

Luke 12:35-39

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

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It had to happen. After 35 years of steadfastly avoiding singing *Onward Christian Soldiers* during a worship service I was responsible for planning, someone, who shall remain nameless, suggested we include the singing of a favorite hymn during the service, and I went along with it. I know that the particular hymn is a favorite of many, but it did not occur to me that someone would actually request it, although I don't know why I thought this.

But another thing that did not occur to me was to avoid singing it. Those of us who plan our worship had made a covenant with you such that we will sing your favorite hymn if you request it, and if you are here to enjoy singing it with the congregation.

I like to think that I've become easier to get along with over the years and the fact is that singing *Onward Christian Soldiers* is probably not going to be the end of the world. My objection of course has always been the warlike language, and the triumphal tone that has been visited on so many generations of young boys and men as they depart for the rougher neighborhoods and more dangerous places all over the world. The sad and sick psychology that lies behind that is the attempt to make these youngsters feel heroic, who have done nothing to merit the name hero except to show up and sign on the bottom line.

Part of my problem with all of this was the war of my generation. So many at the time, and now with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight understand what a wasteful effort the Vietnam experience was for our country-- to say nothing of Vietnam. At best it was merely shameful, at worst it was as many of us young militarists said at the time, “as wars go, it wasn't much, but it was the only war we had at the time.”

So I wasn't going to sing the darned hymn and nobody was going to make me but situations alter cases, as they say, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have changed my mind in terms of the righteousness of the cause-- that is dumping the bums that exploit, oppress, and terrorize their countrymen and women; provided that we do not jump in to add to the terror of the innocents, the oppression of the population, or to supplant such a government with one of our choosing that proves to be equally bad. I tried to explain all of that in my most recent newsletter article.

The other thing about the hymn is that there is a lot of truth lying behind the lines, as it

were, of the title. The fact is that people who take their religion seriously are always engaged in conflict. You can call it what you want, temptation, evil, the powers of darkness, the devil in all his or her guises and disguises. (What, you thought the devil was just male? Possibly. But I've known some women who could wear those shoes as well!)

Islam is engaged as well in the struggle. In their religion, the Muslims speak of two kinds of struggle or conflict. They call it *jihad* the great *jihad* is the one that goes on inside of us, the one I'm talking about, the one that *Onward Christian Soldiers* is talking about. This is the struggle that desires us to turn away from sin and to embrace a life of ethics and character where we intentionally try to avoid doing wrong. As we all know, this struggle is not an easy one.

Where our hymn goes astray, is not in its words but in the interpretation that leads us to the lesser *jihad*. That is the external struggle where we fight to make the world a better place. Ironic, isn't it? The great *jihad* is basically internal-- the struggle of myself against me, or yourself against you. The lesser *jihad* involves the believer fighting against the world, battling to restore the world to some sort of Eden-like perfection. Christians might say that it is the function of working with God to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, in our time.

I will argue that the great *jihad* is truly the greater of the two because if you or I are not prepared within, there won't be much happening without.

Which brings us to our passage for this morning.

I believe that there are internal and external struggles that lie within and without each one of us and I don't have to resort to Islam for an ethic of struggle, there's plenty of evidence of the same within our own faith. Here's the thing. If we know we are to engage or are engaged in a struggle then we must prepare. Just like, "like those who are waiting for their master to return. . ."

In fact in any human activity that is worthy of our effort requires preparation. When the teenaged David went out onto the floor of the Valley of Elah to shut the mouth of the giant Goliath forever, he went prepared-- not with the Philistine's weapons, but with a good idea, a sling, and five stones.

All of this sort of begs the question about what your struggles are and what mine are. Maybe you don't think that you have any need to struggle, maybe you think that you've got it all wrapped up and together-- but think again, because simply becoming Christian is a struggle, sort of like being a Christian soldier marching-- as to war! And there is the need for preparation because we don't want to engage the enemy untrained.

In the church-- preparation, basic training, boot camp, whatever you want to call it usually falls under the banner of something called Christian Education. Most people think of CE as Sunday School, the occasional Bible study, or book group. It's the place

where people sit around and listen to boring lectures, much like basic training used to be in the military, but unlike the military, we don't have the opportunity to visit the church's version of the rifle range, the compass course, the obstacle course and so forth. So in many churches and in most of Christianity there is a gap between theory and practice that is far worse than we find in the military. In the church we talk theory and then say, "Go get 'em: great jihad or small jihad. Go out and fight the demons within (great jihad) or the demons without (small jihad).

Part of the problem, the reason for such a gap is a reluctance for many of us to engage in anything that may tax our brains, or make us think, or heavens to Betsy, actually change our minds. Let's not be smothered by smugness-- as though we already know everything there is to know, or believe all of the right stuff we need to believe. But you know something? Moses called God to come up to the top of a mountain, where Moses encountered God. God did not call Moses to climb a plateau, to arrive at a certain level and stop. He had Moses go all the way to the top. Same with Jesus, he wasn't transfigured before Peter, James, and John atop a hilltop or a knoll, but on a mountain top. I don't think for a minute that God wants us to stop our training, because life is a kaleidoscope, or as Frank Sinatra reminds us in a little tune called, "That's Life, " we might be "flyin' high in April," but find ourselves "shot down in May." And things often change faster than that.

The struggle isn't going to go away. Life isn't going to go away. The only thing I know about life that is certain is that it will change, the struggle continues, within and without, how dare we show up to engage it without the best resources that we have? It would be like marching as to war without knowing how to shoot, or communicate, or dress a wound.

And I know that many place faith in Jesus to protect them, but our belief does not shield us from evil, or terror, or oppression. The best and the most our faith does for us is to give us strength to engage evil, terror and oppression. God does not protect us, but God accompanies us like the hymn says, "with the cross of Jesus, going on before."

It is on us, therefore, to (with apologies to the Department of the Army) to be "the best that we can be." We owe God no less with our service, we owe no less to ourselves. The battle rages, it changes, it challenges; in order to survive, to live well and with integrity, we must be willing to engage the enemy and to be well prepared.