

Everywhere there is so much fear, anxiety, depression, and yes, death. In this information age, we can be literally bombarded with news. We suffer as we watch videos, on TV or on computer; it is almost as if we are there. Some even talk of end times, due to war and “rumors of war” as the Bible says, and threats of escalated war with nuclear options. I was asked the other day if I am a pacifist. My response was, “In my early days of Christian ministry, I think I would have said absolutely, yes. But I have never seen anything like this, anything like this demonic slaughter in Ukraine... yes, a kind of genocide, with a “Hitler figure” calling the shots. I know there have been other genocides in recent years, but because we have European allies, this war has received constant news coverage here and thus seems very close. Nowadays, I’d call myself something like a 90% pacifist. Diplomacy always *first*, and war as only a *last* resort, but times like these may indeed fit into the 10% category that need force to stop brutal force, and need weapons to defend against weapons. Followers of God and Jesus have **love** as the greatest command, but we know that love cannot always be tender; we know that sometimes we need practice the ways of “tough love.”

I cannot guess how “Putin’s War” will play out and how he will eventually be stopped. I was appalled the other day when one news anchor was asking the ambassador of Ukraine cold unfeeling questions like, “who do you think is currently winning? And “how long do you think people in your cities can hold out?” This is not a board game of “Stratego” or “Battleship.” This is not a poli-sci or history class in war strategies and outcomes! I didn’t sense much compassion. These are real people who need to not only escape bullets and bombs, but who need food and water and clothing and shelter!

Our Bible reading this morning is often called the “Last Judgment” and it speaks of “end times” and the second coming of Christ, in glory, sitting on a throne. I cannot guess about the biblical “end times,”... if they could come with a nuclear “world war III, or if climate change will make our earth uninhabitable. As with many Bible passages, we have the option of

interpreting it on a surface, literal level, or reading it for deeper spiritual meanings. Like the news anchor asking who is currently winning the war, a surface level literal reading of this Last Judgment asks questions like “When is Jesus actually coming again? Are these now the signs of the end of the world? No, we cannot answer any of these questions! Jesus is using metaphorical language, a story that has a deeper spiritual lesson. A final judgment will be “like” a shepherd who separates sheep from goats, and it will be “like” a king or judge sitting on a throne, putting sheep at his “right hand” for eternal life and goats at (his) “left hand” for eternal punishment.

One important point, I believe, is that the word “eternal” can be interpreted not only as “everlasting,” but also as a spiritual quality that takes place now, in the present moment. Jesus defined it that way in the gospel of John, being clear “eternal life” starts right now, when we “know God.” Similarly, eternal punishment would start right now, a state of not knowing God. John also says that knowing God is *loving* God, and abiding in *love*! So we arrive at the deeper meaning of the “Last Judgment” ... *that those who love their neighbor, with food, with water, with compassionate visits, are the ones who know God, the ones who are part of God’s eternal life, which starts right now, in this world.*

So regarding the “Last Judgment,” I believe the most helpful way of interpreting is to look for the deeper spiritual meaning, which is quite clear and simple.... that God wants us to love and care for “even the least of these,” and that when we do so, that love shows that we “know God” and are in communion with Christ himself (“as you cared for the least, you cared for ME!).

The bottom line of the Bible will always point to a God of steadfast love, merciful, forgiving love. In Matthew 25, Jesus is clear about how God judges us... not if we get all our thinking and beliefs right, but if we have compassionate love to any and all in need... It has held true at Belleville Church that *how we treat one another is more important than the beliefs that we hold* (which will always vary from person to person). Another

translation of “the least of these” in Matthew 25 is, Jesus said: “Even as you cared for the *overlooked or ignored*...you did that to ME.” And we see them in our midst every day, in strangers and neighbors. So the work of love and peacemaking can always start at home.

In these desperate and sad times, let’s pray for whatever way we and God can put a stop to brutal killing force against force perhaps, protesters here and abroad that risk resisting autocratic rulers, it is hard to know what to do... The teaching of Jesus is that we are judged by how we *respond* to all this great need and sorrow. We always can meet these “standards” of God with compassionate aid, humanitarian aid, food and water and shelter and visiting with those who are grieving and fleeing.

We know that all politics is local, and that making peace, showing love, always “begins in our own hearts, one person at a time.” “Let there be Peace on Earth, and let it begin with me!” So that means we have to practice loving care and compassion in our own homes, churches, communities, with every neighbor.

The following song by Ken Medema is a song I hope you will hear in concert, by the composer himself. It speaks of his own journey, ... church going, church shopping, ... seeking a community that truly puts **love** first, “how we treat one another” being even more important than what we think or believe... where we are not an institution with simple “platitudes and promises,” but a community where loving truly “takes the lead,” with continual change for the better that is like a “love-born revolution.” This song, written recently, is a song of conviction that **Love** is truly the most important and most powerful force of God, and must be our bottom line, the greatest of all the commandments.

THE REAL THING, by Ken Medema

*I want to see a church where it sounds and smells like welcome.
People meet beyond the walls of race and clan and creed. I want to see a
church where mercy grows like gardens. Hope and help meet hand in hand
and loving takes the lead. I want to see a church come alive in every*

culture, speaking peace in every language, hope in every tongue. Alive with conversation, communion and connection, words of love or spoken here and pathos, and passion can be sung! **CHORUS: I want to see the real thing. I want to see the big deal. I want to see the God-life that can turn a soul around. I want to feel the spirit, I want to hear the music. I want to see the God-power that can break the barriers down. I don't want to see another institution with platitudes and promises and pretty songs to sing. All I want to see is a love-borne revolution. All I want to see is the real thing.** I want to see a church to help me find the Jesus way, put my feet on that narrow road he spoke of long ago. I want to see a church where people lift each other up, and make the choices and the changes that will help our spirits grow. I want to see a church where everybody matters. Everyone no matter who, has special gifts to give. I want to see a church to help me find my place of service. We give, receive, belong, believe, and that is how we live! I want to see a church all dressed in generosity, where giving is delight and people run to sacrifice. I want to see a church where no one ever goes without. No matter how much love may cost, people run to pay the price. I want to see a church who dares to speak with honesty. No clever lies, no compromise, no dumbing down. I want to see a church who will tell the truth to everyone: the high, the low, the rich, the poor, the criminal and the crown. **CHORUS.**