



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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MUCH TO REMEMBER

Since returning to Canada after four years in the United States, I have continually been reminded of the ways in which I am so *Canadian*. That may sound odd; one would think that I'd be more aware of it while I was away. We often hear of Americans travelling or moving up here and saying, "It's just like home – only cleaner!" But, when these new arrivals live here for awhile, they begin to see the subtle but powerful differences between our two countries. While I was down there, I saw those differences, but I started to take for granted both my Canadian-ness and American ways. Here now again, I'm more aware of how much I *understand* this country and identify with it, and, I suppose, how much Canada understands and has formed me. Remembrance Day is a particularly strong example of this renewed sense of being a native in my native land.

Growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, I learned the Canadian memories and traditions associated with our participation in war in the past. As a child, it seemed to involve a lot of talk about the First World War and strange names like Passchendaele and Vimy. For some reason, it was these battles that took prominence in Remembrance Day ceremonies, at least as I recall them. Later, my generation came to learn that Canada's sense of itself as a nation was largely formed during the First War; that seems to be one reason why it is so crucial in our history with a special tone of pride and respect for those who died so strongly mixed in with our national sorrow.

It was far easier for me as a child to relate to the Second World War, which was presented so vividly on film and television, albeit usually from an American point of view. But, with no close family members who fought on the front lines, the stories I was told about that war were those of my parents, who'd been teenagers at the time. Inevitably their stories were filled with the vivid impressions typical of that age, things like scrap metal drives and dances to entertain the troops. What I heard directly sounded, frankly, like a lot of fun.

That is not the case for most of us, I imagine. I asked Thijs Dhont if he would be a guest co-ordinator today because he has an entirely different perspective on the Second World War. He's going to tell us a bit about that now.

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Thank you, Thijs. Among us these days, whether members or friends, we have a number of people like Thijs who were born in the Netherlands. Others come from Germany, England, Scotland, Denmark; if I remember correctly, someone told me they were from Austria, we have at least one Swiss, an occasional visitor from Alsace-Lorraine and I'm sure there are others with European backgrounds. One among us was drafted into the South African army when that country was at its lowest moral point. Several of us are originally from the United States with a far more intimate relationship with the Vietnam War than most Canadians have, but our church also has a proud history of resisting that war by arranging the entry and settlement of significant numbers of draft resisters.

Early in my first career, I worked in a home care clinic for seniors with mental health problems. Listening to the life stories of the elderly, I learned many other things about war, including that for some of these people the war was the most passionate time of their lives – memories of horror, but also of profound friendship; memories of loss, but also of finding love for the first time; memories of homesickness, but also of the discovery of the wider world. All these stories remind us that there are many facets to war.

We Unitarian Universalists sometimes assume that there is only one feeling we have about war: that we're against it. Now it's very likely true that, based on our principles that affirm human dignity, justice and compassion in human relations, world community with peace and liberty for all, among other lofty ideals: it's likely true that none of us are for war. Not as a general concept. Many of us long for leaders who think like Dennis Kucinich, an American Democrat so far left that he's coming around the back of the right. He would establish a Department of Peace which would as actively investigate strategies and campaigns to create peace as the Defence Department does for war.

In fact, many Unitarian Universalists adhere to the philosophy of pacifism, the belief that any violence, war and killing are unacceptable means of resolving disputes. Period. Such among us would dismantle all the machinery of war if we could, believing that without the institutions of warfare, human beings would necessarily work for peace.

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King are heroes for virtually all of us, being examples of the success of peaceful means over brutality. We admire and hurt for the Buddhist monks in Burma who attempted to inspire the populace to shake off the oppression of its military government through peaceful demonstrations and the readiness to accept being beaten or killed. We mourn that this time they were not successful, while we believe that ultimately they will be. Because peaceful means are powerful means.

Many others of us are pacifists at some less absolute level. We would offer negotiations and sanctions as the primary means to exert force on any person or any nation. Some of us might choose to negotiate without end, always seeing another possibility, always hopeful of striking the right balance that would satisfy every party and prevent any violent acts.

And there are those of us also who far prefer peaceful options but would also support the use of violent force when the tipping point between the mere threat to life and well-being is right now outweighed by clear and present suffering and death. Internationally, Canada is known for regularly taking this position; our peacekeeping forces are the best and most reliable in the world. We see Romeo Dallaire as a hero in the sense that, when all attempts to prevent genocide failed, he called for military intervention to save lives through the use or at least the threat of violent force against those who would wield violent means themselves. He disobeyed orders and shamed the most powerful leaders of the Western world. Now, it is clear that the betrayal of peace came not only from Rwandans attacking other Rwandans, but even more from the failure of American and European powers to act.

This brings us to the concept of the Just War. Pure pacifism rejects the potential justice of any war, but starting with the ancient Greeks, there has been an attempt to delineate whether and when war might be justified. Given the prevalence of unjustifiable war, waged throughout history in virtually every land at every level from tribal to global, it can be easy to forget that sometimes war might be the least destructive method of establishing peace. But, if this is ever to be so, there must be clear limits on warfare.

To outline just a few of these limits, let's look at some of the wars that are in our minds today as we remember those who have fallen. For a war to approach justice, it must have a just cause. Taking even the most superficial look at World War I, the causes of which are still being debated and reanalyzed by historians, this was a war waged basically between major European powers over issues of national pride, ethnic superiority, imperialist ambitions and economic dominance. Britain, for instance, may have entered the war ostensibly to protect its ally, Belgium, but after the war, it joined in the vengeance against Germany set out by the Treaty of Versailles, which predictably set the stage for another war. In contrast, World War II began with a more evident just cause: the defence of various peoples against fascist, racist and imperialist aggression.

A Just War must also, though, be waged justly. For instance, attacking civilians not engaged in warfare is unjust, as is the use of unnecessary force even to achieve a right end. The Allies may have had a just cause to enter World War II, but in the end they attacked civilian targets intentionally and with disproportionate force – Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. That these were reprisals against Nazi attacks on civilians or as

a means to prevent massive casualties during an invasion of Japan is not enough. The bombing of Dresden was no strategic turning point in the war, unless it was the turn from arguable virtue to outrageous immorality. President Truman rejected the possibility that showing the Japanese the overwhelming power of the atomic bomb might lead to their surrender; instead, he assumed it was necessary to use it on civilian targets. I don't even need to point out the ways in which Vietnam and Iraq do not meet the Just War criteria.

I do feel the need to mention Afghanistan, if only briefly. As Canada considers its continuing role in Afghanistan, I encourage all of us to examine the factors which help define this conflict as just or unjust. Did it begin with a just cause? To refer to other criteria, did NATO have the right intention for war and a probability of success? Was war our last resort? Is the war being waged with just means? Is the violence aimed only at the perpetrators of violence, or are civilians also the target? Is it proportional to the wrong inflicted and minimal to achieve the mission? Some of us will answer these questions differently, but the point is that we do need to answer these as we make our individual and collective decision.

When I began this sermon, I thought I had more answers to these questions than I actually have; I thought I had a justifiable position but now I am in doubt. What is clear to me is that I do believe that some wars are just; in fact, that all wars must be just. On the other hand, how does a theory of Just War apply when those fought are themselves oblivious to the principles of justice? Can a war be just if only one side acts justly? Is it possible to fight justly against a foe that relies on civilian casualties and disproportionate methods? Does the lack of justice on the opposing side then become a just cause?

I know I have strayed far from traditional thoughts and emotions that we bring annually to Remembrance Day, but what other day will make us think deeply about the nature of war? After all, it is on this day that we remember those men and women, civilian and military, whose lives were lost or damaged by wars declared by the elite, the powerful, the ambitious and, worst of all, by the insane. For us to consider the justice of those wars is not to betray the fallen; it is to hope that their sacrifice will truly educate those who come after them. As we hope for our children to study war no more, we must also hope that they will study war far more wisely than the countless generations before them.

Shalom. As-Salamu Alaykum. Peace be upon us all.