

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2009 – VETERANS' APPRECIATION SUNDAY

SERMON: "Veterans – Seekers of Peace"

SCRIPTURES: Psalm 46: 1-11, Isaiah 2: 2-4

Comments on the tragedy at Ft. Hood

On Monday, August 30th, it was my wife's and my honor to represent this church at the military funeral of Bill Cahir, a United States Marine Sergeant, husband of the late Glorain Browne's daughter Rene, who is expecting their first children, twin daughters, in early December. Bill was a member of a civil affairs unit who during his first two tours in Iraq had been a key player in bringing tribes together in relative peace in Anbar Province. Bill was on his third deployment, this time to Afghanistan when he was killed in combat in Helmand Province. His funeral was held in the Memorial Chapel at Fort Myer, Virginia followed by burial in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. It was an occasion of both pride and great sadness. He received many tributes as a man, a leader, a peacemaker, and friend. The military truly knows how to honor its fallen, and we, in turn, seek to honor all our veterans living and dead on this Sunday before Veterans' Day.

Our scripture texts this morning describe what the world will be when God's kingdom on earth is brought to fruition and the divine way is exalted upon the earth. There will be total peace among the nations and no more arms or war.

In the meantime governments and nations have been established to bring about order and security for their citizens in a world largely driven by power and human domination systems where our nature to be the "top dog" appears to hold sway. History demonstrates that economic greed, warfare, terrorism and power plays are the way of humankind apart from God's transformation. Armies have always existed. Humankind has found all kinds of rationalizations for waging wars and to sanctify their cause by claiming God's undergirding of their battle. "Just War" theory was developed to determine a "good war" (as Studs Terkel called WW II) from "bad wars," a theory which was immediately invalidated by the nuclear age and its proliferation. The leaders of nations send their sons (and now their daughters) into combat with patriotic slogans to carry out often unknown policies and dubious strategies. The primal drive to prove their manhood has always made young men and adolescents vulnerable to the recruiter's rhetoric and the politician's propaganda. Religious fanatics and ideologues promise those with no other hope, the glory of victory and eternal reward. In this cacophony of confusion wars continue to devour and decimate the young and future leaders of the world. And so soldiers go forth to war. They come back from combat, if they survive, with a new and passionate knowledge of war's futility and the need for better ways to live together.

But we are not here today to focus on wars and their delusion, but to honor our veterans and to look at what we can learn from them as genuine peace-seekers. These lessons are particularly crucial for Christians who seek to be peacemakers as Jesus taught.

The scripture in Psalm 46 points to the kingdom of God which promises the end of war and the peace the Lord of hosts will accomplish. No veteran who ever went to war or served this country could wish for more than this. No matter what the reasons for enlisting or the circumstances of being drafted, those who have been there carry an acute sense of truth that there has got to be a better way than warfare. I propose today that we look at the dedicated service of our veterans in the light of the well-known slogan, "duty, honor, country."

First, duty translates to commitment to their calling. Young men and women are trained to go out into an unknown and often lethal climate where they are asked to perform actions which they are not certain they can do but undertake them in the hope that they will bring about a better world. In the crucible of fearful combat the focal point becomes not idealistic goals or patriotic slogans but rather their unit's brothers and sisters who fight together to survive the randomness and horrendous fear of hostile fire – "Kill or be Killed." In their unit community they watch each others' backs as a sacred duty. As one marine lieutenant colonel stated to war correspondent, Chris Hedges, in Iraq, "Just remember that none of these marines is fighting for home, for the flag, or all that crap the politicians feed the public. They are fighting for each other, just for each other." The glory of war seldom endures for those who experience combat. But the commitment to their fellow combatants is a strong bond which is seen in unit reunions and VFW gatherings even six decades after their service.

As Christians, we often mouth the words of commitment to Christ as the transformer of life and the Prince of Peace, but we seldom find such a sense of duty in our communities of faith. Why is this the case? If

perfect love casts out fear, should we not be even more committed than those who bond together to overcome their fear in combat?

The word “honor” speaks of integrity in one’s beliefs and actions. In warfare the highest value is one’s willingness to give one’s life for the sake of others. When a person goes to war for whatever reasons proffered, they accept this value as a distinct possibility, even though their denial system counters this with the false notion that it will only happen to the declared enemy or to the “other guy.” In the crucible of combat innocence is lost, the abstract and ideal are replaced with fearsome reality. The combatants live only for their unit, those hapless souls bound together to ward off death. There is no world outside the unit which alone endows worth and meaning. Soldiers would rather die than betray that bond. As many combat veterans will tell you, there is a kind of love in this. (Hedges) This being valid consider the aftermath for those who stormed the beaches at Normandy or the South Pacific Islands, who lost comrades and friends in bombing runs over Europe, who suffered in the “Frozen Chosen” experience in Korea, who died in the jungles of Vietnam or in the desert places and towns in Iraq, and who die today in the mountains of Afghanistan. Oh, the memories living veterans carry and too often bury as their medal of honor. We salute them today for the burdens they bear and honor their service to this nation.

The value and highest symbol of Christianity is “greater love has no person than this, that he or she will give their life for another.” Fortunately, for most of us, this highest value of honor is not demanded. However, we must ask the question of ourselves; in claiming to love God, how far are we willing to go in being vital participants in the coming kingdom? How do we honor that promised kingdom which is not evident in this world of dominion and power systems? The challenge is ours as a community of faith to do all we can possibly do for that coming kingdom of ultimate peace.

Finally, we come to the final word of the slogan, “country.” What does this mean? I believe our veterans have much to teach us about this if they would speak and the others, who weren’t there would listen. They become genuine peace-seekers. They know there has to be a better way than warfare to settle problems and bring nations together. Too often countries, including our own, promulgate mythic war where they imbue events with meanings they do not have. They perceive defeats as signposts on the road to ultimate victory. They demonize the enemy so that their opponent is no longer human. They view themselves, their people, as the embodiment of absolute goodness. Simone Weil wrote, “Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates.” (*The Iliad or The Poem of Force*) In mythic war we fight absolutes. We must vanquish darkness. It is imperative and inevitable for civilization, for the free world, that good triumph. The myth is disseminated chiefly by the state and the press and so often culminates in the well known words, “My country right or wrong.” The potency of the mythic war is that it allows us to make sense of mayhem and violent death. It gives a justification to what is often no more than gross human cruelty and stupidity. It allows us to believe we have achieved our place in human society because of a long chain of heroic endeavors, rather than accept the sad reality that we stumble in a dimly lit corridor of disasters. It disguises our powerlessness. It hides from view our own impotence and the ordinariness of our own leaders. By turning history into myth we transform random events into a chain of events directed by a will greater than our own, one that is determined and preordained. We are elevated above the multitude. We march toward nobility. And no society is immune. (Hedges)

The myth of war rarely endures for those who experience combat. War is messy, confusing, sullied by raw brutality and a gripping fear. Soldiers in moments before real battles do not get nostalgic for home or family which could impair their ability to survive. Rather they clean their weapons readying for the business of killing. No one ever charges into battle for God and country. The imagined heroism, visions of rescuing a fallen comrade, the clear lines of battle, the images of their reaction under gunfire usually wilt in combat. This is a sober and unsettling realization. You may not be who you thought you would be. One of the most difficult realizations of war is how deeply we betray ourselves, how far we are from the image of gallantry and courage we desire, how instinctual and primordial fear is. We do not meditate on action but are motivated by a numbing and overpowering desire for safety. And yet there are heroes, those who somehow rise above it all, maybe only once, to expose themselves to risk to save their comrades. If such soldiers survive, they afterward are usually embarrassed about what they did, unable to explain it, reticent to talk. Many are not sure they could do it again.

Those who seek meaning in patriotism do not want to hear the truth of war, wary of bursting the bubble. The tension between those who were there and those who were not, those who refuse to let go of the myth and

those who know it to be a lie feed into the dislocation and malaise after war. In the end, neither side cares to speak to the other. The loss of innocence and alienation of combat soldiers, coupled with the indifference to the truth of war by those who were not there reduces many societies to silence. It seems better to forget. (Hedges)

Yet, today I want us to value highly the “country” veterans have come to understand through their experiences. They have both the right and obligation to speak the truth to power. Sending your citizens to war should always be a last resort; not a first option, nor an arm for economic exploitation, nor an employment program for those with no other hope. If a nation will sacrifice its sons and daughters to the war machine, then the sacrifice must be spread equally across the citizenry by a draft and the sacrifice of all citizens in getting behind the effort as in WW II. Just war theory must be applied again to all proposed confrontations particularly in terms of non-combatant casualties with smart bombs, drone aircraft and nuclear weapons proliferation. We can no longer subject our military and their families to multiple deployments to the destruction of both. Veterans constantly raise the issues of care for the combatants following their injuries to body and mind that their country owes them rather than discarding them as the refuse of war. I, as a Vietnam veteran, a VA chaplain who for twenty-five years worked with veterans, a pastor to broken and disillusioned warriors speak passionately for all veterans because it has always been the citizen soldiers who keep the state attuned to reality. We know that war never determines who is right, only who is left. We seek peace and look for a new world order which will provide it and that promise is in our Christian faith in God’s ultimate reign.

Too many of us as Christians see the promised kingdom of God as a myth. We have cheapened the prospect into a free ticket to some far off heaven. But the promise remains that the nations of this earth, including us, will be transformed, a new creation, based not on the rule of fear but on shared love for one another because of our experience of God’s love. You and I say a dream; God declares it will be reality. The words of the prophet Isaiah give the vision. (read Isaiah 2: 2-4) Each of us is challenged in our faith to live in love and peace. Surely risk is involved and it may cost us our lives. The late William Sloane Coffin, pastor and peace activist, declares, “Peace does not come rolling in on the wheels of inevitability. We can’t just wish for peace. We have to will it, fight for it, suffer for it, demand it from our governments as if peace were God’s most cherished hope for humanity, as indeed it is.”

So, we honor all the veterans we name today, Those living and those who have died. We recognize your sense of “duty” and commitment to maintaining peace and fighting for a better world. We respect the “honor” you have demonstrated in your willingness to put your life on the line for your countrymen. And we appreciate most the sacred truth you carry and your ability to speak truth to power in order to clarify and uphold the values and integrity of what this country claims to be. A poem by Veteran Steve Mason – *Johnny’s Song* collection of poetry by a Vietnam Veteran – Excerpt from *Closure: a Much Needed War* – Stanza III

“I believe somewhere, everywhere
there is a generic veteran
for whom no national border,
nor ethnic pride
is grand enough
to color his humanity.
I believe also
that is this world’s
most brave champions
who dream of peace
and each country’s truest sons (and daughters)
who must live for it.
And, therefore,
not this Veteran’s Day
nor the next
nor the one after that
will men and women of my heart
find closure for the war we fought
in a ceremony honoring the dead.

[we cherish them best who gave it all
by dedicating our lives to the living]
for closure, if such exists,
comes only to the warrior
the veteran, is of other matter.
Truth under fire
has tempered each veteran
of Every war
from one part warrior
and one part human being.
And for each of US
(long before closure)
there remains one, much needed war.
One, last commitment
worthy of a lifetime –
to fight for peace
in each of our hearts
against the fierce enemies
of our darkest natures
and to march in lock-step
with veterans of all wars
from all nations
for human dignity.

The challenge is ours as a Christian community of faith. My Marine veteran friends often greet each other with the words “Semper Fi.” That motto “Always faithful” is our calling in Christ. May we live it, not just talk about it! Lord, make it so we pray. Amen.

Sources: Psalm 46:1-11, Isaiah 2: 2-4

War as a Force that Gives Us Meaning – Chris Hedges, Anchor Books, New York 2000

Achilles in Vietnam – Jonathan Shay, Atheneum, McMillan, 1994

Credo – William Sloane Coffin, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004