

So here we are again. Wartime. The bombs are not falling on Taos, or Albuquerque, or Chicago, or Miami. Our cities are not being reduced to piles of rubble by artillery. And yet bombs and shells are falling, and people are fleeing, and people are fighting, and our country has taken a side in a conflict on the other side of the world.

A conflict in which neutrality is morally questionable, and one which most observers believe has a side that is clearly in the wrong. A side that is the invading aggressor, committing crimes against a civilian population, both of which are against international law and conventions concerning war.

There are few just wars, and war in general has become increasingly destructive and indiscriminate in that destruction. Many seek an end to all wars. And yet, human beings continue to war on each other.

What's a UU to do? The answer is, as always, that each of us must decide for ourselves. The right of conscience is enshrined in our belief and our practice.

It would be an error to romanticize this conflict as simply one of good versus evil. The motivations of the many sides involved are

complicated and sometimes unclear amid the rhetoric and righteousness. We must be as discerning as possible.

There have been Unitarians and Universalists who have fought in wars – from the Civil War to the World Wars to Vietnam and onward. In retrospect, some of those wars were easy to be on the right side of. There are UU ministers who served and still serve as chaplains in all branches of our armed forces. And then there have been those who were conscientious objectors in all those wars, some of whom spent time in prison for their belief in non-violence.

For us, all of them are right. They have to be. They must be if we are to honor our principles. This can be a hard thing for many people to understand, even UU's. We cannot dictate how our co-religionists think and act. We cannot shame them, or censor them, or cast them out. No democratic vote can force conscience on anyone.

This recognition is at the heart of the Statement of Conscience on Peace adopted at the 2010 General Assembly, a statement I believe is worth sharing all of its 574 words with you.

*“We believe all people share a moral responsibility to create peace. Mindful of both our rich heritage and our past failures to prevent war, and enriched by our present diversity of experience and perspective, we commit ourselves to a radically inclusive and transformative approach to peace. Our commitment to creating peace calls us to the work of peacebuilding, peacemaking, and peacekeeping.*

*Peacebuilding is the creation and support of institutions and structures that address the roots of conflict, including economic exploitation, political marginalization, the violation of human rights, and a lack of accountability to law.*

*Peacemaking is the negotiation of equitable and sustainable peace agreements, mediation between hostile parties, and post-conflict rebuilding and reconciliation.*

*Peacekeeping is early intervention to prevent war, stop genocide, and monitor ceasefires. Peacekeeping creates the space for diplomatic efforts, humanitarian aid, and nonviolent conflict prevention through the protection of civilians and the disarmament and separation of those involved in violent conflict.*

*We advocate a culture of peace through a transformation of public policies, religious consciousness, and individual lifestyles. At the heart of this transformation is the readiness to honor the truths of multiple voices from a theology of covenant grounded in love.*

*We all agree that our initial response to conflict should be the use of nonviolent methods. Yet, we bear witness to the right of individuals and nations to defend themselves, and acknowledge our responsibility to be in solidarity with others in countering aggression. Many of us believe force is sometimes necessary as a last resort, while others of us believe in the consistent practice of nonviolence.*

*We repudiate aggressive and preventive wars, the disproportionate use of force, covert wars, and targeting that includes a high risk to civilians. We support international efforts to curtail the vast world trade in armaments and call for nuclear disarmament and abolition of other weapons of mass destruction. We repudiate unilateral interventions and extended military occupations as dangerous new forms of imperialism. In an interdependent world, true peace requires the cooperation of all nations and peoples.*

*For Unitarian Universalists, the exercise of individual conscience is holy work. Conscientious discernment leads us to engage in the creation of peace in different ways. We affirm a range of individual choices, including military service and conscientious objection (whether to all wars or particular wars), as fully compatible with Unitarian Universalism. For those among us who make a formal commitment to military service, we will honor their commitment, welcome them home, and offer pastoral support. For those among us who make a formal commitment as conscientious objectors, we will offer documented certification, honor their commitment, and offer pastoral support.*

*Our faith calls us to create peace, yet we confess that we have not done all we could to prevent the spread of armed conflict throughout the world. At times we have lacked the courage to speak and act against violence and injustice; at times we have lacked the creativity to speak and act in constructive ways; at times we have condemned the violence of others without acknowledging our own complicity in violence. We affirm a responsibility to speak truth to power, especially when unjust power is exercised by our own nation. Too often we have allowed our disagreements to distract us from all that we can do together. This Statement of Conscience challenges individual Unitarian Universalists,*

*as well as our congregations and Association, to engage with more depth, persistence, and creativity in the complex task of creating peace.”*

We are called to peace, but we ultimately recognize that there are no fixed and final answers to the question of war. I suppose this makes us pragmatists and situationists.

But whatever labels we might use – and there are usually multiple labels that apply – we are called to continually exercise our consciences. The complexity of the world does not allow us the luxury of absolutes. Which is another way of saying that revelation is not sealed.

The Statement of Conscience also reveals that war and peace are not just a matter of the individual conscience. We are part of a nation, and an interconnected world of other nations and beings and ecosystems. A world of complex relationships and competing interests. Peace is a systemic goal.

War breaks out, and gas prices rise at the pump. War breaks out, and horrific images flood our media feeds. War breaks out, and we are

called to make sacrifices of some kind, even if just paying more for gas. A sacrifice that honestly seems insulting to those fleeing bombed cities and shattered homes.

War breaks out, and things we thought were important reveal themselves to be utterly unimportant. Our fashion choices. Our social media likes. Our celebrity gossip. Which car we drive. What phone we have. The list goes on. What seems unimportant to you now?

War breaks out, and we are reminded again that an easy, peaceful life is not the rule, but the exception, and that for most of human history, life has been hard and uncertain and filled with violence and conflict. Peace is not our default.

Love during peacetime seems easy. And waging peace is a continuous struggle. Can we bring love to waging war? What does it even mean to love in such times?

To paraphrase the last sentence of the statement of conscience, I think we are challenged *“to engage with more depth, persistence, and creativity in the complex task of being at war.”*

Love means to act ethically towards everyone, even those we are in conflict with. Love looks like the Geneva Conventions. Love looks like the laws governing war. Love looks like taking care of non-combatants, yours and theirs. Love looks like taking care of refugees. Love means defending yourself, your loved ones, and your country from those who would kill or conquer. Love means not demonizing the other side. Love means solidarity against aggression. Sometimes love means physically stopping those who will not stop at violence until defeated. Sometimes, war cannot be avoided in the pursuit of peace.

I realize this way of using the word love is provocative. But this isn't love as a feeling, but love as the taking of responsibility for the way we show up in whatever situation we find ourselves in, and a demand that others do the same.

This is not an easy task in the best of times. But it is more important in times of war, when it is absolutely necessary that we hold true to our values and our theology.

We believe that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity, and that they deserve to live in safety, free from fear of violence. We believe that we are all connected, and we work towards relationships of



compassion and respect and mutuality. We believe in a just and stable ordering of these relationships, based on human agency, freedom and accountability, and cooperation. This is what peace looks like.

When these break down, we have war. And for us, the goal of war – if we must be at war - is not dominion, nor simply ending conflict by submitting to tyrants, but the restoration of peace based on these values. That restoration begins when the fighting stops.

This is what distinguishes us from bullies and tyrants and aggressors of all kinds. I think this is what love during wartime looks like. This is being on the side of love, even if that seems like a weird way to put it.

We are called to live by our highest ideals and aspirations as a faith in the hardest of circumstances.

Are we perfect at it? Of course not. This task – this commandment, if you will - is filled with ambiguity and uncertainty and failures. But intention matters. Values matter. Ideals matter. Defending values and ideals matters. Love matters. Even in the midst of war. Especially in the midst of war.

May we rise to the task.