

Veterans - November 10, 2019 – John 15:9-17 - “No Greater Love”

I was surfing the Internet looking for a good cover for Veteran’s day, when I found the one on today’s bulletin. Please look at it now. This is the first time that a bulletin cover helped me to discern from which Scripture to preach. I chose the cover based upon the verse on it John 15, part of the final discourse of Jesus from which I preached my first weeks here at FPC. Don’t worry, this isn’t a repeat! When I preached this passage before, the emphasis of the sermon was from Jesus’ words at the start of the chapter, when he instructs “Remain in Me” to bear fruit.

In today’s passage, Jesus continues to stress the need to remain, but specifies “remain in my love.” Then Jesus explains that how to remain in his love is to love each other. In v. 13 on our cover, Jesus expounds, “Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Details of the bulletin cover then support the verse.

First, consider the color red. There is a red border, a red rose, and the US flag with red stripes. Red may represent a number of things. Red is the color of love. The red on the US flag signifies “hardiness and valor.” Some say that red stripes also symbolize blood spilled to preserve our freedoms, an appropriate concept for the national holiday of Veterans day. For Christians, red reminds us of the blood that our Savior spilled, to gain for us by his sacrifice, freedom from our sin.

Second, notice the rose on the cover. Whereas, at the beginning of the John 15, Jesus tells us to remain in him, to stay connected to the vine, the cover likely shows a cut rose. No longer connected, a cut rose can only stay alive for several days. Then the flower wilts and dies. Jesus died for us. Again, Jesus said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

This verse is especially fitting for Veterans Day, since veterans practice “laying down life” to protect others. In wars in which US soldiers have served, since WWII over ½ million veterans have sacrificed their lives in battle. Memorial Day is when we commemorate veterans, who have died, but Veterans Day is to honor vets still living.

However, the point of laying down one’s life is not dying. It is being willing to lay down one’s life. Jesus willingly laid down his life on the cross. He willingly bled & died that we might live. Death was not forced on him. He agreed to the Father’s will. He was willing.

Similarly, most of our still-surviving veterans have served voluntarily. They have not been drafted. The most recent draft ended in 1971 at the close of the Vietnam war, nearly 50 years ago. In addition, even during times of conscription, not all soldiers were drafted. Of 16 million US soldiers in WWII, 6 million volunteered! The love that Jesus showed, in laying down his life for us, came willingly. That is the way of love. Love is sacrificing willingly for one’s friends.

And there are many ways that veterans have sacrificed to protect our freedoms. I learned of these in different settings. For one thing, before coming to Ohio, I attended Clergy Training Seminars thru the Veterans Administration in PA. These seminars were offered, since, while 22 million veterans are in the US, there are only 700,000 military chaplains. These facts support a strong need for clergy training, designed to support the wellbeing of veterans with challenges of reintegrating into civilian life. Second, I was also student chaplain in the Veterans Administration of Pittsburgh for hospice, rehab, and in medical mental hospitals. I also grateful for the safe return from service of those of you who are veterans at FPC of Pataskala. But as student chaplain for the VA, I minister to veterans, who were not as fortunate. Through them, I gained insights to share about how veterans, such as these, have laid down their lives for us, like Jesus who willingly demonstrated his love.

For one thing, many veterans of war have sacrificed sound mental health. I spent most of my time as a student chaplain in a Veterans mental hospital in PA. Many of us have heard of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. 22% of veterans suffer PTSD, a fear-based response due to the experience of a lack of safety in the environment.

Even more suffer from moral or soul injury. In the Civil War, this was referred to as "soldiers' heart." In World War I, the injury was called shell shock. In WWII, battle fatigue. For Vietnam, PTSD was the all-encompassing term. But since the gulf war, there is a distinction between PTSD and moral injury. 78% of veterans suffer moral injury, a guilt-based response, where the soldier suffers from a feeling of being unforgivable. Imagine the pain of not being able to accept forgiveness from Jesus, the grace of the Christian faith! This mindset comes not just from battle, but also from battle preparedness tactics put in place after the Korean war. Now soldiers are trained to shoot at moving targets with human shapes and faces, teaching soldiers to dehumanize fellow human beings and enabling muscle reflex memories. Whereas previously, only 1 out of every 4 soldiers were able to fire weapons in battle, now 98% of soldiers fire thru muscle reflexes. But in doing so, soldiers can act contrary to their own consciences, and thereby suffer moral injury.

Here's an example from the VA mental hospital in PA. One of my first patients was a gentle giant, who held high the Christian virtue of peace. Yet his sharpshooting skills took him into special ops, where he described himself as being a trained mercenary. The soldier was taught that to maintain peace, he had to carry out orders that were against his conscience. This wrecked havoc on his mind, bringing him into severe depression and multiple attempts at suicide, as he simply could not live with the things he had to do to be a good and loyal, an honorable and commendable soldier.

Moral injury and PTSD has also eliminated the ability of many veterans to have a healthy and whole home life. Divorce rates are high. Homelessness is not uncommon, which may occur when veterans, consciously or otherwise, believe that they do not deserve a healthy normal home life. As a result, starting about this time of year and all

through winter, the admittance of veterans into hospitals increases, so that homeless veterans might have a warm place to stay. For warmth, veterans may also find ways into prison. All to say, US veterans have made huge sacrifices of home to protect our American homeland.

On a related note, not only have veterans sacrificed, but so have their families. For one thing, veterans and their families sacrifice time together. In our bulletin every week, we lift prayer for CPO John Vincent. His mother Pat wants to see him during the holidays, but is not sure that she will. Veterans sacrifice time with their families.

Further, the shape of the military has changed. While previously military personnel served a constant 6 years in deployment. Now soldiers are part of the national guard or the reserves, cycling through deployment 5 or 6 times in their service period, raising anxiety and stress in preparing for separation from and integration back into family and civilian life. With military and civilian cultures beings so different, the constant state of adjustment is very difficult for soldiers and their families.

Out of all the sacrifices, perhaps one the greatest is feeling no one wants to listen. This example is from the VA mental hospital in Pittsburgh, PA. One group of soldiers asked how much I had to be paid to work with them. I answered that as a student chaplain, actually I paid for the honor of being with them. To which one veteran responded, “No offense Ma’am, but you’re crazier than we are.” God bless our veterans.

One valuable piece of advice that I learned is not to say in quick passing, “thank you for your service,” but instead to ask “tell me about your service.” Then to listen with love, patience, and care, giving time and relationship to a Vet, for soldiers have given much in sacrifice for us.

To reiterate, as much as veterans willingly lay down their lives for us, there are those who doubt that their lives have any value once their military service stops. There is depression & threat of suicide because of it. But help is available. The Veterans Crisis Line works in partnership with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. They share the same number. Dial 800-273-8255. Then press 1 to reach the Veterans crisis line. Here Veterans & family members have access to many services & 24/7 support. The number is printed in today’s bulletin. Please, put it in your phone to use as needed.

Remember to pray for veterans & their families. Of the 22 million veterans in the US, 8 million of these have no relationship with a church. Be a friend to veterans, as Jesus is a friend to us. Find ways of sharing the good news of Jesus’ forgiveness and hope. Cards & gifts can also convey appreciate to vets. Popcorn thru scouts. Our help is needed. Veterans need friendship with us, and most of all with Jesus.

Veterans have sacrificed for us. Jesus has sacrificed for us. As Jesus said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”