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100 years of remembering  
Martin Grove United Church  
November 11, 2018  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 12:9-21 and Matthew 13:24-30

People like to say that the only constants in life are death and taxes. But today, on the 100th anniversary - to the day - of the armistice of the Great War - what we usually call World War 1, we are reminded that there might be a third constant in life - war.

I always feel a bit uncomfortable speaking on Remembrance Day. I am expected to say things that are nurturing, truthful, insightful, helpful, and pastoral. But I personally have no direct experience of war. I know family members who have been to war, but none of them were casualties and none of them ever spoke of the war to me. I have done a lot of research of course, including listening to a 30 hour audio podcast (which I highly recommend) called “Blueprint for Armageddon”<sup>1</sup> by Dan Carlin, part of his “Hardcore History” series.

I know that when it comes to war, truth is very relative. As they say, “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. I know that when it comes to war, truth is also highly selective, because we need to maintain an image that we are on high moral ground while we commit atrocities to other human beings. I know that governments often use slogans that sound very high-minded in order to get soldiers to enlist, while after the fact, we often discover that the motives for war were much more pedestrian - like money, land, and power, things that ordinary people would never have gone to war for. And I know for a fact that all of us here have our own ideas of what Remembrance Day means to us.

“Doing” war is a very old profession. If you study the history of war and warfare, for thousands of years, most wars had a lot in common. Wars consisted of battles between trained combatants, often occurring in relatively small spaces away from civilian populations and therefore the total amount of destruction in each battle was limited. Most battles happened during the space of a single day, often being decided in hours. Yes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dancarlin.com/hardcore-history-series/>

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I do realize that humans also engaged in sieges against cities that took a huge toll on civilians and could last for a long time. But most “battles” were isolated events contained in time and space and the amount of damage sustained.

*[slide: battle of waterloo]*

For example, the end of the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815) was the Battle of Waterloo, which happened on a single day (June 18, 1815). The battlefield was about 4 km across. Approximately 190k people fought that day. 20k were killed and 40k were wounded, all of them combatants.

*[slide: ww1 front line]*

Fast forward almost exactly 100 years, and we have WW1, a war that redefined what humans think the word “war” means. Because of many changes, including technology, mechanization, global commerce, and the rise of wealth capitalists, WW1 grew to become a war that included battles on a front line that extended 700 km, that went on for years, and involved millions of people.

This was a significant change. War has sometimes been compared to boxing. In boxing, a quick knock-out in the first round is the most merciful outcome. Because if a boxing match goes many rounds, both boxers take a lot of damage while they grind each other down. Prior to WW1, most battles were more like the quick knock-out. But by WW1, the nation states involved had the economic and social durability to take a lot of hits and to keep fighting. WW1 was the first war where both sides could grind each other to dust utilizing 65 million troops assembled from 21 countries. Those 65 million people would produce approximately 10 million dead and 20 million wounded.<sup>2</sup>

The scale of WW1 was something completely new to human experience. At the outbreak of WW1 many of the generals were still using strategies and tactics from the past. But cold hard experience on the battlefields taught many new lessons. Lessons that had to be learned through trial and error, and those errors often led to a massive loss of human life. It is safe to say that nobody understood what they were getting into at the start of the war. But they certainly found out.

*[slide: french cavalry]*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://ww1facts.net>

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Consider this. This picture is of French cavalry at the beginning of WW1. Look at what they are wearing. They have feather plumes in their helmets. They are wearing shiny metal breastplates. They are wearing bright red pants. They are carrying swords. One source said that you would have to be an expert on military history to notice the minor differences between these cavalry and cavalry during the time of Napoleon. In the past, people wore bright clothing to battles to scare the enemy - by letting them see how many of you there were. During WW1 these uniforms were exchanged for drab colours to help soldiers *not* be seen. In the days of machine guns, camouflage is better protection than shiny metal and red pants.

*[slide: german cavalry with gasmask]*

WW1 created a lot of interesting images where the past clashed with the present, like in this photo of German cavalry on horseback, wearing a gas mask.

*[slide: christmas truce]*

Other images show the humanity of the combatants too. This image is from the “Christmas truce” in 1914, a spontaneous act of camaraderie between British and German soldiers, much to the disgust of their officers. It is heart-warming to see that Christmas mattered.

Other changes happened during WW1 too. In previous wars, combatants often acted with a good deal of honour on the battlefield. War was in many cases seen as an honourable profession. But as WW1 became a battle along a front that hardly moved, the killing intensified, and the honour and glory of warfare faded - quickly. During the middle ages, two highly trained warriors with swords fighting to the death may indeed have been an act of honour. But being mowed down by machine gun fire by an enemy you can't even see does not speak of honour. There is no honour in gassing other people in the same way that we might spray ants with a can of Raid. Millions of people being pushed into a meat grinder does not speak of honour. George Evans, a 94 year old veteran from the UK famously reflected on this, saying, “I remember my friends, and enemies too. We all did our duty for our countries. We all obeyed our orders, then we

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murdered each other. Isn't war stupid?"<sup>3</sup>

WW1 also redefined our understanding of who dies in war. Previously, wars happened on battle fields, and most of the people who were injured or killed were combatants. This changed radically during WW1. The ability of nations to really take a punch meant not only that the war lasted a long time, but the ability to keep fighting depended on a constant supply of food, ammunition, and other resources that were manufactured by civilians - what came to be known as the "home front". But that also meant that civilians now came to be seen as legitimate targets. Military action in WW1 accounted for about 1 million civilian deaths, but another 6 million died from famine and disease. Warfare had become "total warfare" for most of the European nations involved.

I realize that for many people, Remembrance Day is an opportunity to honour combatants from a number of wars, WW1, WW2, the Korean war, and you may be thinking of other wars. And I respect that. But in my mind, WW1 truly was "The Great War" in the sense that it created a shift in the nature of war and how we understand war. Moreover, in many respects, the war that began in 1914 is actually still with us today. Today is the 100th anniversary of the armistice, but the terms of peace were drawn up afterwards and known as the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty was seen by many as very harsh towards Germany, so much so that the french general Marshall Ferdinand Foch stated, "this (treaty) is not peace, it is an armistice for twenty years"<sup>4</sup> which was a stunningly good estimate of when conflict would begin again. And WW2 led directly to the threat of nuclear Armageddon and the cold war, which still affect our lives today. WW1, dubbed "the war to end all wars" should perhaps more accurately be called "the war to end all peace". We have not truly known global peace since 1914.

There was one other aspect of WW1 that completely removed any traces of honour from the war. While US soldiers were earning \$30/month offering their lives for their country, other Americans, were making a killing of their own. During WW1, at least 21,000 Americans became millionaires (and some, billionaires). To quote decorated

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3262344/World-War-II-veteran-92-sacked-role-Remembrance-Day-parade-reading-pacifist-poem-event.html>

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty\\_of\\_Versailles#Britain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Versailles#Britain)

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veteran Major Smedley Darlington Butler (author of the book *War is a Racket*, 1935), “How many of these millionaires shouldered a rifle [or] dug a trench? How many of them knew what it meant to go hungry in a rat-infested dug-out? How many of them spent sleepless, frightened nights, ducking shells and shrapnel and machine gun bullets?”<sup>5</sup> Apparently, someone once said to Vladimir Lenin, “War is terrible” and Lenin allegedly replied, “Yes, terribly profitable”. Whether or not Lenin actually said that, wealth capitalists certainly took the lesson to heart. The high ideals which soldiers fought for were counter-balanced by those who were driven by profits. WW1 was also a watershed in that during the war, global wealth - which was concentrated in the UK after centuries of theft from around the globe moved from London to New York, and much of the developed world was indebted to the US as a consequence of WW1, to about \$11.5 billion at the time.

You might think that since humanity has practiced war since ... forever ... we might be good at it. On the surface, it seems easy enough. When we see evil in our midst, we take up arms and fight evil. Which is why our story in Matthew seems so strange today. In the parable, the farmer saw weeds among the crop and suggested removing the weeds. But Jesus said you can't remove the weeds without damaging the crop. In WW1, more civilians were killed than “evil” combatants. In WW1 - and in every war since, including the “war on terror” - trying to remove evil has inflicted even more suffering on innocent civilians.

And perhaps St. Paul - in Romans - helps us understand why. St. Paul says, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” War - the way we usually do it - is an attempt to overcome evil with even greater evil. Perhaps that's why today - on the 100th anniversary of the armistice, words are pointless, and all that we can really do is grieve that humanity has such a limited imagination and sense of justice.

*[slide: remembrance day]*

But of course, Remembrance day isn't just about philosophies and ideologies.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ratical.org/ratville/CAH/warisaracket.html>

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Remembrance day is about remembering people - actual individuals that we know who - for many different reasons - decided to enlist and engage in the activity of war. Today, we think primarily of those who volunteered to join the military during World War One and World War Two, although you might think of other wars too.

I imagine that most of us here today know individuals who fought in one war or another. People we cared about. Perhaps friends. Perhaps family. Perhaps our own spouses, or our own parents, or our own children.

And as we now are being asked to remember them - how will we remember them this year? Will we decide that a few prayers and a few minutes of silence is enough? Will it be enough to go home and look through a photo album. Will it be enough to spend time alone with our memories and perhaps with a tear or two?

Or will we decide to honour the memories of our loved one who served - and who died - by taking seriously the words of Jesus. And in very blunt terms, Jesus said to leave vengeance to God, to not take up the arms of the enemy. To allow justice to flow instead of us insisting that we have to see ourselves as “victorious”. Do we hope, dream, live, and breath into a future where peace is achieved through violence and war, or do we hope, dream, live, and breath into a future where peace is achieved through justice for all?

We have the right to decide for ourselves. We have the right to dream of a new world. We have the right to imagine and live into the kingdom of God right here. We have the right to remember.

We will remember them.

*Amen.*