

Reflections on War and Peace
by Lois P. Mitchell, PhD
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For the past month or so, our attention has been captivated by the stand-off between Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush. And now, as the world watches on, the invasion is underway and the media is providing around the clock coverage of attacks and counter-attacks. For me, there is a sense of surrealism about it all. I know that real people and real weapons are embroiled in military maneuvering - the satellite images leave little doubt of that - and civilians in the Middle East are at a heightened state of alert as they prepare for unknown horrors. But I have a persistent sense that while we in the "non-combat zone" are so focused on Iraq and the immediate questions of war and peace, we are missing the broader issues and the bigger challenges.

We have all heard countless opinions offered about this war. From political and military analysts to cultural celebrities, everyone has an opinion and an angle. Representatives of religious organizations, from the Pope to elected officials of various denominations and faith groups, have offered their insights, pleading variously for peace or for decisive military action against evil. Governments around the world have negotiated and maneuvered under the watchful eye of the "fifth estate" to establish positions which will protect or advance their own political interests and agendas.

I am not going to offer an opinion on the war. I don't know enough to have any confidence in saying either that this war is unjust and unnecessary, or that it is legitimate and necessary. Rather, these are some reflections which I hope might draw our attention away from this rather narrow focus to a broader perspective. These are thoughts which have been jostling about in my mind and which now seem to be coming together to give me a bit of a sense of clarity in the midst of much confusion.

I've often heard that the Eskimos have a number of words for snow. As I hear protesters and commentators talk about peace, it occurs to me that there is a tendency to lump a lot of assumptions into that single word. What do we mean when we say we want peace? Surely peace is not simply the absence of military action. We talk of the cost of war, but what is the cost of peace? Christians on both sides of the issue have appealed to our sense of the road to peace to convince us of a moral absolute which justifies their perspective. On the one hand, I have heard that Christians must oppose war because Jesus is the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6), while on the other hand, Jesus Himself said "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). How can we reconcile these conflicting images?

I sometimes have the sense that we are being manipulated by the media to only see those portions of reality that they want us to see at any particular time. And, whether we realize it or not, we are pretty easy targets for this kind of selective seeing. We think about that which is in front of us. Right now the lenses are very open on the war and our thinking is drawn to what we see. We think in manageable, bite-size portions of reality.

But what of the bigger questions? Can we pry open the lenses and look past the war to the scene behind it and around it? Can we turn the camera on ourselves and expose our biases and assumptions? Can we look into our own hearts and acknowledge the deceit and selfishness there? Can we seek truth, even when it makes us squirm? Can we face our own ethnocentrism (the tendency to assume that our view is morally superior) and broaden the categories in our worldview so that we can see the gross inequities in the “global village” and determine to face our own fears in light of what we see?

I think it’s remarkably easy for us to talk about peace when we limit peace to the absence of aggressive military action. If the coalition of invaders, led by the United States, suddenly withdrew, or if Saddam Hussein agreed to go into exile, would the result be peace? If the invasion is “successful” in a matter of days or weeks and the Iraqi regime is dismantled and rebuilt on democratic principles, will the result be peace?

If we are really committed to peace we must look past Iraq and Afghanistan and Somalia and Palestine and Uganda and Northern Ireland and the hundreds of other places around the globe where peace is a distant conceptual illusion. I’m concerned that many of us in the developed world, have come to think of the global village as some sort of quaint, egalitarian, pastoral setting where life is simple and fair and just. What does the global village look like? What is life like for its inhabitants?

I recently heard a description of the global village which surprised and disturbed me. We can get a sense for life in this village if we suppose that it is comprised of 100 persons and reflects the basic demographic profile of the world as it is now. Picture this village of 100 where:

57 are Asian, 21 are European, 14 are from the Western Hemisphere and 8 are from Africa;

70 are people of color, 30 are caucasian;

66 are non-Christian, 33 are Christian

one half of the wealth of the world is in the hands of 6 people and all 6 are from the United States of America;

70 are illiterate, 30 are literate;

80 suffer from severe malnutrition;

75 live in sub-standard housing;

only 1 has a college or university degree.

Of course this is only a partial picture. Environmentalists could certainly bring some of these points home in terms of our use of the natural resources of the planet and the sustainability of various practices sponsored by industry and business. Political scientists could comment on the political systems and structures we might find. Psychologists and other health professionals

could give us some insight into issues of “quality of life” for the majority of people in this village.

If this portrait is true, and I believe it is, peace, justice and fairness will come to the global village only through great sacrifice on the part of people like me and you - the privileged people. Am I ready to make those kinds of sacrifices? As I envision peace do I have a realistic picture of what it looks like and what it costs? I'm reminded of the discussions we have had during the World Vision 30 Hour Famine with our youth group. As we raise their awareness of hunger and hunger-related issues, the youth are truly experiencing a sense of the injustice of it all, but are they willing to give up something in order to make a difference? Do we even really challenge them to think along those lines? If they are and we do, where do they go from there?

What about authority and power in the global village? How should the global village be governed? What will “freedom” look like when all is said and done?

Here's the bottom line for those of us who claim Jesus Christ as our Lord: what are the limitations of my faith when it comes to obeying His call to take up my cross and follow Him, to be a “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1-2)? The world can focus on the invasion of Iraq but where is Christ beckoning me to be at work for His purposes and for His glory? As I pray for Jesus' Kingdom to come and for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, what does He want me to do? What is He preparing me to be?

This invasion will one day become a matter of historical record and the attention of the world will be directed to other arenas, other stages, other scripts. What will we have learned and how will it have changed us? As I save this commentary and return to the pragmatic requirements of my life on Deer Island, I pray not only for peace, but for wisdom, discernment and courage to hear and see beyond the images on my TV screen.

In the movie, The Matrix, Neo is offered a choice. He can take the blue pill and forget what he has seen or he can take the red pill and have his mind freed. The blue pill promises comfort and security; the red pill, as we see through Neo's experience, is the entrance to a rabbit hole where reality is larger than life. Christians, it seems to me, are offered a similar choice. We can choose, each day, to seek God with passion and anticipation, or we can opt to keep God at a comfortable distance. I am not, by nature, a risk taker, but I've come to the conclusion that life is a risk, either way. What may seem to be the safer route may actually be far more treacherous.

I wonder, as the disciples were one by one martyred for their faith, did they regret choosing the red pill?

Lois Mitchell is a sociologist who works part-time for the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches and Canadian Baptist Ministries in the area of Public Witness and Social Concerns. If you wish to respond to this Commentary, you may contact her through email.