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Peace that Passes Understanding: Four Paths to Opposing War
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After the remarkably creative and mildly controversial title of last fall’s Phi Kappa Phi lecture, it might appear that I have veered toward the overly pious. From Paul Simon, to the Apostle Paul.

In fact I have two quite specific things in mind with my title. First, my topic is only whether war is justified, not whether any violence is justified. Since pacifism is often identified with the renunciation of all violence, and some of my arguments lead to a conclusion well short of that, I deliberately left that term out of the title.

Having said that, I hope that you will indulge me tonight in using pacifism as a stand-in for opposition to war. It can mean more, and does mean more on the view that I will ultimately defend. But I will be offering a number of arguments whose conclusions are only about war, not about violence in general. So for tonight, let pacifism mean simply opposition to war.

Now to the pious part: “peace that passes understanding.” The peacemaking that I will ultimately defend may be, I fear, literally beyond understanding. The peace that Jesus invites us to enact will be found, at least on some accounts, at least irrational and perhaps unjust.

But the irrationality and injustice come later—not until we introduce Jesus. Before that I want to do what I hope will be some straight philosophy. Here, roughly, is my strategy: take any ethical principles on which you might base your thinking about war and show that each, plausibly, leads to opposition to war. Okay, any is a lot and we have only a short time, so I’ll narrow to four broad approaches—but four big enough that they capture the majority of ways of thinking about war. Hopefully big enough to capture yours. If not, I’ll want to hear about that later.

Consequentialist Pacifism?

Let’s begin where discussions of war so often begin: Is it worth it? Is it worth it? of course, conceives of ethical reasoning, at least about war, in terms of consequences. Do the benefits outweigh the costs? Do the terrible harms averted by war outweigh the terrible costs of war? War has a lot of terrible consequences, but it might forestall even worse consequences. When it does, perhaps we must choose war.

The name for this approach to reasoning about war is consequentialism. Although it is not popular among Christian ethicists, it is important to give it some consideration since it is, I think, the default approach of policy makers, and since, as I will argue shortly, many who would initially resist consequentialism back into it under the pressure of aggression.
Consequentialism determines the moral worth of an action by looking to the value of its outcomes, and claims, on most accounts, that the action required is the one whose outcome has greater total benefit than any alternative. Notice first just how permissive this doctrine is, or at least seems. Nothing is forbidden—nothing, that is, save failing to maximize benefit. If, in some set of circumstances, actions that we would typically find abhorrent—enslaving, torturing or killing the innocent—produce greater overall benefit than any alternative, they are permissible; indeed they are required.

Given this apparent permissiveness, consequentialism seems easily to justify going to war. However much suffering, say, the Second World War might have caused, imagine the untold suffering that would have resulted from not confronting Hitler. Imagine a complete ethnic cleansing of Slavs throughout Central and Eastern Europe, not just from western Poland. Imagine a worldwide Holocaust.

And it’s not just the going to war that consequentialism seems easily to justify; it also justifies whatever means maximize benefit, or maybe in this case we should say minimize harm. Did the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, granting the awful suffering they caused, prevent the far greater suffering that would have resulted from an invasion of Japan? Then those bombings were not only permitted—they were required.

If any standpoint justifies war, and the awful means used to wage it, it would seem that consequentialism does. But for all its permissiveness with respect to the kinds of actions it can justify, I want to suggest to those who might be attracted to it that it may be far more demanding than it first appears, and might, remarkably, result in opposing war.

Among the questions left open by the characterization of consequentialism I gave a moment ago—that it requires us to maximize benefit—is the question: for whom? When I’m counting up the benefits and harms of the courses of action I might take or the policies I might support, who is included in that calculation? A second question follows right behind that one—how much do they count?

One form of consequentialism, utilitarianism, is distinguished from the others by its answer to these two questions: everyone counts, it says, and everyone counts equally. Utilitarianism requires us, then, to choose the course of action that maximizes benefit when everyone is taken equally into consideration. That, as you can see, is a challenging doctrine.

When it comes to war the breadth of our concern is typically far smaller than utilitarianism demands. We typically give, if not exclusive consideration, at least far greater weight to the wellbeing of family, friends and fellow citizens than we do to the wellbeing of distant and anonymous people in other countries. Were we to take seriously utilitarianism’s challenge to consider everyone equally, our cost/benefit comparisons of military or non-military responses to threats might be very different, and may lead us to more readily oppose war than to support it.
I don’t want to press this point; utilitarianism’s universalism (everyone counts) and egalitarianism (everyone counts equally) are among its most controversial elements (though they do seem like its points of closest affinity with the teachings of Jesus). Perhaps in matters of international affairs we should privilege us over them, where the “us” is our fellow citizens and the “them” is those in other lands.

Suppose then, that those of you attracted to consequentialism abandon utilitarianism, with its rigorous demands, for what we might call national-interest consequentialism, privileging the wellbeing of our fellow citizens over the wellbeing of others, or maybe the wellbeing of our state over that of other states. Even this national-interest consequentialism presents, I submit, serious challenges.

One thing that is required in the pursuit of maximizing benefit is creativity. The assumption that how we’ve always done it is best is often fatal to maximizing benefit. Pursuing the most beneficial outcome requires genuinely exploring the alternatives. But here pacifism typically gets extremely short shrift by its critics, at least in popular debates, if not in the philosophical literature.

When faced with aggression, if we give a non-violent response any consideration at all it is to compare the benefits a massive, disciplined, highly-trained, extremely well-equipped, extremely well-funded, very courageous military to a bunch of Quakers from the American Friends Service Committee equipped with megaphones and orange vests. Of course that comparison is going to favor the militarized alternative.

I exaggerate of course, but if you are serious about maximizing benefit, whether for all concerned, like the utilitarian, or just for the nation, like the nationalist, you won’t start with a tendentious comparison. You will draw a more robust comparison. Imagine, not two or three hundred members of the American Friends Service Committee, but 1.5 million, the leadership of which is trained at three of the best universities, and the remainder of whom complete weeks of intensive training followed by months and years of ongoing education. Imagine forging those 1.5 million Friends into a disciplined and efficient organization capable of putting all of its energies toward a shared end. Imagine equipping that force with whatever the non-violent equivalents are of Ohio class ballistic missile submarines, M1 Abrams tanks, F22 Raptor fighter aircraft, and the soon-to-be-christened USS Gerald R. Ford supercarrier. And imagine funding it with roughly three quarters of a trillion dollars each year.

This is the comparison the consequentialist needs in order to feel confident that the military alternative maximizes benefit. And lest it seem so outrageous as to not even bear consideration, we should remember that we do have historical precedents to inform our calculations. We know the results of the efforts of hundreds of thousands of modestly-trained, poorly-funded, civil rights protestors equipped with pens and paper, some TV cameras, and a tiny fleet of busses. We know the results of millions of modestly-trained, even more poorly-funded, even more ill-equipped Indians protesting British rule.
The skeptic might note something important about my examples: each was facing a largely benevolent regime. George Wallace, tough as he was, was no Hitler. When Hitler’s invading Poland, it’s not at all clear that my force of non-violent Friends can make any difference, no matter how numerous, well-trained, well-equipped and well-funded. They’ll just be sheep to the slaughter.

Perhaps (though perhaps not), but notice something important about this objection: *When Hitler’s invading Poland*. The objection imagines that massive, ruthless aggression is at the door. And in such an extreme emergency, the military option may well maximize benefit.

But those committed to maximizing benefit, won’t just do the cost/benefit analysis of the military and non-violent options in the face of aggression. At that point it may already be too late to maximize benefit. Truly maximizing benefit will require doing cost/benefit analyses all along—before aggression is at the door, recognizing that war, even were it to maximize benefit later, is likely be more costly than engaging early to address conditions that, left unchecked, will lead to the aggression. The time to do a cost/benefit analysis is not just in 1939 when Hitler invades Poland, but in 1929 when Germany is reeling from the aftermath of the Versailles treaty, growing increasingly polarized, and the US is calling its loans in response to its own financial crisis. What could our force of 1.5 million Friends do then?

Nothing I’ve said shows that consequentialism implies pacifism. Too much depends on contingent facts of particular cases. What I do want to ask, however, of those committed to maximizing benefit is: first, consider the breadth of your concern. In matters of war we often privilege an “us” over a “them.” This may be warranted, but should not be done unreflectively. Second, do cost/benefit analyses not just on obviously ineffective non-violent alternatives, but on comparably massive, comparably well trained, comparably equipped and comparably funded non-violent alternatives. We may not have those alternatives now. But if the calculations suggest that a comparable non-violent alternative might maximize benefit, at least you know what to work toward. Finally, do those calculations now, not just when the shooting starts. What approach maximizes benefit now in addressing challenges in Columbia, or Russia, or China, or any of dozens of places where injustice or conflict simmer, but have not yet boiled over into combat?

I believe if the consequentialist does these things, pacifism will be far more plausible.

Just War Pacifism

But as I said at the outset, you’re probably not a consequentialist. Its justification of any means in pursuit of the best ends runs deeply counter to the ethical intuitions of most people and is typically thought at odds with Christian ethics. Even if we grant a place for cost/benefit analysis in our moral reasoning, it is usually within limits. There are some things that we typically think impermissible, no matter what the cost of refraining from them. We can’t use human shields in battle, even if doing so will guarantee victory. We can’t use mass rape to terrorize the enemy, even if doing so
will shorten the war. We can’t torture those we know to be innocent, even if doing so will prevent a suicide bombing. It’s not that the suffering of the torture victim is greater than that of the bombing victims—it probably isn’t. It’s that some things just aren’t done.

It’s the inclusion of inviolable principles like these in reasoning about war that distinguishes our second major outlook on war, the just war tradition, from pure consequentialism. The just war tradition is complex even to summarize, but it is necessary that I outline its major elements in order to make the two points about it that I wish to stress tonight.

Recognizing the awful consequences of war and the potential to abuse war for unjust ends, the just war tradition is concerned with specifying the constraints on war, the conditions under which it is just. These constraints are of three kinds: the criteria for justly engaging in war, or *jus ad bellum* criteria; the criteria for justly prosecuting war, or *jus in bello* criteria; and the criteria for justly concluding war, or *jus post bellum* criteria. Tonight I will be interested primarily in the criteria for justly prosecuting war, *jus in bello* criteria.

Remember that consequentialism places no limits on the means used to maximize benefit; no strategy or tactic is impermissible if it maximizes benefit or minimizes harm. This is one point on which just war thinking takes strong exception. According to the just war tradition, some means are simply prohibited whatever the benefits of using them or the costs of refraining from them. Different commentators differ on how to carve up this territory, but six *jus in bello* prohibitions are widely agreed upon:

- No weapons of mass destruction
- Discrimination between combatants and non-combatants, and non-combatant immunity
- No use of excessive force
- Benevolent treatment of prisoners of war
- No use of means which are evil in themselves
- No reprisals

Our concern for the moment is not with the particulars of any one or other of these conditions. Just knowing that there are such constraints, having a rough idea what they are, and knowing that at least some are not the product of consequentialist reasoning is all we will need for the two considerations I want to raise about just war theory.

The first line of thought is just the simple observation that just war theory frequently collapses into one form of consequentialism or another, both in practice and in theory. Michael Walzer, perhaps the most powerful contemporary advocate of just war theory, famously argues for suspending *jus in bello* constraints on how war is fought in the face of a “supreme emergency,” where the threat to “the survival and freedom of political communities—whose members share a way of life, developed by
I fail to understand this willingness to abandon principled constraints on the waging of war in the face of a supreme emergency. I should be careful, of course I understand it in practice. Faced with the death of a nation, we might all be inclined not to let principle stand in the way of survival. No, what I fail to understand is why claim this position to be anything other than the consequentialism that, under pressure, it turns out to be.

Moreover, I fail to understand why one would hold off so long to abandon one’s principles. If it is ethical to abandon them in an emergency, then we are conceding that at some point, they become subject to cost/benefit analysis. But why at that point? The only answer can be that it is the point when the cost becomes too high. But that answer reveals that one has been engaged in consequentialist reasoning all along. It’s just that the cost/benefit analysis up to that point showed compliance with the constraints as maximizing benefit and minimizing harm. If not, if one has been upholding those principles up to the point of the supreme emergency at the cost of maximizing benefit, one will have been behaving unethically according to the principles one is now appealing to.

In fairness to Walzer he does recognize this apparent inconsistency. His response is to simply swallow it, claiming that those who abandon jus in bello constraints in the face of a supreme emergency were right to do so (and, incredibly, are rightly censured after the war). (Just and Unjust War 258, 324).

Whatever we think about Walzer’s position, his argument highlights a critical question: what are we willing to lose to uphold putatively inviolable principles? I’ll put it more strongly: are we willing to lose inestimably valuable things—democracy, freedom of religion, deep cultural traditions, the lives of our loved ones—are we willing to lose these to uphold our principles? Are we willing to lose, period?

If we are not, then we demonstrate that these principles were never inviolable to begin with. They were, perhaps, good rules of thumb, to be upheld when we can afford to do so for the sake their benefits—a clear conscience, or avoiding reprisal or revenge, or international prestige, or political capital. But if that is what they are, good rules of thumb, then it turns out they are a part of a consequentialist calculus, and our position is fundamentally consequentialist.

In short, just war theory that is not prepared to accept massive harm to uphold its inviolable principles is just a form of consequentialism, one that codifies certain contingent constraints. There is perhaps nothing wrong with that, but then we have to return to the implications of consequentialism that we raised a moment ago, not to mention much deeper concerns about the plausibility of consequentialism that I have not raised.
So the first challenge to just war theory is hanging onto it at all. But what if we do hang onto it? What if we do take the principles of justly waging war as in fact inviolable? We will, I think, be unable to support war, or at least the next war.

This is not a novel claim. Many have argued that the nature of modern warfare is such that it cannot be fought within the constraints of *jus in bello*. One common argument in this vein stresses the difficulty, if not impossibility, of maintaining non-combatant immunity: modern wars are fought in the midst of civilian populations; the combatant/non-combatant distinction has grown murky; and most decisively, modern weapons, preeminently nuclear weapons, are so powerful that they cannot be used in a way that discriminates between combatants and non-combatants.

While I believe this view is compelling, I am interested in a different problem: not that we *cannot* maintain *jus in bello* principles, but that we *have not*. That fact—that militaries, including the US military, regularly fail to fight within the constraints of *jus in bello*—has implications for the justifiability of entering the next war.

Imagine a situation in which all the criteria for justly going to war are met—perhaps the position of the United States on December 7, 1941. Now imagine that at that moment, we know in advance that in waging that war our forces or our government will violate criteria for justly waging war: US citizens of Japanese descent will be interred; US forces will engage in reprisals in response to German atrocities; Japanese civilians in Nagasaki will be killed in the second atomic bomb attack. What would that knowledge imply for the justice of entering the war? I submit that it would render entering the war unjust.

Of course we don’t have foreknowledge. But we do have a historical record that indicates, if not consistent, then at least frequent violation of the criteria for justly waging war *even where the cause is just*. Here are just a few examples from the last 70 years of American military engagement: targeted strikes by drones on specifically named terrorist leaders in the mountains of Pakistan; Abu Ghraib; the Highway of Death; the NATO bombing campaign during the Kosovo War; My Lai; the bombardment of Hanoi; Daejeon Prison executions; the firebombing of Dresden and of Tokyo; the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Many of these, maybe all, would spark great controversy, though bear in mind that the issue is not, at the moment, whether, say, the nuclear attack on Nagasaki saved more lives than it cost. That is a consequentialist rebuttal. What is at issue at the moment is whether the Nagasaki attack, and the others I have mentioned, violates just war theory’s *jus in bello* constraints. On that question there can be far less controversy.

Grant, then, if you will, that in many of the wars in which the US has been involved in the last three quarters of a century it has violated *jus in bello* principles. How should this shape our beliefs about the next war that the US will engage in? Does this history justify the hope that the US will abide by *jus in bello* principles in the next war? Sadly I have to conclude just the opposite, that we can be confident that in the next war, too,
the US will violate just war theory’s *jus in bello* principles. May we justly enter a war that we are confident will not be justly waged? I believe not.

In effect I am suggesting a new condition for justly engaging in war, a new *jus ad bellum* condition, one that looks back at how war has been waged, then looks ahead to how, given that history, we can expect the next war to be waged: if we lack confidence that *jus in bello* principles will be maintained, engaging in war is unjust.

The term for this kind of opposition to war, by the way, is just war pacifism—the claim that while war might be theoretically justifiable, under current conditions it cannot meet just war criteria, and so is unjustified. It is also, along with the consequentialist pacifism I sketched earlier, a contingent, not absolute pacifism, highly dependent on, in this case, contingent historical facts. Not all pacifisms are contingent, and we will turn now to two that are not.

**A Deontological Pacifism**

As we have seen, consequentialism is very difficult to resist when things of great value are at stake. But the implications of consequentialism—that maximizing benefit is the only intrinsic good, that any means is justified in pursuit of maximizing benefit, that finite value can be put on human lives so that they can be part of a calculation of overall benefit or harm—these implications, not to mention the practical challenges of foreseeing consequences and assigning them relative values, leave many convinced that consequentialism is fundamentally in error.

Consequentialism’s major rival, deontological ethics, takes exception especially to consequentialism’s claim that nothing except failing to maximize benefit is inherently wrong, claiming instead that some things are required, and some things prohibited regardless of the consequences of these actions. Different deontological theories differ on the source of these duties: from the nature or will of God, to the nature of human beings, to the dictates of reason. But all agree that at least some duties must be understood as binding independent of the consequences of our fulfilling them or foregoing them.

We have seen already that the inclusion of such inviolable principles distinguishes the just war tradition from pure consequentialism. We have just seen that strict adherence to the deontological principles of the just war tradition, like non-combatant immunity, can lead to just war pacifism.

Many have gone further, arguing that deontological principles require not the mere contingent opposition to war that just war pacifism provides—until war can be made safe for non-combatants, we must oppose it—but rather absolute opposition to war. Something about war, it is claimed, is fundamentally inconsistent with a duty that is absolutely binding on us.

Many candidates have been offered for what this duty might be. Some argue, for example, that we simply may not kill another human being, that there is nothing a person can do to sacrifice their right to life. Such an approach asks: *what may we do to
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our enemy—to the one who unjustly threatens us? I’ll return to that question in the last section of the paper, but for the moment I want to ask a different question: what may we ask of our own soldiers?

As any of you will know who have served in the military or who have had loved ones in the military, soldiers, especially those who engage in combat, make great sacrifices on behalf of those whom they protect. Many forfeit their lives, many more their physical health. And given the nature of military hierarchies, all forfeit a significant measure of freedom over their own choices.

Of the sacrifices that a soldier makes, I believe the greatest is not risking their lives, or their physical health, or even forfeiting their autonomy. I believe the greatest sacrifice comes in killing, threatening to kill and perhaps even training to kill. The vast majority of soldiers experience a natural aversion to killing and their training involves, among other things, enabling them to overcome this aversion in combat. But there are losses associated with overcoming this aversion.

Many suffer the various forms psychological trauma that go under the umbrella of post-traumatic stress disorder. Even if those killed or threatened have perhaps forfeited their right to life by fighting for an aggressor, still it can be scarring to kill those whose humanity one recognizes even through their participation in aggression.

Some successfully cauterize themselves to this psychological trauma by diminishing the humanity of the enemy. This has certainly been a widespread phenomenon in past conflicts. But while this strategy may stave off psychological trauma, it may have a still greater cost: putting one in moral peril.

Worse still might be the spiritual cost of killing. A friend who is Greek Orthodox tells me that in her church, those who have killed in combat may not partake of the Eucharist for a given period. What she initially felt was undue punishment, she discovered was rather an acknowledgement that even justifiable killing takes a spiritual toll, and returning to full spiritual flourishing might be a slow process. Consider as evidence of this the combat veteran with whom I worship who cannot say the creeds, due, as he put it, to what he experienced in the war. I don’t know the details of that experience—perhaps it was witnessing death, perhaps it was causing death—but whatever it was, war has left him feeling spiritually crippled.

These are at least some of the costs of becoming able to kill and of killing in combat. I am not claiming that a soldier is not morally permitted to bear these costs. Risking psychological trauma, far from being unethical, is highly self-sacrificial. And even those who risk moral or spiritual peril might in an odd way be morally praiseworthy. Risking one’s moral or spiritual purity for the sake of another might even be thought the highest self-sacrifice. My concern is not whether the soldier may kill, or threaten to kill, or learn to kill. Whatever the losses—psychological, or moral, or spiritual—and whatever the legitimacy of risking those losses for the sake of others, my concern is whether I may ask another to bear those costs on my behalf. I believe the answer is no.
But this is what we do when we support war—we ask others to kill and to train to kill on our behalf and thereby to risk losses we may not ask them to risk. If I am right that we may not do this, then we may not support war.

A Pacifism of Christian Discipleship

So far, we have approached the issue of the justifiability of supporting war philosophically. The various forms of consequentialism do not rely on religious underpinnings and, while they might be held by Christians, are typically resisted by Christians. The just war tradition is historically closely tied to the Christian faith, but it is separable from the faith: its origins are pagan and its most thorough recent expositions are secular. The deontological approach like the one we just explored, where one starts with inviolable fundamental principles and explores their implications for the justifiability of war, also need not be related to religious belief, though the version I offered suggests that religion might be relevant.

If I were smart, I’d be done now. I’ve already been too ambitious. But I foolishly promised four paths to opposing war, and I foolishly promised a pacifism that “passes understanding.” So, having attempted to navigate the philosophical waters, I am now going to sail right off the edge and offer an approach to opposing war that at least purports to depend entirely on the particulars of the Christian faith. This really is sailing off the edge for it will take us into biblical scholarship and theology, areas where I have no training and have done too little reading.

A distinctly Christian pacifism will emerge from a distinctly Christian social ethics: not a Christianized utilitarianism; not a Christianized Kantianism. And the starting point for a distinctly Christian social ethics will be the person and life of Jesus Christ.

That may seem obvious, but I think it is rarely our practice. In ethical matters we typically look to Jesus for what our attitudes should be and for how we should act in interpersonal relationships. Too often we do not take Jesus’ life and teaching as instructing us how to engage with our surrounding society.

What social ethic can we discover in Jesus’ life and teaching? I think we see this most clearly in his own description of his ministry, offered right at its beginning in the synagogue at Nazareth, “the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Some have read “the year of the Lord’s favor” as referring to the jubilee year and thus take Jesus as calling for Israel to reestablish the practice of the jubilee. As you’ll remember, Old Testament law had required that every 50th year debts would be cancelled, slaves would be freed and lands would be returned to the families that originally owned them. The jubilee had very rarely been practiced and one way to understand Jesus’ self-identification here and much of what he taught elsewhere is as proclaiming a jubilee year.
I am impressed with this understanding of the ministry of Jesus. But even if it is mistaken, Jesus’ self identification and subsequent actions and teaching strongly suggest that Jesus is concerned with not just our standing before God, nor just with our inner attitudes and interpersonal relationships. He very engaged in the social problems around him—illness and physical disability, and the hunger, poverty, imprisonment and slavery resulting from permanent indebtedness.

This is the core of Christian social ethics: Jesus’ proclamation of his own purposes in the synagogue at Nazareth. With Jesus’ first disciples we are called to join this movement of social transformation.

Now consider the results of Jesus efforts to, as I would see it, establish a jubilee in first century Palestine. Jesus’ work and teaching is a threat: a threat to established social structures and to those who benefit from their perpetuation, and he is a direct threat to the authority and position of Roman and Jewish political leaders. Not surprisingly the response to that threat is enmity—in particular the plot to execute Jesus.

So far there is nothing especially radical here, except perhaps that this is a more “political” Jesus that some are used to. What’s truly radical is Jesus’ response to the enmity. That response is, as you know, love. “Love your enemy” is for Jesus a very real matter. Certainly “love your enemy” is a helpful message for us when, say, malicious gossip is being spread about us. But Jesus has something far more concrete and serious in mind: people were trying to kill him. Worse, perhaps, people were trying to thwart his work on behalf of those who needed health, sustenance and liberation. Moreover, these enemies sought to accomplish their injustices with treachery, and by manipulating and twisting the law. This was serious enmity—mortal enmity toward himself, enmity toward those whose healing and liberation Jesus sought, and enmity that pursued its unjust ends with treacherous means.

As I say, Jesus’ response to these most serious of enemies was, as you know, love. What does that love entail? What Jesus had spelled out elsewhere—if your enemy strikes you on the cheek, give him the other to hit as well—he lives out in his arrest, trial, torture and crucifixion. He refuses legitimate armed defense, he effectively gives himself to his enemies, he asks God to forgive his executioners.

This is enemy love, and it is radical not just because it gives so much of oneself. It is most radical in accepting failure—even when that failure comes at great cost to those who deserve justice. When Jesus accepted unjust arrest and execution in order to enact enemy love, his efforts on behalf of the sick and imprisoned failed. Jesus accepted that failure, accepted the perpetuation of harm toward those who suffered, for the sake of undeserved love toward those who were causing that harm. That is the full implication of enemy love.

Such enemy love is radical to the point of irrational, perhaps even unjust. But this is the life of Jesus.

Of course this is not the end of the story. The end of the story of Jesus’ life is triumph—triumph demonstrated by the resurrection. But even this isn’t the end of
the story. The work of Jesus carries on in the community of his disciples—the church. It is into this community that we are called. We are the inheritors of the objectives of Jesus’ ministry announced at Nazareth. The Holy Spirit carries on the work of Jesus through us.

What shall we expect the result of this work to be? The same as it was for Jesus—enmity. And when faced with that enmity, we are, just as Jesus did, to love that enemy: to refuse legitimate self defense; to, if necessary, give ourselves to that enemy, even at the cost of death, and, perhaps worse, even at the cost of failing those who need and deserve our help.

But again, this is not the end of the story of the disciples’ lives, of our lives. The end of our story, too, is triumph. Triumph of what? The triumph of those original objectives Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue in Nazareth and pursued through his life, objectives that the church inherits and that the Holy Spirit continues to pursue worldwide through us—the transformation of persons and social structures in such a way that the sick and wounded are healed, the hungry are fed, and the imprisoned and enslaved are liberated. As the Revelation of John tells us, the Lamb who was slain will be eternally enthroned, and the order over which Christ will reign eternally is precisely the one he called for in Nazareth nearly 2000 years ago. He is going to win, that is already sure, and we with him. And the victory will not be for our sake, but for those whom we have joined with Jesus to heal, feed, and liberate. Jesus failed them in the short term—that can’t be denied. And we will too. But his victory is sure, and ours with him. And that victory will ultimately be theirs.

That is the end of the story.