

Wise Doves
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Matt 10:16-22 NRSV

16 “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. 19 When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; 22 and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

As we have followed the news this week about the Russian military invading Ukraine, perhaps you also saw photos of Ukrainian Christians gathering in bomb shelters and subway passages to pray. Even as someone who believes in the power of prayer, it is hard for me to not see these images and feel angry and frustrated. My impulse is to believe that weapons would be of more help than words. I think most people feel this way. We are conditioned to believe that the answer to violent aggression is an even more violent defense.

The early church didn't have the luxury of believing this. It wouldn't be until Emperor Constantine established Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire that violence was even a viable option to Christian leaders like Augustine. (By the way, Constantine didn't get baptized until the end of his life precisely because he could not, would not renounce violence as a primary method of governance. Western civilization would have developed very differently if he had.) The early church saw themselves as being sent out by Jesus himself into a wild and dangerous world. “I am sending you out,” Jesus says, to live according to a higher standard by a greater form of power. It was Christians' ability to live in self-discipline and restraint that drew people in. The community regularly manifested the power of God through healing prayer and exorcism and reconciliation and patient self-giving service. The church had access to a type of power that was greater than anything their pagan neighbors had ever seen. **The church was full of people who were free, and who freely prayed for the freedom of others.**

For all the things that Vladimir Putin may be, he isn't free. News reports describe him as increasingly isolated and paranoid, in contact with only a handful of advisors. He has used COVID as an excuse to distance himself, literally, from anyone who would challenge his dark view of the world. When he agreed to meet with French President Emmanuel Macron, they sat 5 meters apart. That one person can be the source of so much needless pain, suffering and destruction is nothing new in human history. What is new is our shared perspective about such people in light of the existential threats humanity faces because we keep doing really reckless stuff. Every human on the planet knows – or should know – that we have truly global concerns that can only be addressed if we work cooperatively and collectively. Anything less is a zerosum

game with no winners, just losers. Invading a neighbor country to sow chaos and division for the sake of some petty form of nationalism is just so 20th century. It's the behavior of a childish bully. How is it that nations continue to be ruled by man-babies? When are we going to grow up?

Jesus came into the world to grow us up. From the moment Jesus said, "I am sending you out," he was ushering in a new way of living and a new way of living together. "They will know you are my disciples by the way you love each other," he said (John 13:35). This kind of love isn't about being nice. It's about being wise and courageous. It's about following in the way of Jesus who poured himself out for the sake of others. It's about trusting God as much as Jesus did, and joining God in the bigger work. When we know God will provide us with our daily bread, we can be about the business of God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

In the third century, church leaders in Syria compiled a guide for Christian life together called (in English) *The Teaching of the Apostles*. It describes what life in the church was like on a day to day basis: how the deaconesses would go and wash the feet of the sick, how wealthy people would skip church so that they could go and serve the poor, and how all the believers – not just leaders – were "like wise doves, at peace with one another, striving to fill the church." The authors of the guide believed that spreading the message of the gospel was God's work, and it was their calling to be "helpers for God." (Kreider pg 226). Did you catch that? They believed that when it came to people believing in the good news of Jesus Christ, that it was **God who was doing the doing!**

As helpers of God, the work of Christians was to promote peace among themselves and, in extreme circumstances, seek the conversion of pagans who were wild and whose wildness cause of a lot of unnecessary trouble. The bishops were to announce peace, embody peace, and strive to make peace with all. The work of peacemaking was critical. "when peace was absent—when there was injustice among members or relationships were broken—in the view of the authors the church's worship was null and void." (Kreider pg 234)

What does it mean to "wise doves" today?

1. We acknowledge our prejudices against the work of peacemaking.

The early church was committed to the work of peacemaking, and that work was their most powerful evangelistic tool. The God of peace expressed power through His people, and the world was drawn to it. But "Peacemaking" is a term that makes a lot of people uncomfortable, even and especially in the church. It sounds weak to our ears. Even though the most deep and transformative movements in human history have been non-violent – the rise of Christianity being the critically important one to us – we still have a prejudice against peacemaking. We are so influenced by a culture that glorifies violence that we believe peacemaking is for the naïve.

Yet when Jesus called his disciples to be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves, there was to be no hint of naivete among them! Douglas Sean O'Donnell puts it this way: "We are to be godly but not gullible—snake smart, but not snake sneaky. For our character commends Christ; our godliness proclaims the gospel."

The Ukrainian Christians gathering in bunkers are anything but naïve! They know exactly what is happening and what the stakes are. Ukraine declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. I've got shoes that are older than that! We can rest assured that they haven't forgotten. That is why they are putting their trust in God and availing themselves of the most powerful force that exists: The power of asking God "Your kingdom come!"

2. We do the work of maintaining peace amongst ourselves.

We are so much of the world that it is far more likely to encounter Christians who sue each other than ones who confess and forgive each other. I serve on our Presbytery's MPT, and this afternoon another MPT member and I are going to meet with leaders of a church in conflict. The stories we have heard truly break my heart. And my fear is that, once these conflicts are out in the open, a lot of people will not just leave this church but will leave Christianity all together. As Jesus observed his disciples behaving like rivals instead of like brothers, he said them: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea (Mark 9:42)." When Christians fail at maintaining peace and righteousness with one another, the congregations are the ones to suffer.

3. We pray for the "wild ones" who are causing so much harm in the world.

We pray against the demonic forces that drive people to start wars. We pray against the principalities and powers and authorities to lead soldiers to follow unjust orders. We pray for the spirits of violence and oppression to be broken down, and for justice to be built up.

Vladimir Putin has lost his dang mind. We need to pray God to break through this madness in a way that only God can!

(Oh yeah, and when your favorite politician or pundit has lost THEIR dang mind, you need to stop following them and start praying for them too!)

You may ask: Is that all we are to do? We are "just" gonna pray? First, there is nothing small or limited about prayer. But second, prayer moves heaven AND prayer moves us. It moves us to send aid. It moves us to call on our government to stop turning a blind eye to the corrupt oligarchs who rob their people blind and prop Putin up. It moves us to receive refugees from stupid wars into our neighborhoods, into our schools, into our churches, and into our homes.

You've heard me say this before, but I need to keep repeating it: **If we the Church can't show the world a better way to live, who is going to do it?** We, the people of Jesus have the Holy Spirit-given power to be the wisest, most self-controlled, most generous, most patient and enduring people on earth.

Let us pray.