human nature. He knew war was sometimes necessary to restrain evil, but he also knew it as not moral in every case.

This morning I would like to share the "Just War Theory." I will talk about war which is the extreme example of using power. But I believe most of the conditions for a just war, apply also to police, school principals and parents in their use of power. The great minds of the Christian faith beginning with Augustine, have wrestled with the concept of a just war. They have developed five conditions that must be met before any nation should resort to armed force.

The first condition that is necessary before the start of hostilities is that all other means of peaceful resolution have been exhausted. The use of force should never be a first resort. All means of solving disagreements must be tried first before force is used.

The second condition is that force must only be used by a legitimate authority. War is never to be started or waged by a private citizen. A rich businessman is not to use his money to build an army to fight for his interests. Lynchings were examples of a mob, with no legitimate authority, using force against others.

A third condition for the use of force to be considered moral is that the cause must be right and just. If a country is to spill the blood of its enemy, the cause for which the fighting takes place must be just. If a nation fights another merely to gain territory or natural resources, it is clearly an unjust use of force.

The resort to the use of power must only take place in the defense of justice and civil rights. John Calvin wrote a long time ago:

**For it makes not difference whether it be a king or the lowest of the common folk who invades a foreign country in which he has no right, and harries it as an enemy. All such must, be equally, but considered as robbers and punished accordingly.**

Clearly the use of force must be in self-defense or to protect fundamental rights.

A fourth condition for the use of force is that just methods are used to carry out the war. This means that every use of force must be carried out with an attitude of restraint. One must use the amount of force which is proportional to the goal.

This is not too hard to understand. A just war must be fought in a manner in which the cost to yourselves and the enemy is appropriate to the goal. The cause may be just, yet the means to accomplish that goal may be unjust. One is not to use a cannon to kill a fly; you use a fly swatter. The amount of damage inflicted on life and property must be proportional to the goal. This week's Russian attacks on civilian, non-strategic targets violate this condition.

A final consideration before deciding on the use of force is prudence. A war may be considered just and could be waged in a just way, but still one final question is the prudence of fighting at all.

Martin Luther was speaking about the prudence needed by a ruler in considering the use of force when he wrote:

**A ruler must take heed that he deals justly with evil doers. He must be wise and prudent to mete out punishment without injuring others. I know no better example of this than King David himself. He had a captain, Joab, by name who played two wicked pranks in that he treacherously murdered two loyal captains, whereby, he justly merited death twice over; yet David did not put him to death during his lifetime, but commanded his son Solomon without fail to do so, because he could not punish him without great injury and disturbance. A prince must punish the wicked in such a way that he does not step on the dish while picking up a spoon, and for the sake of one man's head plunge the land and people into want and fill the land with widows and orphans. Therefore, he must not obey the counselors and fire-eaters who incite and provoke him to obtain war and say, "Why must we suffer such insults and injustice?" He is a poor Christian indeed who for the sake of a single castle would make an armed camp of the whole land.**

Luther is advising Christian rulers to ask the question of the common good. Even if the proposed military action is just in every way, still is it in the national interest.

These then are the principles which Christians have used since Constantine when thinking about the use of force. They can be used in discussions around policing and even parenting. But above all, you and I as Christian citizens are to use these same principles in thinking war and peace.

The decision to use force is never easy. I do not envy those in authority who have these difficult decisions. But we should always answer these criteria with a bias towards peace. We must always remember the human tragedy that conflict brings.

One of the bloodiest battles of the forgotten war of 1812 was fought about 45 minutes from here, just across the Rainbow bridge at Lundy's Lane. After the battle a local woman came across her husband lying on the ground. She took his head upon her lap and sobbed until an onlooker recorded:

**....Awakened by a groan from her unfortunate husband, she clasped her hand and looking wildly around, exclaimed, "O that the King and President were both here this moment to see the misery their quarrels lead to – they surely would never go to war without cause that they could give as a reason to God at the last day, for thus destroying the creatures that He had made in his own image.**

There is a time for the use of force, there is a time for war, but only for a cause and cost that we can justify to our heavenly Father.

May we as Christians see our mission to promote understanding and peace as we serve the Prince of Peace. May learn to live with power and use it only for the common good.