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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Matthew 6: 7-13
May 1, 2022

Lead Us Not Into Temptation:
Resisting the Logic of Violence

My offering this morning comes in the form of fragments, shards and remains strewn about as if by an explosion. These shards, these fragments, are all woven around the words found in the Lord's Prayer: lead us not into temptation.

First fragment. In 1856, Henry Ward Beecher was the most famous minister in the United States. The country was hurtling toward war over slavery, and Beecher was a fierce abolitionist. In the mid 1850's, the frontline in the battle against slavery took place in Kansas, as pro- and anti- slavery factions waged guerilla warfare upon one another. Beecher found the practice of enslavement so abhorrent that, as a Congregationalist Minister, he advocated sending guns to the abolitionists in Kansas. One report reads thus: "(Beecher) believed that the Sharps Rifle was a truly moral agency, and that there was more moral power in one of those instruments, so far as the slaveholders of Kansas were concerned, than in a hundred Bibles." Guns from New England started flowing west, in boxes that came to be known as "Beecher's Bibles."

When the bombs started falling on Ukraine, I thought about Henry Ward Beecher and his "Bibles." The invasion was barbaric and cruel. All those apartment complexes with smoldering gashes; all those bodies in the streets; all those shattered government buildings; was this the neo-fascist frontier? After years of sowing discord on social media, was this the next stage of development in the arsenal of far-right authoritarianism? When confronted with that kind of aggression, what possible role can piety serve? It's awful to contemplate, but what better way to resist barbaric cruelty than by taking up arms, standing firm, and saying, like Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "You shall not pass!" Perhaps Beecher was right: when confronted with evil, there's more moral power in a rifle than in a hundred Bibles.

"What's the best way to help Ukraine in this awful moment?" That's what we all wondered in the days after the invasion. The answer quickly returned. "We need weapons. And armor." The U.S. and much of Europe answered the call, supplying guns, and especially missiles, to the Ukrainians. Contemplating all the school teachers, the office workers, the stay at home dads, and even the moms who were suddenly thrust into a conflict they never would have chosen, I briefly wondered: if a faith community wishes to stand against encroaching fascism, should we be sending flak jackets, helmets, guns? Is this the time to resurrect Beecher's Bibles?

I'm not often given to such thoughts. I come out of a pacifist tradition, and I abhor the casual embrace of guns in the United States. I won't allow my children to play with so much as a water pistol, nevermind first person shooter video games. Once, when Augie returned home from a birthday party with a water gun designed to look like an assault rifle, I confiscated it, and hid it in the garage. I care little about legal niceties or the language of the Second Amendment. Guns are instruments made for one purpose alone: killing from a distance. Bombs are meant to do the same. Only, they allow for killing at a far greater distance, and at a far greater scale. Still, one might reason, the world is a violent place, and force can only be countered with force. Is that what we mean to teach when we outfit children with fake weapons, allowing them to simulate shooting one another?

“Lead us not into temptation,” Jesus said. We say it too every Sunday. What is it that we’re praying for when we utter that phrase? What are we hoping to avoid? Certainly, situations in which our personal integrity might be challenged or shattered. But is the phrase not better understood as a plea for the avoidance of a tragic fate, where circumstances conspire to make necessary, for us, choices we ordinarily wouldn’t consider, where, confronted by an impossible dilemma, we’re forced to say and do things that would ordinarily seem unthinkable? But isn’t the prayer a way of insisting that we not allow ourselves to be led in such a way? Is it not, somehow, attempting to avoid those dead ends and traps that make up the labyrinth of the human condition? Is it not a plea to be led in another way, a way that is not strewn with guns and with bombs?

It turns out that Connecticut has been particularly tempted toward killing from afar. In Divinity School, down in New Haven, I lived a few blocks away from an abandoned factory building. The windows were shattered. Trash was strewn around the lot. Graffiti marked up some of the walls. For a while it was one more sign of rust belt decay in New England. I never gave it much thought. Then I learned that the building had once been the site of Winchester, where guns were manufactured throughout the 19th and the 20th centuries. Just down the street from the place that generations of students studied the Bible and theology, the tools that would be used to slaughter Native Americans were being manufactured. Winchester shipped its guns out West, where it became a symbol of the frontier. But it wasn’t only Winchester. Remington made weapons in Bridgeport. Colt made guns in Hartford. Sharp’s Rifles were made in Bridgeport, and then in Hartford. Hopkins and Allen made guns in Norwich. Smith and Wesson made them in Springfield. Seen from a different vantage, the abandoned factory in New Haven, to say nothing of the abandoned factories in the aforementioned cities, are all monuments to the genocidal intentions of a young country, learning how to kill from a distance.

If you go to San Jose, California, you can visit the Winchester Mystery House. It’s a mansion that was built by Sarah Winchester, heir to the fortune - the killing, if you will - that the Winchesters earned in New Haven. The largest purchaser of Winchester guns was the U.S. Department of War. The Department bought guns in massive quantities for one reason: to kill Native Americans. Mrs. Winchester built stairways that lead nowhere, bookcases that conceal doorways, doors that open to nothing, all in an attempt to elude the ghosts that she believed were haunting her. She may have been right. There’s no better metaphor for the moral labyrinth of killing from a distance than the Winchester Mystery House. It is the very definition of what it means to be led into temptation: a place that forever traps, confines, and tricks you.¹

Still, maybe Beecher was right. Maybe he understood something that only those in crisis can grasp: that armchair moralism about violence counts for nothing when evil is unleashed, when you’re forced to respond. But I’m not so sure. The killed and the maimed, stacked far and wide over the last century and a half, stand between us and Beecher. Perhaps, by now, we should know better. The words of the prayer return to us again: lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. How shall we avoid this temptation? How can we avoid this evil?

Sven Lindqvist was a writer who saw more clearly than most the inhumanity of the modern era. His many works stand as a plea to avoid the labyrinthine traps of violence. They’re filled with difficult stories, but their very existence suggests a place in which to stand, a place beyond the killing. Despite their gloomy topics, I read them, paradoxically, as testaments of hope. In his book, *A History of Bombing*, he tells us that our era, this era, the one where bombs rain down on Ukraine, began on November 1, 1911. That’s when an Italian pilot leaned out of

¹ An insight found in Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), pg. 234-235.

his aircraft to drop a hand grenade on a group of unsuspecting Libyans. It was the first recorded instance of aerial bombardment, initiating a sequence of events that leads through the London air raids and the Dresden firebombing, through Hiroshima and Nagasaki, through bombs falling on Baghdad and on Gaza.² It reached its apotheosis in Obama's drone strikes on Yemen. In mid April, the *Times* ran an article about the terrible crisis of conscience faced by those drone pilots. They were in an air conditioned shipping container in the desert outside Las Vegas. They dropped bombs by remote control. "Soul fatigue" is how one person described the effects of that work upon the drone operators.³ That seems like a polite way to describe the mental breakdowns that routinely occur among the operators.

Just this week, the President requested some \$30 billion in order to aid Ukraine. I'm glad he did. At least, I think I am. Much of that will be spent on Stinger missiles, produced by the Raytheon Corporation, in a plant located in Tucson, Arizona. It bears asking: who's profiting from this war? If there are those who are tempted toward the way of Beecher's Bibles, who are the enablers, and what stake do they have in the matter? Let's chase the question. The top five defense contractors in the world, in terms of spending, are located in the United States. They are: Lockheed Martin, Raytheon Technologies, Boeing, Northrup Grumman, and General Dynamics. Each of them has annual contracts that range from \$40 to \$70 billion a year. Taken together, the top five have defense contracts that amount to more than \$250 billion spent every year. And that's only the top five. There are others. If you were to draw a map of where their offices and production facilities are located, it would form a giant U, extending down the East Coast, across the southern states and through places like Texas and Arizona, and then up the West Coast to Seattle.⁴ It's not an exaggeration to say that those are the regions that have remained relatively recession proof for the past thirty years, while much of the rest of the country has suffered. The prosperity of the United States, or at least a certain segment of the United States, has been predicated upon the production of instruments that perfect the art of killing from a distance.

If that's true, there must also be a market in which to sell the products developed by Lockheed, Raytheon and all the rest. Surely that's one reason that after the fall of the Soviet Empire, NATO has actually expanded, rather than contracting. George Kennan, the leading Cold War specialist in the United States in the post-WWII era, famously argued against the expansion of NATO into Central Europe, arguing that it would fatally damage efforts to convert Russia from an enemy into a partner. That has proven true. Just as the Monroe Doctrine once enabled the United States to wage fierce combat anytime a European power exerted influence in the American hemisphere, Russia has proven to be touchy about similar encroachments. Arming Eastern Europe has proven to be a powerful market force. Let us also recall that the war is creating another valuable market as well: when the bombs cease to fall, the work of rebuilding will commence.⁵

Clearly, we need NATO right now. But perhaps in the not too distant future, we'll come to another crossroads like the one that George Kennan observed. Perhaps that's the time to renew a conversation about what it would take to de-escalate not only NATO, but also much of our defense spending, channeling that money into the social services that have steadily been eroded

² Lindqvist, Sven, *A History of Bombing*, (New York: The New Press, 2001), pgs. 1-2.

³ "The Unseen Scars of Those Killing by Remote Control," by Dave Phillips. Published on April 15, 2022 in *The New York Times*.

⁴ The insights into the geography of defense contractors in the US, along with the economic engine they provide, is indebted to David Harvey's podcast on March 24, 2022. "War - Who Benefits From It?"

⁵ Insights learned from David Harvey. See previous footnote.

for the past forty years.⁶ Perhaps the time is coming when we might once again be afforded an opportunity to divert money currently being used for projects that kill from a distance, and toward projects that promise a future for the planet, like green energy and other ecologically sustainable initiatives. Perhaps that's the time to funnel investments into the middle of the country, to counter the despair and gloom of so many forgotten towns.

Say we resist the impulse leading toward Beecher's Bibles. Does that make us beautiful souls, maintaining our piety while depending upon others to do our dirty work? Perhaps. But I prefer to see it another way. I prefer to think that we exist as a sign and as a promise of what may still come to be: a human family that chooses, insofar as it is able, not to enter the labyrinth of violence and killing, even at great risk to itself. Of a human community that prays not to be led into such temptations, but practices other methods as a means of resisting evil.

I would have us consider another way, one both tested and novel. It's not a solution. But it is a different corridor within the labyrinth, one with fewer dead ends. This past week, a new program was announced that allowed individual households to apply to house Ukrainian refugees. That's something we know how to do. But this is a new strategy, and it would have to run separately from our existing refugee resettlement program. Prior to this, refugees couldn't be housed with families, largely to protect their privacy and to prevent exploitation. This new program, called Uniting for Ukraine, allows any of us to host refugees in our homes, provided we pass a security screening and can demonstrate the financial wherewithal to help. I'm not suggesting that we should all apply. Some of us have extra space, some of us do not. Some of us have extra money, some of us do not. Some of us have extra time, and some of us do not. What I do wonder, however, is if there might be one, or perhaps several people in our congregation who might be led to explore this idea together. Say there were three households capable of pulling this off. Or say there were five. Or say there was just one. What if, as a community, we then created a support network so that those households weren't shouldering the load alone - providing financial support, but also medical, educational, language, transportation, and other support services?

Some will say that we're already stretched thin with one refugee family in town. Some will say that it will become too complex. That may be. But imagine what it's like in Poland right now, and other places throughout the EU. If we wish to, we could find the resources we need to realize such a vision. Talk to me if you think you might want to apply for that program. You can find a little more information in your bulletins.

There exists, in our country, a near magnetic attraction to violence as a social solution. From Henry Ward Beecher to the Winchester gun factory, from drone strikes launched in a desert to the multi-billion dollar weapons manufacturing industry, it can be hard to sense that other ways are even possible. They are possible. They're opened whenever we pray those words that Jesus taught to his disciples, words that we speak every week: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Let us be among those who take those words seriously, so seriously, in fact, that we work to realize the upside down kingdom, the gentle power, and the peaceable glory with which the prayer concludes. Amen.

⁶ Ibid. See above.