

PERPETUATING PEACE

On November 11, 1918, the guns of World War I were laid aside as the armistice ending that brutal conflagration was signed. One year later, exactly one-hundred years ago tomorrow, the first observance of Armistice Day was held. Congress had declared that November 11 should be a day “commemorated with thanksgiving and prayer and exercises designed to perpetuate peace through goodwill and mutual understanding between nations.”

In time, when it became clear that World War I was not the war to end all wars, the name of the holiday was changed to Veteran’s Day, and it became a day to honor all those who had served in the military--dead or alive, in times of war or in times of peace.

Veteran’s Day, despite the original call for prayers in the Congressional declaration of 1919, is not a religious holiday. It is a secular holiday. You do not need to be a Christian to observe it, you don’t even need to be a person of faith. For being an American, and celebrating a national holiday like Veteran’s Day, is not dependent on belief in God or any other religious understanding. Yet here we are, gathered as followers of Jesus and believers in God, in the midst of a worship service devoted to religious practices like prayer and song and the reading of scripture, choosing to mark this day.

I must admit, I have had trouble over the years bringing days like Veterans Day, Memorial Day and the Fourth of July into worship. It is not that I am unpatriotic, though I have been accused of that from time to time. Quite the contrary! I love this nation, and am so very grateful for the privileges it affords! I have studied its history, I make sure I vote, I report for jury duty when called, I write letters and send e-mails to governmental representatives to share my thoughts on various pieces of legislation. In other words, I participate in this our democracy.

No, my hesitancy about observing national holidays in church has more to do with a concern about what is commonly called American civil religion. This is a nation built on freedom of religion. And that is good. And I for one am grateful for that freedom to worship, or not to worship, as I see fit. Sometimes though, we forget that, and try to conflate religious beliefs and patriotism. Being a real American, we sometimes assume, means believing in God--or even being a Christian. But that is to true. Being a loyal American is not synonymous with being a Christian. Millions and millions of Christians are not Americans! And many, many, many Americans are not Christian. Being an American is not even synonymous with being a believer in God. You can be an atheist or agnostic and still love this country.

But all that said, at some point along the way I came to believe that there can be a place for marking days like Veteran's Day in church. For such days, when they are not merely excuses for jingoism, bring to the surface important virtues and ideas that we as Christians can and do honor.

Memorial Day, for instance, reminds us that honoring the memory of those who've gone before us, especially those who have made sacrifices on our behalf. After all it was Jesus who said, "No greater love has a man or woman than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

And the Fourth of July calls on us to never take for granted the liberties we enjoy, blessings like freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly. Freedoms that make it possible for us to gather in churches and synagogues and temples and mosques, to pray as we feel so called.

And Veteran's Day-- serves to help us remember that as Christians we believe we have an obligation to serve others, even as we have been served. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "For. . . you have been given freedom: not freedom to do wrong, but freedom to love and serve each other." (Galatians 5:13, *The Living Bible*)

Our scripture reading this morning from Luke is the well-known story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is approached by a scribe, one of the men responsible for knowing and interpreting the law. He has a question for Jesus, he wants to know what one must do to inherit eternal life. What is required?

Jesus asks him what the Torah says, asks him what law applies to his question. The scribe responds by quoting from two sections of the Bible. First, he offers up a verse from Deuteronomy, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind." (Deuteronomy 6:5) And then he adds a bit from the book of Leviticus, "And [you shall love] your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

Good answer, says Jesus. Right on the money! But who is my neighbor, asks the lawyer?

And then he tells the story of the Good Samaritan--you know it. All about the man who is robbed along the Jericho Road, left for dead, ignored by a priest and a Levite as they hurry by, and then rescued by a Samaritan. A surprising twist. Samaritans were reviled in ancient Israel.

While he tells the story to answer the question asked by the scribe--who is my neighbor? -- the story also illustrates that for Jesus love isn't about warm fuzzy feelings. Love is about action. Love is about what you do for the person who is down and out and in need of help.

Regardless of how you feel about their appearance, their religious beliefs, their socio-economic status or anything else. Love helps others. Love serves others.

There are many stories in circulation about veterans who did that when they were on the battlefields of war. Lives saved by selfless acts of love and courage. But I was recently touched by a much simpler story, a true story, one told about a homeless veteran named Tony--a homeless veteran in great need himself.

Tony it seems fit the stereotypes. He had a weathered face from spending so much time outdoors. He was unshaven. No doubt his clothes gave off an odor, and his teeth were probably in a state of decay.

One day, though, a young woman passing him by stopped to say hello. He was usually found in an alleyway that lay along her path to work, and so, over time, she not only said hello, but stopped to chat. Eventually they would even share lunch together. Perhaps she was a dogooder, or had a vet in her own family, or maybe she was just lonely. Tony most certainly was. Tony used their time together, the young woman wrote, to tell her "about his war stories and loved ones and who should win the Super Bowl." And she reciprocated with her own stories about her various concerns, her family, and as she wrote, "How I [didn't] really care who should win the Super Boal." (Lauren Hansen, "7 Heartwarming Veterans Stories," www.theweek.com)

Not long ago, the young woman went through a particularly challenging time in her life. She had some very difficult choices to make about her future--and Tony listened with care as she spelled them out. On one day in particular, she was very weighed down with her worries as she walked to work, when suddenly, Tony approached her from behind, and tapped lightly on her shoulder.

As she turned around, she saw the old vet's face, darkened with concern. He told her he had a gift. And then he reached into his tattered old Army jacket, and pulled it out. An old watch head. It had no strap, just the watch itself. As he placed it in her hand, he said, "I don't have much but I wanted you to know that you have done what many other would not simply by being my friend." (Ibid) And so she had. Her friendship had helped the lonely old vet. But as she wrote, he had helped her "infinitely more." (Ibid)

That original Congressional proclamation noted spoke of offering prayers and words of thanksgiving, but it also spoke of engaging in "exercises designed to perpetuate peace through goodwill." Perhaps that is the finest way we can honor those who have served our nation on our behalf. By serving folks like Tony. It is estimated that of the 968,000 homeless folks in America, one in ten of them are veterans. And 76% of homeless vets are suffering from addictions or mental illness. (www.themilitarywallet.com/homeless-veterans-in-

america/) Perhaps this year you could offer your support to veterans, help perpetuate peace through goodwill, by supporting financially or as a volunteer one of the many agencies assisting homeless folks in general or veterans in particular. Don't just say "Thank you for your service," offer real help. You don't have to be a Christian to serve others, but we call ourselves Christian are under a special obligation to do so. For, as Jesus reminded us in the story of the Good Samaritan, love is serving others. And in the end, that may be the most important lesson we can learn on this and every Veterans Day.

Amen

John H. Danner