

Our Veterans, Our Neighbors

If you ask Christians what teaching of Jesus most clearly defines how we should live our faith, many would speak the words we just heard: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This teaching is central for us this morning as we honor the veterans among us. There are 18 million veterans in our country and they are our neighbors--the people Jesus says we are to value second only to God, and to love at least as much as we love ourselves.

Let me tell you about one of my neighbors. A few years ago I was living in a 3-family house not far from here. One morning a U-Haul pulled into our parking lot, followed by other cars filled with people who came to help with a move-in. As I watched, I tried to see which of these people were my new neighbors. Soon it became clear. There was a handsome young man in a wheelchair. Both his legs ended at mid-thigh. I'll call him John. The other new tenant was his young wife, whom I'll call Liliana.

Over the next year, I got to know the couple a bit—just a bit, because they were very private. John was 26 and had served two tours in Iraq. During his second tour, the armored truck in which he was riding rode over an IED—an improvised explosive device. One of his fellow soldiers died; two, like John, lost limbs. John spent many months in an army hospital before moving to our building, which was five miles from the VA Hospital in Northampton.

Proximity to the VA was one reason why these new neighbors moved into our building. The other was access to the UMass Amherst campus, where John had enrolled under the GI Bill. Each weekday morning John came out in his wheelchair, rolled down the ramp to his hand-controlled car, unlocked the door and, using his great upper body strength, transferred himself into the driver's seat. His wife, Liliana, folded up the wheelchair, slid it into the back and got into the passenger seat. When they reached the campus, she lifted out the wheelchair; John transferred himself into it and went off to class. With all his pride and all his strength, he wasn't able to do what most other students could do: get to class on his own two feet.

So this was my neighbor, whom Jesus tells me to love as much as myself. When I learned about him, I was so grateful to be a taxpayer, supporting all the services he received. I learned that John was on a waiting list for costly above-the-knee prostheses which might let him walk again. He was also in a support group for veterans with PTSD. All this made me glad for him. But I wondered about 21-year old Liliana, because it wasn't clear that she had anything like the comprehensive support John was receiving. Yet to my mind she was almost as much of a veteran as he, because her life had been so altered by his injuries.

This brings me to another neighbor. Tracy belonged to a Vermont church that I served soon after 9-11. Like John, she served in Iraq. There her vehicle hit an IED. Initially, she was not thought to have been seriously injured because most of her wounds were invisible. She was diagnosed with depression, sent home for a rest and redeployed. A year later, she was medically discharged. By then it was clear that the 300-mile-an-hour shaking her head had received from the IED had caused a traumatic brain injury. She is one of roughly 350,000 soldiers our government says suffered brain injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Today Tracy and her two teenagers live with her mom. Tracy had joined the National Guard when her kids were toddlers in hopes of attending college and becoming an elementary school teacher. That has not been possible. Due to her injury she has developed terrible headaches and personality quirks that create stress at work and at home. She can no longer read facial expressions that tell her she is making people uncomfortable. Once reserved and quiet, she now often speaks profanely and sometimes makes threats against people who annoy her. Tracy and her family get a lot of support from

the National Guard. The Guard treats the whole family as veterans, because all their lives have been drastically altered by Tracy's military service.

My point is not that all Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have come back injured. No. It's that due to medical advances, tens of thousands of our soldiers survived brain injuries they wouldn't have survived a generation ago. Their survival has generated enormous challenges for them and their families. And we as a nation have not fully met those challenges.

There's no way to count all the veterans' wives and husbands, parents and children who, alongside our 18 million vets, are our *ununiformed* veterans today. But all are our neighbors, whom Jesus says we are to love as ourselves. Would that Jesus could go to every VA hospital and Vet Center and lay healing hands on our veterans. But now he works through us, and the healing work is ours. It's hypocritical to praise the sacrifices of our veterans while moaning about the taxes which pay for their services. Whatever our veterans need, we owe them.

The debt we owe was well understood by the hero of today's other Bible passage: David, the shepherd boy who, a thousand years before Christ, became Israel's greatest soldier, poet and eventually, its king.

The story comes from the time of David's military service. He had joined the Israelite army in his teens. He soon proved to be a bold fighter and an inspiring military leader whose God-given charisma drew tribal leaders to him.

Year after year, David and his men fought the Philistines, who controlled the Holy Land's fertile plains. It was guerilla warfare, with small bands of Israelites launching their attacks from the hills, without support from any larger force. The men had each other's backs on patrol, in ambushes and in pitched battles. They formed tight bonds, as modern soldiers do in similar circumstances. And like modern soldiers, they often called each other "brother."

In today's story, David is resting in his stronghold, a fortified cave near the village of Adullam. There he is joined by his three most trusted lieutenants. As they rest, he shares a simple human desire with them, a wish that he could have a drink of water from a well near the gate of Bethlehem, his hometown. It was just a longing, perhaps mixed with homesickness, spoken as one of us might say, "I wish I had a Coke like I had back home!" But David knew his craving could not be satisfied, because his hometown was then occupied by the Philistine army.

Utterly loyal to him, the three officers decide to give David a special gift. They leave the cave, travel 12 miles to Bethlehem, slip through the Philistine lines, draw water from the well and bring it back for David to drink.

David's response is remarkable for his intuitive grasp of what is at stake. He refuses to consider himself worthy of their gift. He perceives that water obtained at such a risk and with such love cannot be treated as an ordinary thirst quencher. It represents a deep spiritual bond between him and his men. So instead of drinking the water, he pours it on the ground as a libation, an offering to God. *The Lord forbid that I should drink this!* he says. *Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?* He shows his men that in *his* eyes, their offering is a sacrament.

We as a nation would do well to see our veterans through David's eyes. The blood of our servicemen and women *is* a sacrament. What they offer, what they risk, is offered and risked in solidarity with us. Do we accept the cup they bring without facing our responsibilities? Are we more worthy than David?

We each have our own opinions about the wars our country fought for 20 years; wars that produced 2.5 million veterans. We know what these wars have cost the women and men we asked to fight them.

In today's story, a soldier who lived 3,000 years ago tells us that we should not demand such costly sacrifices for trivial reasons. We shouldn't say, "Oh, how we'd like a drink from this or that foreign well!" and put human lives at risk for trivial or unworthy aims. Our soldiers self-offering should never be initiated lightly.

There are cups of water that should never be requested; cups that, if offered, we should not drink. But, having asked for the cup and drunk from it, we need to make our own offering to the men and women who brought that cup to us at the risk of their lives, limbs and sanity. Let ours be a libation of unstinting love, support and care.

May God bless our nation's 18 million veterans. May God bless their families, who wear the invisible uniform. May God bless us all, that we may serve and sustain these neighbors, whom Jesus calls us to love...even as much as we love ourselves. Amen.