

David Hilfiker: Wage Peace

Sermon for Seekers Church

David Hilfiker

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Wage Peace

I must admit to being overwhelmed at the task of preaching to you this morning. Here we are again, on the eve of our government's

- invading yet another country,
- killing yet more innocent people,
- initiating violence that will only rebound as violence almost always does,
- acting in defiance of the rest of the world and
- establishing as acceptable the doctrine of pre-emptive war,

for goals that remain murky at best, and more likely just plain wrong.

We of the scattered churches have written letters, marched in protests, e-mailed everyone in our address books, lobbied Congress, signed on with MoveOn.org and tried in every way we knew to make ourselves heard. What do we do now? What is there left to say?

I visited Iraq this past December because I wanted to hear the voices of the people there. As usual, the voices of the victims are missing from our policy deliberations. One might well believe that the only person living in Iraq was Saddam Hussein.

One set of contrasting facts stands out from my trip: every Iraqi I talked to at any length held the United States

responsible for enormous suffering over the twelve years since the imposition of the economic sanctions and the first Gulf War, yet every single person I talked to was welcoming and friendly to me as an American. Despite that friendliness, I found it painful to be there as an American: I experienced my own country and its policies as the source of great and needless suffering.

As usual, the children endure the worst of the suffering. Before 1990, Iraq was well on its way to becoming a modern, industrialized nation. As undemocratic as the country is, as brutal as Saddam is with his enemies, the socialist government of Iraq had nevertheless invested heavily in public health and social services. Clean water and sanitation were accessible; modern health care was provided for all and education through university was available. The mortality rate for children under five years of age was about 5% and declining. The UN estimates that-without the war and the subsequent sanctions and given the usual advances in public health and health care-the under-five mortality rate would now be about 3%. Instead, 13% of Iraqi children now die before the age of five, approximately 5,000 **preventable** childhood deaths a month. Proportionately, it is as if there were an extra 60,000 deaths among children every month in the United States.

Most of these children die from some combination of contaminated drinking water and malnutrition. Bombing during the war destroyed or damaged many sanitation and water treatment plants, but the economic sanctions that have been the most devastating. The UN instituted these sanctions after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, prohibiting all member nations from trading with Iraq. They were slightly modified in 1996 through the Oil-for-Food Program, which allows Iraq to trade some of its oil in exchange for humanitarian goods like medications and food. However, all requests for these humanitarian goods must go through a Security Council committee on which the US has veto power. Because of concerns

for "dual use"-humanitarian goods that *might* be used militarily-at any given time there are several billion dollars worth of goods being delayed or blocked completely.

These draconian economic restrictions have kept the country from rebuilding after the war. Even getting parts to repair old facilities has been almost impossible. So, 500,000 tons of raw sewage is now dumped into Iraqi waterways every day. Since almost all the available water in Iraq is surface water, drinking water must be taken from those same waterways. The UN estimates that-even after treatment-40% of all drinking water is contaminated. The result is a rate of childhood diarrhea three to four times normal and a rate of death from diarrhea ten times higher than before 1990. Typhoid fever, malaria, cholera and tuberculosis have re-emerged as common diseases.

The city of Basra lies in the South, just above the Kuwaiti border, where much of the fighting took place. I visited a hospital there, and an obstetrician told me he had experienced a 15-fold increase in the rate of birth defects in his practice. We visited a baby born with all of its intestines outside the abdomen. That kind of deformity occurs anywhere, of course, but the doctors seemed certain that what had been rare before 1990 was now commonplace. They hold responsible the pulverized dust from the depleted-uranium-tipped munitions that the US used in the first Gulf War.

I visited a cancer ward in the same hospital. Five children lay waiting for death from leukemia. Again, the radioactive dust from the depleted uranium is the most likely culprit, although pollution and malnutrition are probably involved, too. Whatever the exact pathophysiology, the war and the sanctions are clearly the ultimate cause.

To make matters worse, appropriate cancer chemotherapy is almost never available because one medication or another of the treatment protocol does not make it through the sanction committee, so almost no child gets the full regimen that would

make successful treatment likely. Instead, most die.

Iraq is a police state where the criticizing the government is a capital crime, so I was never able to talk with Iraqis about their feelings toward **their** government. But in our conversations, they pleaded with me to understand that the sanctions, too, have been a weapon of mass destruction-the only one **used** in Iraq in the last ten years-and that any new war would provoke massive suffering. Many times, I heard something similar to the phrase, "Tell the people in your country that we're human beings, too."

Some of the older, well-educated people were very familiar with and even admired the United States. They had been educated before the war in American schools in the Middle East, and most had spent significant amounts of professional training time in the US, too. One retired surgeon said to me,

My 'scientific fathers,' were all Americans, so I have always had good feelings for your country. The American Constitution has been a model for the rest of the world. People have always gone to America seeking freedom. You are a great country. But you must understand: We hate your government's policies, and the young people are beginning to hate you. The US has lost the deep love that the rest of the world has felt for it ... and the reason is obvious.

What I felt in our conversations was a sense of betrayal that this great country had stooped so low, had so thoroughly lost its way.

Over the past several weeks-and especially over the last few days-I have been struggling with how to respond to all of this. Early this morning I got up and re-wrote the last half of this sermon. Let me share with you some assorted observations.

- Over half of Americans believe that Iraq is directly

connected to the attacks of 9/11, something even the Administration has not claimed. That statistic has not become national news.

- Last week on public television, the evening news program devoted at least a minute to an impassioned accusation by an Iraqi refugee that doctors in a Baghdad hospital had murdered his two children. The visibly distraught father said his children had gone into the hospital healthy and had died. He did not say how he knew that the children had been deliberately killed or why doctors would do that, and he offered no evidence. I'm sure the refugee father believed his accusations, but for a reputable national news program to repeat such unsubstantiated, and inflammatory, allegations is outrageous-especially as the country makes a decision about war.
- Since returning home from Iraq, I have been reading mountains of material about this war and the political response to it. What is utterly astonishing to me is that on the eve of this invasion, no one is sure why the Administration is **really** pursuing it. Few people (and almost no one outside of the United States) believe the weapons-of-mass-destruction argument, but commentators cannot quite agree about other motives, either. Is it oil, is it Israel, is it economic dominance? On the eve of war, it seems bizarre that we do not now why it is happening.
- For months, the UN's chief nuclear inspector Mohammed ElBaradei has been repeating that Iraq has no active nuclear weapons program-not just that they have not found anything yet but that as far as they can tell there **is not any program**. While not rebutting ElBaradei with substantial evidence, the US continues to state as fact the opposite. President Bush and Secretary of State Powell have repeatedly alluded to Iraqi purchases of aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear fuel production and Iraqi attempts to buy nuclear fuel in Africa. On Friday,

ElBaradei documented that the purchased aluminum tubes could not have been used for nuclear fuel production and that the documents purporting to show attempts to buy African nuclear fuel were forgeries. The Secretary of State said he was sticking by his story.

- Over the past year the Administration has indicated that it plans on resuming nuclear weapons testing, plans on using nuclear “bunker-busting” bombs, will consider responding with nuclear weapons to any Iraqi chemical or biological weapons attack, and is looking to build and use mini-nuclear weapons. The Administration has claimed the right to attack any nation that it believes may someday endanger us. The Administration has publicly enshrined world dominance as national policy.
- Since 9/11, there has been an extraordinary loss of civil rights. The recently leaked Patriot Act II proposal would allow secret arrests and detention. It would also allow stripping US citizens of their citizenship for contributing to organizations the Justice Department named as terrorist organizations, even if the citizen was not aware of the accusation.

I cannot make sense of all this except to say that it appears we are in the middle of a national meltdown and hardly anyone seems to notice. Despite our position as the sole superpower, we are renouncing fifty years of international efforts at nuclear non-proliferation. We have declared a policy of pre-emptive war, an obviously untenable basis for peace among nations. Civil rights are disappearing. Against almost the rest of the world, we are entering into a war for reasons of which no one seems sure. The media are not only refusing to blow the whistle on all of this but also are inflaming things. What is going on? Why is no one calling this crazy?

While I will continue to work at it, it seems clear to me that we are not going to stop this insanity anytime soon. So, how do I at least renounce my part in this? How do I refuse

induction?

A few weeks ago, theologian Stanley Hauerwas spoke at the Festival Center. He reminded us that, for the Christian, **loyalty** to the nation is idolatry; one's only loyalty is to God and through God to all peoples and all nations. Ultimately, I am not a citizen of the United States but of the Reign of God.

For the follower of Jesus, of course, this is always true at any time in relations to any nation. But at a time like this, when the American Empire seems intent not only on inflicting suffering elsewhere but on self-destruction, it's important for me to remind myself that that this empire is not my ultimate place of belonging.

What I have been thinking about these past few weeks is that as a follower of Jesus, I am called not only to resist this evil but also to refuse to participate. If I am honest, I must acknowledge that I am tied to this insanity through my privilege, especially through my lifestyle that consumes far more than my share of the world's resources. So, how do I step out?

While there are some obvious answers to this question that involve living more simply, there are also many unanswered questions. I am feeling an urgent need to begin a conversation with others on how we can step out and live justly within this society. Undoubtedly, that conversation would lead, among other places, to advocacy for a radical reduction in our present consumer habits and standard of living. Ultimately, I am sure that it would have to lead to radical political actions.

Such a discussion feels too anemic in the face of this coming devastating war. Nevertheless, this war will not be the end of this Empire's reach. We will live in this crisis until we become either a more just nation or collapse of our own greed

and ignorance.

I will need some help in stepping out of this fog.