

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 8, 2015

A Soldier's Faith

Matthew 8:5-13

During his years in the military, he had worked his way up in the ranks. By now, as a centurion, he was part of the backbone of the Roman army, charged with discipline. Not that there weren't days when he thought about the possibility of retirement. But part of him realized that there could still be ample time and opportunity for further advancement. Presently, he was in charge of roughly eighty troops. The next step up would be to command a cohort, made up of about 480 men. And who knows, maybe even commanding a legion, nearly 5,000 soldiers, wasn't beyond the realm of possibility if he stuck with it and maintained his current level of performance. After all, a few of his superiors had recently made comments indicating that he could be in line for another promotion.

But there was more to this soldier than just the medals on his chest and the respectable wage that came with being a centurion. He had already been through a lot in his military career, and had seen and experienced his share of combat and violence. He certainly hadn't gotten to where he was by taking the safe, easy route through life. On the contrary, he knew firsthand what it was like on the battlefield. He had seen fellow soldiers get maimed and killed. He had seen incredible acts of courage, bravery, and sacrifice. He had witnessed brutality against the innocent. He had watched the horrors of collateral damage. He had faced terrifying situations that called for split second decisions in the midst of moral chaos.

It's no wonder that there were sleepless nights when the centurion relived the violence and heard again the cries and screams of warfare. And don't forget the people in his household. They felt a lot of it too. They lived with many of the effects of what this soldier had been through. Add to this the fact that when not on the battlefield, the centurion had other duties, like general policing, customs work, or supervising crucifixions, and you begin to see that warfare's human toll was as awful in the first century as it is in the twenty-first century.

This Wednesday is Veterans Day, an opportunity to remember and honor all those who have served and are serving in our country's armed forces. It's important that the church participate in this occasion, particularly because of the Christian traditions, resources, and practices that we can bring to bear on the lives of veterans. Wednesday needs to be so much more than just a chance to get a good deal on a new refrigerator or mattress. Much greater things are at stake, including the spiritual and emotional lives of our soldiers.

As more veterans return home from Iraq and Afghanistan, the need for care and healing increases, especially for those suffering from combat trauma. Though it wasn't officially recognized until 1980, PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) is a condition that we've continued to research, understand, and treat. Even after the danger of a traumatic or life-threatening event has passed, those who suffer from PTSD continue to react and suffer. The main symptoms include troubling memories and nightmares, hyper-vigilance, anxiety and depression, emotional detachment, and avoidance of crowds. These symptoms often lead to substance abuse, chronic unemployment, and homelessness. What's more, the

impact of PTSD isn't felt by just the veterans themselves. Marriages get strained, and often fail. Relationships with children and extended family suffer. Another enormous concern is the rising rate of military suicide. The suicide rate among those with PTSD is almost twice the national average. Veterans currently commit one-fifth of all suicides in the United States, at the rate of about 8,000 suicides every year. Taken together, these symptoms and statistics give us a sobering reminder of how war can devastate human lives, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

In the midst of this kind of human suffering, the church can be a living embodiment of Jesus' healing, restorative presence. Today's text is a good example of how Jesus' life and ministry sometimes brought him into contact with soldiers. In this case, the centurion is seeking healing, not for himself but for a paralyzed servant in his household. Note that Jesus' initial response is hesitation. What doesn't come across in the translation I read earlier is that Jesus' reaction to the centurion's request is more of a question than a statement. "I should come and heal him?" is probably a more accurate way of capturing Jesus' reluctance. I say reluctance because in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is consistently portrayed as a very Jewish Messiah, sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and is never pictured as entering a Gentile house.

But the centurion isn't put off by Jesus' hesitation. Instead, he takes Jesus' reluctance as a test of faith, which he passes with flying colors. He explains that it's not necessary for Jesus to actually enter his house, but only to speak the word, and the servant will be made well. Remember that as a military officer, the centurion has plenty of experience with the power of a command. Whether in the field among his troops or at home giving instructions to his servants, the centurion knows what can be accomplished by a simple order spoken by someone in authority. And he recognizes in Jesus the very authority of God, including power over disease. The centurion has confidence that Jesus possesses God-given power to heal from a distance.

Now that, says Jesus, is incredible faith. In fact, Jesus notes that he hasn't witnessed that kind of faith among many of his own, the people of Israel. Here is a centurion, a Gentile, a person whom many ordinary Jewish folk would have regarded as the enemy, a cruel and self-serving outsider. Yet, in Jesus' eyes, this outsider is a model of faith, and a sign of things to come. The centurion's confidence that Jesus is carrying out God's strategy for victory points to the day when God's mission of healing will be fully accomplished, and all God's people in Christ will participate in the celebration.

Today's story of one soldier's faith reminds us that the church is called to be an advance sign of God's project for reconciliation and restoration. And the way that we as God's people respond to our veteran's lives and experiences is an important part of how we participate in God's work of bringing life out of death, good out of evil, and wholeness out of brokenness.

In the lives of veterans, brokenness takes many forms. This includes the loss of limbs, burns, brain injuries, chronic pain, and the other physical scars caused by the violence of combat. But there are also the mental, emotional, and spiritual wounds that need attention and care. These aren't always as easy to identify, and can take even longer to treat. That's partly because of the chaotic, complex, and confusing circumstances that soldiers face on the battlefield, where decisions have to be made and actions taken under conditions that most of us have never faced. As one Vietnam veteran has put it, "the reality of warfare is that given enough time in combat, most soldiers will be faced with moral choices that will take a lifetime to untangle." He goes on to say that the church often does a poor job of engaging the atrocities of war and helping soldiers work through the fear, guilt, and shame

that many of them wrestle with for years after they've returned home. "Somehow," he writes, "I believe we Christians do not want to be soiled by the brutality of the battlefield, even though we are forced to confront our own involvement in the war as we pay taxes, vote, watch television, and occasionally have firsthand contact with survivors of combat. There is enough blood for all of our hands."¹

It's important that we acknowledge and respond to the moral and spiritual complexity of the wounds that veterans bear. But it's also important that we recognize the enormous sacrifices that they and their families have made, and the ways that their service continues to benefit our lives. The kind of strength and commitment that it takes to do what they do can provide all of us with an example of solidarity, cohesion, and mutual support toward a common mission. Their lives have much to teach us about devotion and discipline, and about how to recover, rebuild, and persevere in the face of enormous obstacles and challenges.

As I've already noted, the church has a unique and crucial role to play by being the healing community of Christ. We see in today's Scripture passage that where Jesus' word is present, Jesus himself is present. And where Jesus himself is present, Jesus' power, the very power of God, is present. The power to redeem and to restore. The power to reconcile and to make new. The power to save and to heal.

There are many ways that we as Christians can be a healing presence in the lives of veterans. Though our small church doesn't include as many veterans as much larger congregations, we can still come alongside those in our fellowship who have served, and be present to them as they continue their journey. And beyond our congregation, we can bear the healing presence of Christ to veterans in our families, our neighborhoods, our schools, and our workplaces.

We can help connect veterans with each other, especially since veterans know veterans, and understand veterans, better than anyone else. We can help connect veterans to the VA. We've heard lots of news about the breakdowns and failures of the VA, issues that certainly need attention and correction. But we also need to remember that the VA is doing lots of good work in supporting veterans and their families. Where there's receptiveness, we can refer veterans to therapists or other counselors who can provide appropriate help. We can help veterans find jobs and other opportunities where they can put their gifts, skills, and experience to work. We can demonstrate our care for veterans through cards, phone calls, care packages, and other tangible expressions of support.

And even more directly related to the church, we can integrate veterans into the life of our spiritual community as we worship together and work together. It's not just about what the church has to offer veterans, but also about what veterans have to offer the church. It's about how their presence enriches and strengthens a congregation's mission, especially when it comes to the ways that the church thinks about and speaks about war and combat.

In addition to all the things I've mentioned, the church can be a community of Christ's healing through the gifts of listening, prayer, and Scripture. We need to give veterans space to talk—or not to talk—about the full range of their experiences, even when what they have to say is painful and uncomfortable. We need to be attentive to them as they wrestle with and respond to the physical and spiritual wounds that they bear. We need to have them know that we're praying for them, and that the God who hears our cries for grace is still speaking into our lives, especially through the preaching and teaching of the Word. That includes the hard and difficult parts of Scripture where we must honestly and openly engage with issues of warfare, lament, and the question of God's presence and purposes.

But remember that we need to do all this within the Bible's overall story of forgiveness, peace, and new life through Christ. As veterans move, small step by small step, toward a place of healing, they need the church's word of hope to help them keep living into their place in God's plans and purposes. You and I have a vital part to play in that work of recovery and restoration. I like the way that Katelyn Beaty has put it when she writes, "At the family picnic, in the fellowship hall, at the Communion table, we are ever in the midst of the walking wounded. But wounds that are seen have a better chance of healing than wounds that are hidden. May we stay with veterans long enough to see, to suffer alongside, and to serve."²

¹ Patrick Stone, "Where Atrocity Is Normal." Christianity Today website. June 30, 2006. Accessed November 5, 2015 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/juneweb-only/12652.0.html?share=8qT2II4UP%2ftvj6K9yYthsEJwraYSAPMP>.

² Katelyn Beaty, "Hidden Casualties," *Christianity Today* (June 2015) 7.