

“Ukraine’s Bitter Brother”

Rev. Stephen Milton

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Last Sunday, after church, my wife Amanda and I went downtown to participate in a march for migrant workers. The posters said it was at Toronto City Hall, so that’s where we went. It was really loud – the St Patrick’s Day parade was marching by along Queen. Beyond the skating rink at City Hall, we saw a crowd of people with tables, signs, and microphones. So, we went over there. There were about 100 people. But as we got closer, we realized we’d made a mistake. This was a demonstration of freedom Convoy people. Definitely not the group we were looking for.

We ended up finding the migrant workers protest, which was in a small park up the street on Bay. It was about the same size, but the tone couldn’t have been more different. The convoy protest was almost entirely composed of white people.



The migrant workers protest was a rainbow coalition of Filipinos, Blacks from the Caribbean and Africa, Latinas and Latinos from South America, people from China and India.

Speeches were in English, Chinese and Spanish.

The convoy truckers wanted the government to stay out of their lives. The migrant workers wanted the government to do more, to live up to the United Nations’ standards of human rights and the rights of refugees. The convoy protest was composed of disgruntled white people who felt Canada was breaking its own rules by mandating vaccines. The Migrants wanted the government to apply existing rules and principles to include more people in Canadian society, to be fair to all.

That contrast between two visions of how life should work is seen in our scripture story today. The prodigal son is one of the most famous of Christ's parables. It features two sons. The younger son breaks all the rules and comes crawling back to his father. The older son has dutifully obeyed every rule. It's a long story, and it seems like it goes on way too long. The story seems to be over as soon as the younger son is welcomed back into the father's house, where a feast is served in his honour. The story is a thinly veiled lesson about God's love. God welcomes back even those who have broken the rules. But if that is all the story is about, then the end of the parable seems unnecessary. Why bother meeting the older brother? The point has been made: God is loving and forgiving.

But the older brother does not see his father as loving and just. When he hears the music coming from the house, he isn't happy about it. He complains to his father that the younger son has broken the rules: he has spent all his money on sex workers and partying. The older brother complains: Here I was, working like a slave for you all these years, and there was no party for me and my friends. Note the use of the word "slave". For the older brother, being part of his father's house is not about love, but duty. He slaves away for his father, dutifully obeying the rules. Things have to be done the right way, or they are not worth doing. This attitude causes the older brother to resent the party being thrown for his wayward brother. He resents it so much that he stays outside, even after his father invites him in. For the older brother, his loyalty to his father is not about being loved, but about obeying the rules. The prodigal son has disobeyed the rules, so this party is not worth attending. To the older brother, the party should not even be happening.

The prodigal son story should be named something else, because it is really about both sons. They represent two ways of relating to God. One brother comes crawling back after making many mistakes. God does not reject him, but instead, throws a feast for him and dresses him in the best clothes in the house. But there is another way of worshipping God. That is to obey the rules. Most people see religion this way. It is about a set of rules which we obey, and if we get it right, then God will let us into the heavenly house. But this parable challenges that view. Jesus tells us that this rule-based view of religion is too thin. It can lead to resentment when others don't obey the rules. It can lead to the judgment of others, so that, far from emulating God's love, we come to resent other people who have a different relationship to God. One where they appear to be breaking the rules that we obedient people live by.

That rule-based view of religion is playing an important role in the war in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine is clearly motivated by the strategic goal of creating a buffer zone between NATO states and Russia. But to achieve this goal, Putin needs his army to fight and die. When soldiers die, their bodies are sent back to their families. Those families and the dead soldiers are heroes, and their sacrifice must be justified. Grieving mothers who disagree with the state can undermine even authoritarian governments. Even dictators need to provide a justification to their people, an ideological excuse for the deaths and loss of freedoms experienced in an authoritarian regime. Putin has outlawed freedom of speech, shut down the Russian independent media, and soon stores will start running out of Western-made consumer goods. To justify those sacrifices, Putin needs an alibi, a rationale for why his people should be

proud of Russia's actions. He needs to prove why these sacrifices are heroic, and not a case of his incompetence.

During the reign of the Soviet Union, the ideological alibi for the dictatorship was Marxism; for Putin, it is Christianity. He has been telling anyone who will listen that he is a loyal follower of the Russian Orthodox Church. After years of persecution by the Soviets, the Russian Orthodox church has been delighted that Putin is openly supportive. The war has been endorsed by the church's leader, Patriarch Kirill, who has called the invasion a battle with "evil forces that have always strived against the unity of Russia".¹ The church has enjoyed its new relationship with the state. In 2020, it opened this new cathedral outside Moscow.



It is the third-largest orthodox church in the world.² It is dedicated to Russia's armed forces.



¹ "Putin's war in Ukraine is blessed by Church icon, says Kremlin boss," *The London Times*, March 14 2022

² "Putin's war in Ukraine is blessed by Church icon, says Kremlin boss," *The London Times*, March 14 2022

The walls are painted khaki green. The floors contain metal culled from defeated Nazi tanks and weapons, so Russian soldiers can walk on their former enemies. The walls present mosaics of Russian military victories throughout history.³

The original design called for images of Stalin and Putin to celebrate their military triumphs, but they were taken down after some public outcry.

Why would the Russian orthodox church support Putin in his drive to invade and take over Ukraine? One reason is that Ukraine plays a pivotal role in the history of the Russian Christianity. The father of the Russian people was Vladimir the Great. Back in the 900s, he united the Rus tribes to create the Russian nation. A turning point in the nation's identity was when Vladimir chose Orthodox Christianity as their faith. Vladimir was baptized in Crimea. Then he went to Kiev, where he had thousands of Russians baptized in the river.⁴ For many centuries, Kiev was the capital of the Russian Orthodox church.⁵ For Russian Orthodox Christians, Kiev is like their Jerusalem.⁶

In the centuries that followed, that church in Kiev became the Ukrainian Orthodox church, which operated under the wing of the Russian Orthodox church in Moscow. But after mounting disagreements over religious freedoms, in 2019, the Ukrainian Orthodox church broke away from Moscow and was allowed to become its own independent national church.⁷ This upset leaders of the Russian Orthodox church. Putin wants to rebuild the Russian empire, based on a vision of orthodox Christian values. But this can't happen if the mother church in Kiev has broken away. Crimea and Ukraine are not only strategic military targets but religious ones, too.

The leaders of the Russian Orthodox church have been enthusiastic supporters of the war because they see Ukraine as the prodigal son, the one who has broken God's rules. Patriarch Kirill has denounced the way Ukraine has become infected by Western values.⁸ He sees these as immoral values, at odds with God's laws. Specifically, he has said that one can see the moral downfall of nations based on whether they have allowed gay pride parades.⁹ Recognition of homosexual rights has become the litmus test for whether a nation has abandoned its Christian heritage. Putin has endorsed this approach, persecuting queer people in Russia and Chechnya.

Putin and the leaders of the Russian Orthodox church are acting like the older brother in the Prodigal son story. They are horrified by the idea that God could be condoning this kind of behaviour. Increasingly, Putin sees the world as divided into those who will follow Russian

³ <https://religionnews.com/2022/03/07/holy-wars-how-a-cathedral-of-guns-and-glory-symbolizes-putins-russia/>

⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-crimea-orthodox-vladimir-great-religion-ukraine-russia/26725761.html>

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Russian-Orthodox-Church>

⁶ <https://religionnews.com/2022/02/24/next-year-in-kyiv/>

⁷ <https://religionnews.com/2022/02/24/putin-is-after-more-than-land-he-wants-the-religious-soul-of-ukraine/>

⁸ <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5907950.html>

⁹ <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/03/head-russian-orthodox-church-blames-gays-putins-invasion-ukraine/>

conservative values, and those who will not. He has convinced himself that his Russian empire must save Ukraine from itself and from the corrupting influence of the West. He has sold the war as a rescue mission of good Russians living in Ukraine, who are in danger from corrupt, gay-loving, Nazi Ukrainians. The fact that he is bombing the homes and cities of the people he purports to save is an irony that does not trouble him. He also is untroubled by the fact that individual Russian Orthodox priests have dared to protest the war.¹⁰

This war is both a strategic power play and a culture war, and that should worry us here. You may have noticed that in the United States, the extreme right and some commentators on Fox news have shown open support for Putin. On the surface, Putin and far right Republicans make strange bedfellows. The party of Ronald Reagan hated the Russians, and helped destroy the Soviet Union. But in the past twenty years, the far right has seen an ally in Putin and his Christian ideology. In the late 1990s, Russian and American conservatives created the World Congress of Families. It an international organization which aims to protect the rights of straight families by opposing abortion and gay rights. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, is a vocal promoter of these so-called family values.



He travelled to Moscow before the war to meet with Patriach Kirill and had a private audience with Putin. He has declared that Russia is now the world's greatest hope in defending Christian values.¹¹

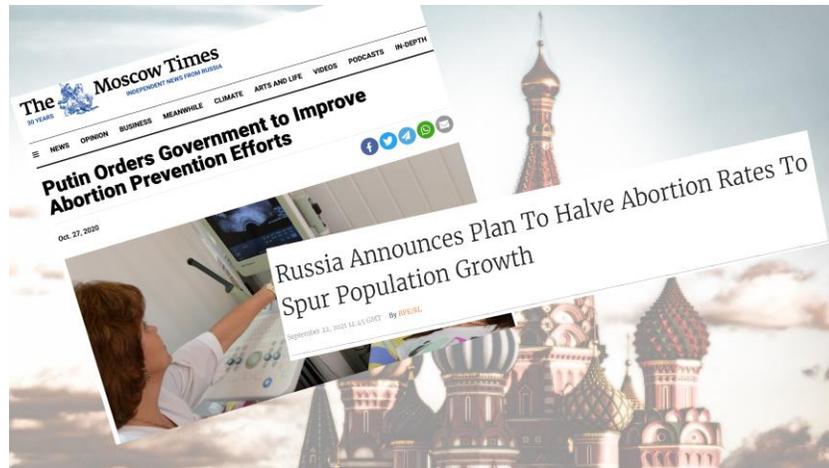
¹⁰ <https://religionnews.com/2022/03/04/among-russian-orthodox-growing-dissent-against-the-invasion-of-ukraine/>

¹¹ Chrissy Stroop , "A Right-Wing International? Russian Social Conservatism, the U.S.-based WCF, & the Global Culture Wars in Historical Context," *The Public Eye*, Winter 2016

In Russia, the rise in conservative values has gone hand in hand with fears about a shrinking white population. They call it a “demographic winter.”¹² Putin and the Russian Orthodox church’s leaders are determined to increase white fertility.

Putin and homosexuality

To achieve this, Putin has launched an offensive against homosexuals and transgender people. They are seen as a threat to straight fertility. It is now illegal to say anything that could be construed as supporting or promoting homosexuality to children.



Recently, Putin has been looking for ways to significantly reduce the abortion rate to enhance fertility. The state provides incentives for women to have second children, rewarding them with 7500 dollars, and in some cases, free land.¹³

The crackdown on homosexuality and abortion has the same root: is all part of a desire to enforce traditional family values to increase childbirth among white people in Russia.

All of these moves have found admirers among conservatives in the United States. They, too, worry that the white, Christian population is declining, outnumbered by non-white immigrants. To reverse this trend, the right has been fighting to end legal abortions at the state level, and hope that the Supreme Court will make abortion illegal nationwide. In Florida, legislation has been written so that homosexuality cannot be mentioned in classrooms, even if a child’s parents are gay. This is the “Don’t Say Gay” bill.¹⁴ Similar bills are in the works in other states.¹⁵ Several states, led by Texas, have tried to hold parents responsible if they help their trans

¹² Chrissy Stroop , "A Right-Wing International? Russian Social Conservatism, the U.S.-based WCF, & the Global Culture Wars in Historical Context," *The Public Eye*, Winter 2016

¹³ [Amie Ferris-Rotman](#) , "Putin’s Next Target Is Russia’s Abortion Culture" *Foreign Policy*, October 3rd, 2017.

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/23/us/what-does-dont-say-gay-actually-say.html?searchResultPosition=3>

¹⁵ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2022/03/16/dont-say-gay-bills-nationwide/9443559002/?gnt-cfr=1>

children get medical treatments for their gender affirmation.¹⁶ Like Russia, right wing politicians are trying to control fertility and gender to promote heterosexual fertility among whites. What we see in Russia and Ukraine is not something that is happening far away on the other side of the world. Russian and American conservatives are united in using Christianity to help advance the fertility of white people, and will actively persecute whites and other races who are perceived to be an obstacle to this goal. The war in Ukraine is part of a war that is already happening here, and will not end when the shooting stops.

In the parable of the Prodigal son, the elder brother wants his father to reject his younger brother. He is incensed that his father loves both of his sons, even though they are so different. The parable seeks to teach us that what matters most is love, not rules. Obeying the rules and being bitter is not God's way. To insist on rules over love is to remove ourselves from God's kingdom. Not to be pushed out, but to stand in the field, hearing the music, but refusing to go inside. Those who insist that they are God's chosen ones because they have followed all the rules are in danger of forgetting that for Christians, the kingdom of God is not about rules. It is about love. An expansive love that seeks to bring more and more people in. A love that dares us to look beyond yesterday's divisions and prejudices. A divine love that encourages us to see everyone as fellow children of God. Even if they are here undocumented, or on a migrant worker's permit that has them crossing the border each year, like a yo-yo.

A month from now, this congregation will celebrate that we have chosen to be an affirming congregation. A church community which welcomes people of all kinds, rich and poor, gay and straight, people of all races, genders and abilities. In taking this stand, we have chosen to affirm that we believe God is a source of ever-expanding love. A God who will lead us into a future that does not look like the past. A future where Canada and churches like this will be much more diverse, and through that diversity, we will speak with greater wisdom about what matters, and what remains to be done. A future defined not by fear, but by hope. A future that feels like a party of celebration, where no one is left in the fields alone.

Amen.

¹⁶ <https://www.kqed.org/news/11908500/nations-trans-kids-would-be-offered-place-of-refuge-in-california-with-new-bill>