



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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For Love of Country
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth" (Psalm 46:9-10).

One hundred years ago today, at 11:00 in the morning local time, the armistice to conclude what was called The War to End All Wars took effect. At that moment a correspondent from the *Times* wrote from the front, "four years' killing and massacre stopped, as if God had swept His omnipotent finger across the scene of world carnage and cried, 'Enough!'"¹

Human beings cause wars, not God. As the New Testament letter of James says, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" Among the cravings endemic to humanity is the longing for glory and honor. Most individuals can't attain those things on their own, so the tribe or nation has been a focus of collective egoism all through history. People seek glory through their groups, and they want to believe that their tribe is great, or even the greatest. The trouble, of course, is that many tribes want the same thing, and so their competing claims lead naturally to conflict and war.

Everyone wanted glory, and they all put their own country first, but nobody wanted what the Great War

¹ Adam Hochschild, "The Eleventh Hour," *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2018, p. 30.

brought: 20 million dead, 21 million or more wounded, new technologies of destruction, and resentments that would lead to another war within a generation. In one of those little ironies of history that somehow signify the whole, a British baby born at exactly 11:00 a.m. on Armistice Day was christened “Pax” by his parents, only to be killed 21 years later in the Second World War.²

Last year, Graham Allison, one of our most highly regarded scholars of international relations, published a book called *Destined for War*. The subtitle is “Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?” All of us with degrees in international affairs have studied Thucydides because, though the technology of war has changed dramatically since the time of the ancient Greeks, human nature has not. What Allison calls Thucydides’s Trap, in a nutshell, is that when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, conflicting fears and miscalculations often lead to war. A history project at Harvard studied this dynamic in sixteen cases and found that war resulted in all but four. Allison says war is not inevitable, but we’re more likely to avoid it if we learn the lessons of history, including the history the whole world remembers solemnly today.³

On what we now call Veterans’ Day, we give thanks for the service of so many who sacrificed in the armed forces on behalf of our country. One of the most moving places I’ve ever visited is a veteran’s hospital, and I’ve

²Ibid.

³ Graham Allison, *Destined for War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

known several veterans who still carried the wounds of war decades later – some of them physical and visible, others the invisible but equally real wounds of the mind and spirit. A fitting response to such sacrifice is for all of us to offer our continuing gratitude and support.

But if Veterans' Day is a time to honor those who sacrificed for love of country, it's also a time to reflect on what it means to love our country, and what kind of country we want ours to be.

Those of us who are parents love our children, and we know that loving them means wanting what's best for them. That includes providing enough material security, but also cultivating their character, so that they become decent human beings who care about others as well as themselves. To love someone is to want that person to become the best that he or she can be. And to love our country is to want it to be the best it can be, appealing to what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature.

We can love our country through the armed forces, but we can also love it through moral and spiritual forces. The best kind of patriotism wants not just to defend the country but to make it worth defending. No individual or nation becomes great simply by declaration. If nations or individuals ever achieve real greatness, they do it by practicing such classic virtues as justice, courage, moderation, and wisdom. Great nations, like great individuals, strive to live up to their highest ideals, confessing their faults honestly in order to overcome them.

They don't pretend to be better than they are, they strive to become better.

If that's true, we still have a lot of work to do in America, precisely because we love our country. And for people who love God, our love of country, like all our other loves, needs to be rightly ordered by our devotion to God and the guidance God gives for the way we ought to live.

Human beings are inclined to do easy things, which means we're always tempted to seek short-term rewards at the expense of long-term consequences. That's why sin is so popular: the benefits come first while the costs come later, and we humans notoriously discount the future.

Public policy works that way too. My doctoral dissertation in history at Carnegie Mellon was about, among other things, how the generation that lived through two world wars created a system of international institutions and relations to try to prevent such a calamity from happening again. The system strongly benefited the United States because it was designed principally by the United States, and for seven decades or so it worked fairly well.

In the last nine years we've enjoyed steadily declining unemployment, and the economy continues to grow, though that growth comes with yet another year of massive deficits, which the *Wall Street Journal* reports will add around \$779 billion to the \$21 trillion we've already accumulated. People want to believe that tax cuts will automatically pay for themselves, but most economists

don't believe that, and we have 35 years or so of ever-increasing debt to show that they don't. Conservatives focus on too much spending and liberals on too little revenue, but the truth is that either one will add to the debt we pass on to our children and grandchildren. In the 1990s we actually had four years of budget surpluses because the president and Congress adjusted both revenue and spending to make it happen. We could do that again with bipartisan compromise, but it would require leadership to reverse the bitter divisiveness of recent times.

There has long been discord and division in our country, but that leads some people to exactly the wrong conclusion. "It's always been this way," they say, "so we shouldn't worry about it. We'll get by, as we always have." But that kind of glib response ignores the suffering brought about by human folly, including the reason we have observances like Veterans' Day. The fact that people are perennially tempted to do dumb things, sometimes with terrible consequences, means we need to be always on our guard. It reminds us that civilization is a thin veneer over some ugly impulses, and we need all our efforts to preserve and protect it.

Among the easy, but ultimately destructive, things people do is cherry-pick facts and focus on other people's faults in order to distract attention from their own. We see it all the time, as pundits and politicians and partisans call out bad behavior in their opponents while excusing the very same behaviors in their own tribe. Some

commentators are so brazenly hypocritical that you wonder how they can take themselves seriously.

I often hear people say, when their tribe gets caught doing some bad thing, “Well, both sides do it.” But what kind of moral reasoning is that? If the other side’s behavior is awful enough for me to come down hard on them, why should my side get a pass for doing the same things? Didn’t our mothers tell us two wrongs don’t make a right? Don’t we tell our own children that? If “both sides” do bad things, then all of us have a responsibility to hold our own side accountable, instead of perpetuating the hypocrisy that undermines morality itself.

The climate we create by what we do, and what we encourage or tolerate, has enormous implications for society, and if we really love our country we will work hard to hold everyone, including ourselves and our own tribes, to a higher standard.

Words matter too, and not just actions, because speech is in fact another form of action. Christians know this as well as anyone, since the Bible tells us that the world itself was created through the Word of God, and we believe that the Word became flesh in Christ to show us how to live.

Words matter, which is why people run all over the country making speeches, and why they host talk radio, and promulgate opinions on cable TV and the internet, and post messages on social media. They do all that in order to influence people one way or another, and to paint

a positive image of themselves or a negative image of people they don't like.

Some individuals and groups spend huge amounts of time and energy and money to motivate people with their words. That's why it's disingenuous at best when they turn around and disavow any responsibility for the impact of their speech. Of course, those who spew hateful words and demonize others and play on people's fears may not be the proximate cause when someone goes out and commits a crime consistent with their messages. But to say that all such criminals are simply insane is an obvious attempt to avoid responsibility for the climate they help to create.

Experts on crime tell us that few perpetrators of violence are in fact mentally ill. Instead, they're full of hatred or rage. Our national security agencies monitor speech in all kinds of groups, from foreign provocateurs and religious extremists to domestic purveyors of racial, ethnic, and religious hatred. It's just one more form of hypocrisy to acknowledge that other people's rhetoric can have terrible consequences, while pretending that no such consequences ever follow from our own.

If you've ever had a leak in your roof at home, you know that water can run along the rafters, so that damage in the ceiling or walls does not always appear right below the hole in the roof. Hatred and hostility are like that too. They don't always come out in the immediate location of the source. Hatred can take the form of racism, or anti-Semitism, or religious terrorism, or political hostility, or

even domestic violence. But hate is hate, and those who incite hatred of any kind bear some responsibility for wherever it appears. And those of us who tolerate hateful speech when it comes from our own party or tribe also share some degree of responsibility, if only by our acquiescence.

When terrible things happen in our country, people sometimes say “This is not who we are; we’re better than this.” I don’t say that, because manifestly, we’re not better than this right now, as these things keep happening among us. Three weeks ago, a man sent pipe bombs to a dozen or so people he hated. By the end of that week another man filled with hate killed eleven innocent worshipers in a synagogue. And while we’re still mourning the loss of our friends and neighbors here in Pittsburgh, yet another man, this time a veteran, killed a dozen more people at the other end of the country.

We’re obviously not better than this yet; but we can become better, and we must. If we truly love our country, we can’t acquiesce in all this ugliness. We mustn’t tell ourselves that it’s always been this way; or that “both sides do it,” as if that was some sort of excuse; or that anyone who does such terrible things must simply be insane. Those are all ways of avoiding our collective responsibility to make our country better. We need to stop doing the easy thing by passing the buck, and take up the harder task of holding ourselves and our own tribes accountable to a much higher standard.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were among the giants of our Founders' generation, but for a time they were bitter political rivals. Later on, when both were retired, Adams wrote to Jefferson, "You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other." Through their correspondence they became friends again, and in another one of those strange ironies of history, they died a few hours apart on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Our nation has always had rivalries and conflicts, from the very beginning. We can't prevent every bad thing from happening, but we can do much more to seek justice and freedom from fear and equal opportunity for everyone. We need to do those things if we love our country, because only then can our nation become great in ways that will be pleasing to God, who made America to be beautiful after all.



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