Date: November 11, 2007
SUNDAY: Ordinary 32 (Veteran's Day)
SERMON: Plowshares of Salvation
Text(s): Micah 4:1-4; Luke 19:1-10
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One of the highlights of our time in Europe was the annual Pastors and Spouses Conference the Association of International Churches in Europe and the Middle East. Each of the 36 churches in the Association took turns hosting the conference, and it was our turn to play host in the year 2000.

Our overall plan for the week was to provide opportunities for our colleagues to appreciate the deep impact of the Christian faith and tradition on the culture, the art, the music, the architecture, and the political life of Western Europe, and France in particular. So, for example, we visited both the cathedral in Reims where the Frankish king Clovis was baptized in the year 496, the date that the French celebrate as the founding date of their nation, as well as the museum and church in Noyon, the birthplace of John Calvin, the father of the French Protestant Reformation about 1200 years later.

But it was a different experience, later that week, that was not only educational, but profoundly moving and sobering— a dramatic demonstration of how our very civilization, rooted so deeply in the soil of the Christian faith, had grown into a tree with poisonous and lethal fruit. It was a visit to Omaha Beach in Normandy, and to the American military cemetery there. How many of you have had the privilege of visiting that beach and that cemetery? If you haven't visited, but have seen the movie "Saving Private Ryan," then you will at least have some idea of the beauty and solemnity of that cemetery, sited as it is on a beautifully-landscaped tract on top of a high bluff overlooking the beach.

If you've been there, or even if you've only seen photographs, you'll understand something of the awed silence that descends on you as you gaze over those silent rows of white marble crosses or Stars of David, some 10,000 of them in that one cemetery. It's an experience that no one who has been there can ever forget. For about half an hour, we wandered around in small groups, or just with our spouses, looking at the names on the graves or studying the maps of the invasion plastered into the walls of the monument or standing on the platform built out over the cliff's edge to look down on the beach below, trying to imagine in our mind's eye how it must have looked through the eyes of both the American soldiers trying desperately to cross that beach to the shelter of the bluff or through the eyes of German soldiers atop the bluff trying desperately to keep them off. Both armies of course, represented countries whose cultures and values had sprung from nearly two millenia of Christendom. Then, we gathered in front of the monument and the husband of our associate pastor, himself an officer in the naval reserve, and a lay pastor, led us in a simple ceremony of remembrance of those who sacrificed their lives in that titanic struggle. When we boarded the bus for the ride back to our hotel, we were sobered and left alone with our own thoughts and emotions.

I expect that all of us here, and perhaps none more so than those who have fought in our nation's wars, whether hot ones or cold ones, know that there is a distinction between honoring the commitment and sacrifices of the men and women who serve in our military and fight in our wars and honoring the causes or policies that placed them on the field of battle. Reinhold Niebuhr, the 20th-century theologian who was the conscience of our nation throughout much of that century was one of our best teachers of that truth. Just this past week, I read a fascinating article by on Niebuhr by Paul Elie in the November issue of *The Atlantic* (pp. 83-96). Elie examines a strange phenomenon in our national conversations about our current wars— that Niebuhr's voice is again being invoked, but by people on all sides of those conversations, each side claiming Niebuhr's thought as a support for their widely divergent views.

I think he is correct in his assessment of why this is so. Niebuhr emphasized two things: First, he rejected the liberal naïveté that often espouses a simplistic form of pacifism, believing that appeals to social reform or humanitarian ideals can stop nations or dictators from pursuing their destructive and deadly pursuits of power or strategic advantage or natural resources. Powerful aggressors cannot be stopped by appealing to the angels of their better natures, but only by powerful force. Hence, Niebuhr said, wars are inevitable because humanity is deeply involved, both personally and collectively in evil. The consequence of human sinful self-centeredness is the suffering and sacrifices of war. Evil purposes lead to evil ends. While Niebuhr believed that it was possible for normally self-interested individuals, as moral beings, to sometimes rise above self-interest for the sake of the greater good when inspired by high ideals, religious belief or by conscience, nations and societies almost never can. Nations or tribes or movements act only out of self-interest in order to gain advantage over other groups. Peace among nations, he said, "is gained by force and is always an uneasy and unjust one." He reminded us that collectively, we are always asking young men and women "to give a life of eternal significance for ends that do not have eternal value." Niebuhr's realistic assessment of the inevitability of war appeals to those who justify the use of war as an instrument of national policy in the pursuit of national self-interest.

If that were all Niebuhr said, we would remember him as an acute analyst of social realism, but not as a genuine prophetic voice of national conscience.

What gives his voice its continuing power, as well as its appeal to those who oppose war as an instrument of national policy, is the second thing he emphasized. Our collective war-like behavior testifies to our failure to understand that human history is ultimately not under our control, but is played out under the higher sovereignty of God. In 1960 he wrote, "This drama of human history is indeed partly our construct, but it stands under a sovereignty much greater than ours. . . a mysterious sovereignty which the prophets are always warning that we must not spell out too much."

That biblical view of history, what Niebuhr refers to as the "sovereignty much greater than ours," is precisely in view in the passage from the prophet Micah this morning. While a secular historian might illuminate all the factors involving national self-interest that were in play in the 8th century B.C.— expansionist empires of Assyria and Babylonia contending for trade routes, water rights, domination of regional politics, etc., Micah, like Niebuhr, articulates what's going on from a theological and existential point of view. Rulers are greedy for power and they subvert justice. They *"build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong. Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price. . . yet they lean upon the Lord and say, 'Surely, the Lord is with us! No harm will befall us.' Therefore, because of this, Zion will be plowed like a field; Jerusalem shall be a heap of ruins."*

Like all true prophets, however, Micah's grim warnings about the limits of human striving and the consequences of individual and collective human sinfulness isn't the final word. Micah also believes in a sovereignty over human affairs that is both greater and more mysterious in its operations than our human understanding of it. His is a vision that sees the ultimate goal of that divine sovereignty as a world at peace in all its relationships. His vision is of a time, when humans are not driven by greed for wealth or power or resources, gained or restrained from gaining by the sword of war, but of a time when all acknowledge that God alone is sovereign and that their own good is inextricably linked to the good of their neighbors.

So he points our eyes to the day when

God will *"arbitrate between strong nations far away. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees and none shall make them afraid. For the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken."*

If human injustice and sinfulness results in Zion being *"plowed as a field"* by the destructiveness of war, this judgment will not be God's final word; rather, in the mysterious operation of God's rule, there will be a different kind of plowing going on under the surface of things that will one day be manifest; the swords of war will be transformed into plowshares of peace.

Well, how does that help you and me live now? What can we do besides simply accepting war as inevitable and then honoring those whom we send off to fight our wars for us?

Our gospel lesson may provide us a clue. This same theological vision of Micah and Isaiah and Rheinhold Niebuhr is brought down to a much more personal level in the Luke's story of Zacchaeus the tax collector. Zacchaeus is an example of exactly the sort of ruler Micah railed about and that Niebuhr wrote and preached about— a man motivated solely by self-interest. The Roman imperial government appointed local people in their far-flung empire, to collect the taxes Rome demanded from her colonies. As an incentive, Roman governors would often either tacitly or explicitly agree that the tax collector could gouge as much as he could by fair means or foul from the peasants and artisans and merchants. After giving to Rome what Rome required, the tax collector could keep any balance for himself. Clever strategy, wasn't it? (Let's not tell this story to the IRS; it might give them ideas.)

So Zacchaeus is sitting pretty. He's been unjustly plowing his fellow countrymen deeply enough that he's very comfortable. He's gotten away with it because he's got the sword of Rome's imperial power behind him.

But then one day, this itinerant rabbi, Jesus from Nazareth shows up. His curiosity is sparked, perhaps because he genuinely wants to hear what this man has to say, or maybe he wants to take Jesus' measure as a potential threat to his lucrative trade, or perhaps he's just like the people who follow fire trucks or ambulances because they want to feel part of whatever's happening. And because he's short in stature, though not short of either cash or *hutzpah*, he "climbs up in a sycamore tree to see what he could see," as the old Sunday School song many of us learned puts it. And up in that tree, he promptly finds himself "out on a limb" as it were. He not only can see what's going on, he can be seen, and Jesus sees him. Maybe that's what Zacchaeus wanted all along— to be seen— but I rather suspect he wasn't prepared to be seen the way Jesus sees him. I suspect none of us is ever prepared for that.

When Jesus invites himself to his house for dinner, or "for tea" as the Sunday school song puts it— remember?— he's pleased. This is being seen in the way he wants to be seen, as an important enough man to be asked to host this popular teacher in his own home. He gains great face in this encounter. He may even be able to parlay this into a weapon to gouge even more money out of his constituents.

But now the plowshare is turned on Zaccheus— not a plowshare forged from Roman steel— but one forged out of moral truth and God's demand for human justice. Without a word from Jesus, but only from Zacchaeus's own guilty conscience or even from a lower desire to make himself look good in the eyes of someone he knows to be his moral superior, Zacchaeus suddenly has a "come to Jesus" moment— literally. He bursts out, *"Lord, half of my possessions, I'll give to the poor, and if I've defrauded anyone* (and of course, he'd defrauded everyone–that was the game) *I'll pay them back four times as much."*

And Jesus responds, *"Today, salvation has come to this house."* Salvation for Zacchaeus is not just a mystical spiritual experience; salvation means rendering restorative justice to the victims of his self-centered greed and a change in his way of life that will make an honest man out of him. The effect of that personal transformation in Zacchaeus would have immediate social consequences for his whole constituency. They would no longer be gouged into poverty, but could begin to improve their own quality of life. The seeds of social justice and peace, peace between indivduals and peace between nations, are sown in soil that has been plowed by the encounter with God's sovereign and saving power. This what John Wesley meant, I think, when he said that "all holiness is social holiness." Salvation is only salvation when it changes the social realities on the ground.

That's our calling as the church— to be a community of transformed individuals (or at least those who are in the process of becoming transformed) so that in our life together we give visible and tangible testimony to God's reign of justice and peace, a reign that is present even now in our own just relationships. And that visible example will be a sign of the fullness of that reign that is still to come for the whole world.

On this Veteran's Day, perhaps if our collective memories of the cemeteries at Omaha Beach or Pork Chop Hill or Khe San or Arlington, can help us realize that our swords will do much more to advance the cause of peace when they are turned into plowshares of justice, then those whose service and sacrifices we rightfully honor will not have served or sacrificed in vain.