

Americans love war. There's no denying it. We love war. We watch movies about war. We play games about war. We collect for fun the weapons of war. We even engage in reenactments of war. We love war.

But that's not just true of Americans. Human being love war. Countless books, plays, and operas have been written about war. The heroes of war have always been held in high esteem by every culture. And the histories of great battles have lived on in legends that last for generations. Human beings love war.

Except, of course, when we have to fight in them. Talk to anyone who's ever been in a war and they will tell you that there's nothing fun about it. It is not entertaining. It is not a game. It is not something they want to relive.

Mostly, it's a lot of dirt and pain and death. As the old saying goes, war is hell. And while a few naive souls may go into it thinking it will be fun, most of them get a rude awakening about what they've signed up for pretty quickly.

We love the fantasy of war. But the reality is far less appealing. And that's a lesson the disciples had to learn in our Gospel lesson today.

Jesus is well into his ministry by now. His disciples know him and respect him. They've gotten a taste of his power and they've heard a collection of his sermons. And regardless of what he's actually saying, what many of them have heard is that he's here to start a rebellion. He's leading them into a new kingdom of God. He is starting a war.

And it all sounds very fun and glamorous to them. They'll be heroes and martyrs and zealots. And they'll overthrow the Romans and they'll restore Jerusalem and they'll be part of the founding of a new world power. And it'll all be very grand and awe inspiring and entertaining. And they are lining up to enlist in his army.

And so, as we heard last week, Jesus sits down with them and says, "Yes, there is a change coming. Yes, you are part of a new kingdom. Yes, you should be watching for the old order of things to pass away and a new order to come. Yes, I have come to bring fire upon the earth and division and war."

And I can just see the disciples getting riled up and ready to grab their swords and rush headlong into battle. But Jesus doesn't stop there. Yes, I have come to bring division. But it won't just be between Israel and the Romans. It won't just be between the ruling elite and the oppressed poor. It won't be along the lines you're expecting.

It will be between you and your father. You and your mother. You and your brother and your sister and your in-laws. The name of Jesus Christ won't just divide political boundaries or cultural boundaries. It will divide families and friends. And it won't be grand or glamorous or entertaining at all.

It will be hard. Because you will have to make tough choices about the life you will live and the loyalties you will follow. You will have to change all your priorities, even if that means putting the things and the people that you love and cherish below the commandments of your God and Father.

Simply put, there is nothing fun about war. Whether you're talking about the wars between nations. Or the war between heaven and hell. The disciples really hadn't thought about that fact. And it's a lesson that I'm not sure many of us want to think about either.

Because it's easy to say, "Oh, I know my brother doesn't know Jesus. But he's my brother. Of course he'll go to heaven." It's easy to say, "Oh, I know my friend isn't a Christian. But they're a good person. They've done so many nice things for me. Of course they're going to heaven."

We don't want to think about what heard this week in our Gospel: that the door is narrow. Very narrow. It is the width of one person: Jesus Christ. And if you don't go in by that door then you're not going into the banquet hall. Because when that door is shut, you can pound on it and plead through it and weep and cry out in pain, but it won't open again.

We don't want to think about that. We don't want to think about it, one, because we don't want to think about all those for whom the door is already shut by death, and we know they didn't go through. And we don't want to think about it, two, because we don't want to think about all those people in our lives who still need to be shown the doorway.

People who may refuse to walk through if we tell them about Jesus. People who may reject us. Laugh at us. Humiliate us. Verbally attack us. If we tell them about the kingdom of God. People who may hear the truth, but choose to believe the lie.

War isn't fun. War is hell. Literally. For those who remain entrenched in their sinfulness and opposed to God, the end of this war means hell for them. And unfortunately, according to Jesus, those people are many.

And I wish I had something to say that would make it all better. A quick fix or a scriptural loophole or... something that would bring the glory and grandeur and fun back to it all. Something that would make the pain and the dirt and the death disappear.

But I can't. And frankly, I wouldn't even if I could. Because the reality is, this is a war. And though there are losers, there are also victors. And my salvation rests on that very same narrow door that will condemn so many others. Jesus Christ was baptized into death so that I might enter through that very door at my own baptism.

And I want the whole world to come through that door with me. I want the banquet hall to be filled with every friend and family member I have ever known. But I can't make them enter.

I can stand and shout at the top of my lungs to invite everyone who can hear me to know Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I can warn them with just as loud a voice as to what awaits them if they stand outside that door. But I can't make them enter.

And I can't make the door any bigger. I can't turn to God and say, "God, could you do it differently? Could you make the door a little wider? Could you give them another way?" Because in doing so, I would be telling God, "Jesus Christ isn't enough." His death wasn't already a big enough gift for world.

So here we are. In the midst of a war, filled with dirt and pain and death. Waiting for the day when we will sit at the table with Christ and there will be peace on earth, goodwill to men, and the war we have fought will be a grand memory. An awesome display of God's love and power. And the war to end all wars will be complete.

But until then... we fight the good fight. And it's not always fun. We fight the good fight. And we endure the discipline of our Lord, who just wants to see us yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness through his training.

We fight the good fight. And we share the love of Christ. We point our family and friends to the narrow door. We proclaim Jesus Christ crucified for them. Even when it divides us.

Especially when it divides us. Because if it divides us, then it means we're probably fighting on opposite sides of this war. And those are the people who need to hear the good news the most.

We fight the good fight. We point to him whose blood makes us righteous. We proclaim him whose death gives us eternal life. And we wait with fear, with hope, with joy, for the door to be shut. Because only when the door is shut can the banquet to begin. Amen.