

Lead us not into Temptation

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I think I should start by joining the chorus of those who are stating the obvious when it comes to the war that is happening in the Ukraine. It is totally unjustifiable; an expression of sheer brutality and disregard for the rights of the Ukrainian people to determine their own destiny.

It is a tragedy on all sides, from the Ukrainian families that are being torn apart, all the way to those dying Russian soldiers who have had to betray their own hearts to invade in the first place. Perhaps the one bright spot in all of this is that most Americans are united in their condemnation of what Vladimir Putin has done.

On the one hand, this war seemed to come out of nowhere. But in reality it is the latest and most tragic expression of a trend toward authoritarianism. And for many of us, the inability of our democratic institutions to break free of this trend has been a source of ongoing frustration and anger. So what I would like to address briefly is the anger itself and the temptation to violence that it represents.

One of the most searing bits of video footage that appeared this past week was of a medical team trying to save a six year-old girl. She was

still in her pink pajamas. Her body was shattered beyond repair, perhaps by artillery fire. The team were sobbing, as they realized the futility of their efforts to save her. And one of the doctors, looked up at the camera and said, "Show this to Putin."

I could not have chosen more appropriate words and, hot with anger and heartbreak, I added my own - "Stop this insanity now, If you are not a heartless monster!" I'm sure those are words the doctor would have added himself, were he not so overcome by the cruelty behind this one among the already countless tragedies that have unfolded since Putin decided to invade.

But I was not finished reacting to what I had seen. My anger grew ruthless and cold as I brooded over Putin's cruelty. I felt myself being tempted into a daydream within the realm of what some scholars call the "myth of redemptive violence"; the belief that by a corresponding act of violence, we can eradicate evil and make everything better again.

It is the kind of dream sequence delivered to us in "Dirty Harry" movies where, during the first half the villain commits a series of heinous acts that display his senseless cruelty. And finally at the end, Clint Eastwood catches up with him and blows him away. And we feel a sort of joyful

euphoria, as though the killing were a salvific act. It's a powerfully seductive storyline. Boy would I like to be Dirty Harry Callahan urging Vladimir Putin to "make my day!"

The words of the Lord's Prayer, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" come to mind here. If we give in to the temptation to become ruthless and cold as a way to overcome the ruthlessness and cold-heartedness of the world's authoritarian leaders, then we have not overcome them. Rather, it seems to me that we become them, in miniature.

And so the question becomes, "How can I respond to the inhumanity around me without losing my own humanity? I think that is an important question for us to ask ourselves, not only in the face of this war and its perpetrators, but in the face of all the expressions of deceit and inhumanity that we experience.

Living with the reality that there is so much senseless violence in this world, it is sometimes hard to keep in mind that there is, in fact, a reality that can and does exist, where families *don't* get torn apart and diverse peoples *are* able to live together in peace and prosperity. But the existence of that most beautiful place depends on there being

people who are able to resist the temptation to fight evil on its own terms. It depends on people who live by a firm commitment to being rooted in loving kindness, justice and humility, no matter what happens.

That is the life Jesus lived. And as Christians we too are called to live in his Spirit; avoiding the temptation to bow down to Satan and his false promises of salvation.

Thankfully there are many people like this who exist. And already people are working to absorb the flow of refugees and aid agencies have moved into action. And the wheels are already turning in our congregation, seeking to extend our love where we can.

{May God grant us the courage, the creativity and the strength to be effective servants of God's love in the face of the evil in this world and for the sake of the people of the Ukraine}.

Uncomfortable addendum: Seeing so clearly what is driving this unfolding refugee crisis, I wonder how it may influence our attitudes toward other similar crises, for example the people who have been trying to cross our Southern borders.

Most are just ordinary people who are fleeing oppression, not unlike the reasons the Ukrainians are fleeing. Most are not criminals and drug dealers. If they weren't being persecuted in their homelands, they wouldn't leave them.

Will we still want an impenetrable wall to keep out the refugees, when the people being confronted by that wall are suddenly white Europeans? How comfortable are we with the argument that we should keep Ukrainian refugees out because they are potential "freeloaders who will want to take advantage of our welfare system," the way Mexicans and the people of Central America are routinely spoken of?

What is happening raises questions about the nature and limits of our love. Jesus's answer was that his love had no limits. What will be our answer?