Editorial: Does our moral compass still recognize evil?

WARNING: This editorial references effects of war that may be traumatic for veterans of war or others who have experienced extreme violence.

It's a grisly scene. Ukrainian workers dig up buried corpses of Russian soldiers in exchange for captive Ukrainian soldiers. The exchange rate is six for two—six dead Russians for two living Ukrainians.

I can't establish the veracity of this story published March 21, 2022, in *[The Kyiv Independent](#)*. But we know enough about the horrors of war to believe the story is not a fabrication.

A preacher nearing Easter will see the obvious illustration in this story—death in exchange for life. In case a preacher's senses are dull, a line in the opening section spells it out: "In a twist of dark irony, the invading army's dead soldiers will redeem themselves in death—and help save the living."

As a former pastor once tasked with preparing a sermon for each Sunday, the habit of looking for sermon illustrations is still strong. But the illustration mentioned above breaks down in important ways that matter for all of us.

A compass tells the truth

First off, the entire thing is brutal. Every part of the story—what precedes it, the specific actions described and what will follow—is tragic. Reverent silence, weeping, righteous anger—all are appropriate responses.

If any such emotion wells up within us, we know our moral compass is not broken. We know from such reactions we still are able to recognize evil. May our senses not be dulled, for there is much evil yet in the world.

One brute fact is many thousands are dead who didn't have to die. We can't skip over that fact or hurry past it. Beyond the fact of these thousands dead is the fact many millions are profoundly traumatized, whole generations. Further still, these many dead are connected to even more millions, thousands of miles away, who will suffer hunger and poverty as a result of the same war.

I cannot breezily read Caiaphas declaring: "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (John 11:50). It is never just one who dies. And the cause, how can we imagine it being so noble?

Getting our bearings

To get to the more explicitly spiritual association mentioned above …

Jesus gave his life willingly; it's doubtful these Russian soldiers met their death as freely.

Jesus did the dying; he did not send someone else to do the dying for him.

Jesus was not sent to kill; the Russian soldiers were.

Jesus rose again to life; not so these soldiers.

Jesus' family, friends and followers had Jesus returned to them alive, and vibrantly so. Russian parents, wives and children will receive back only the bodies of their sons, husbands and fathers killed in Ukraine—if they even receive that.

Jesus wasn't a Russian soldier. He wasn't conscripted by an autocrat to be thrown into battle as little more than cannon fodder. Or, maybe Jesus was more like these soldiers than we want to admit. He, too, was subject to the whims of tyrants, whether Herod, Pilate or Caesar.

The exchange of dead Russian soldiers and Jesus' redeeming work—the two are not equivalent. Yet, the fact Jesus was fully human and his very human body was brutalized is a critical equivalence necessary to make our salvation effective.

Tension between true and magnetic north

Seeing the exchange of bodies in Ukraine as any kind of illustration of Jesus is paradoxical. It is at once irreverent—almost prurient—in regard to the Russian soldiers, while also casting Jesus' brutal death in profound light. As hard as I try to reconcile the two, I find only tension between them.

The danger in reducing the exchange of dead bodies for living bodies to a sermon illustration is that we make use of it, as though it is for us just a tool to get a point across. Yet, don't we—preachers and nonpreachers alike—do this all the time? Don't we make flippant use of this world's horrors as though we have no more than theoretical connection to them?

I admit my question is deeply philosophical, but it's a philosophical question with profound and desperate real-world significance. The six dead soldiers dug up and exchanged for two living soldiers are not illustrations; they are human.

They had names, though no dog tags to identify them. They had families. They had hopes other than going to war, much less dying in war. They had lives. But now, here we are, here I am, making a point over their dead

bodies.

God, have mercy.

We ought to be horrified at what war will lead us to do, even the best of us. Before war, there is evil, of which war is merely a symptom. In response, we must calibrate our moral compass to recognize evil in all its guises, and we must resist it, because war is not its only or worst effect.

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