

The scene is Iraq; from last Fall. One chaplain approached a soldier who was preparing for a convoy down Route Irish, a contested route just outside Baghdad known to be one of the most dangerous stretches of road in the world. “What do you want?” the chaplain asked, really asking, “How can I minister to you -- how can I give you help?”

Without taking his eyes from his gear, the soldier said what for many has become the soldier’s prayer: “What do I want? Sir, I wanna know that Jesus is in my Humvee.”

The closest friend of a soldier comes in the relational side of faith: the presence of God, the nearness of Jesus, the immanence of the Holy Spirit. Beliefs are important to a soldier in the field, but only so far as they frame what it is you experience. What counts most is what’s down deep in your bones, the faith & trust you were raised with, the truth you were taught, and the lives of those who modeled faithfulness for you.

This is Memorial Day Sunday, when we take time to consider the religious foundations of what our nation celebrates tomorrow; a recognition of the sacrifice made by so many, men and women who have served our nation in times of war and times of peace—those who have given themselves over, by sacred oath, to serve, protect and defend this nation and in so doing have placed the greater good of others above that of their own safety and security. It is surely a life-changing decision for a person to make. It is not a decision I have made. I have not served in the U.S. military, but I have a profound respect and owe a huge debt of gratitude to those who’ve made that commitment. As the son of a deceased veteran, that’s part of who I am.

I try to take Memorial Day seriously- both in terms of what the sacrifices made by so many have meant for us as a nation, but also – in a more personal way, what it might mean to carry a full, sincere and honest faith with you into uniform. For a thinking person, it can’t be a simple thing to do, nor should it be. Getting yourself into the position of living under the sovereignty of God and the command of military authorities in a complex world brings with it many vexing questions and all too often few easy answers. And again, that’s just how it is.

In preparation for this sermon I’ve read a good and helpful book along the way, *The Faith of the American Soldier*- written by Stephen Mansfield, who took 18 months to work with, get to know and interview soldiers and military chaplains in the theatre of battle in Iraq. He surveyed faith perspectives of dozens of soldiers, from those who described themselves as

living out of a “faith buffet: one part Buddha, three parts Jesus, two parts fortune cookie, and three parts Oprah,” those of a generation eager for spirituality but suspicious of institutions, hungry for truth but wary of doctrine, inspired by stories but repelled by legalistic standards, longing for God but wondering if God is really there. He also interviewed others with more traditional religious upbringings; well-churched, devout believers who were taught not to question, but to accept on faith the way things are and ought to be. He shares a story about one young soldier who newly joined a transportation company and appeared fresh on the field with what some who served with him called a ‘happy faith.’ Bad things didn’t happen to good people, he believed. His church background had taught him that the holy are protected from all harm and those soldiers who suffered did so because they didn’t pray properly, or they didn’t live the “Godly kind of life” they should have.

Some early successes in the field made this soldier bolder, both in the fight and in his faith. Then it happened; a female soldier this young man had become fond of was killed, by a single bullet, while sitting at his side.

The experience shook the inner workings of his soul, and, when he had no frame of reference for the experience, no way for the event to fit within his understanding of faith & life, he began to unravel. Months went by and his downward spiral became more dramatic. Before long he was removed from duty, a psychological casualty of a collision between stark faith and harsh reality.

Chaplains in the field are certain that what clearly does not ‘work’ in terms of faith- what doesn’t survive the crucible of war- is a simplistic, one- size-fits-all kind of faith and spirituality. This is one of the very first things that soldiers and chaplains mentioned in interviews. “The soldier who has an easy religious answer for everything is the one I watch carefully,” one commander said. “If a soldier doesn’t have enough *flex* in his thinking, if his religion is a rigid set of unchanging explanations for everything that happens in the world, then war is going to mess with his mind in a serious way. There’s too much uncertainty in our world for simplistic thinking. One soldier gets hit, and another right next to him survives. One vehicle rolls over an IED and nothing happens. The following vehicle gets demolished. Over here you have to have a sense of mystery— for a Christian, it would be the certitude of the sovereignty of God- to survive in your mind. Any idea that certain things always happen or that certain things never happen will not only make a bad soldier but is evidence of a flawed faith. A religion like this is the enemy of a good fighter.” So say chaplains in Iraq.

And so also, may I suggest, is a simplistic faith an enemy to faithful daily living.

In a similar sort of way, the questions a soldier in the field asks are our questions as well; the same thing we're looking for from faith; a sense of meaning and purpose, reason to live, strength to go on, a cause greater than ourselves.

As Dr. James Fowler, a pioneer in tracking and assessing the paradigm for Christian Faith Development has written, "There is truthfully nothing more sacred to a man or a woman than the meaning, the value, the purpose in being of their lives. It is a middle-and upper-class myth that says that all a person needs to pursue his/her life and career is determination, commitment, and a measure of luck and pluck." Something more is needed; one thing more is required to build a healthy, durable, strong and resilient faith. It begins with just what the soldier preparing for his convoy was looking to find: Jesus in his Humvee, but it is that, and more.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews leads us to that something more. Even as Jesus is famously described as the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith', Jesus isn't the only one alone who has the power and resources to give us strength, courage and hope, and even reason to live. What it often takes is simply another person alongside, to help you walk the walk of faith. Sometimes the walk is easy and comforting, sometimes it takes more courage and fortitude than imaginable. The letter to the Hebrews describes, in fairly graphic detail, what it was that those who trusted and believed endured at the hands of their persecutors for the sake of their faith. Tellingly, we're told, almost as an aside, that "they were too good for a world like this."

These people whose lives are recalled to remembrance counted their lives as a tool for God's good purposes. They understood God's sovereignty to be all reaching, beyond this earthly life, so that their sacrifice would not be in vain, but would be a means through which God's purposes would be carried out. This isn't a simple thing to understand, nor is it by any means easy, but it's absolutely crucial to a living faith. That there is any meaning and purpose to life at all only comes through the sovereign goodness of God's act of creation. The God who is still active in history and our own lives today is the same God who created all things. Our essential story as Christians is the story of the creator God who is also the redeemer God and who has come in this world as Jesus Christ. And we, as followers of this same Jesus, are led to live lives as close to his as we possibly can. We find ourselves by giving ourselves. In Jesus' words it goes like this: "those who want to save their life will lose

it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.“ What Jesus says is seldom simple, hardly ever easy, but always, always true.

Walking alongside another takes many forms; it happens in many ways. On Thursday night I shared in another, more down-home example of it than on the field of battle. At the induction ceremony of the newest members of the National Junior Honor Society at Ridgley Middle School, where our daughter Grace was one of about 75 students to receive the award, in their applications, all the students had been asked the same question, the answer then which was read aloud to the gathered assembly at award time. They were asked to write some brief words about who it was that modeled the highest characteristics of the Honor Society: character, scholarship, leadership, service and citizenship. I wasn't counting, but I am sure the majority of the students counted their Mothers as those who embodied for them just the right mixture of sacrifice, dedication, intelligence, determination and resilience that made them the people the students would most want to emulate. That was a very good thing to hear.

Sometimes it takes a moment of reflection to think back to those who modeled faithfulness for you; those who you would honor, if given the chance; those whose sacrifice of part of themselves made a real difference in your life. Remembering them, honoring them, thanking them is part of what today is about. And importantly, we are not just to thank those we know, or once knew, but at this Memorial time, to extend our thanks and gratitude through time and space.

Gratitude is a response and a relationship; it's an ongoing thing, a process. Through the presence of God, the nearness of Jesus, the immanence of the Holy Spirit, we are called to remember those who give of their lives in the service of our country now serving in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or Korea, or who knows where, who now, are giving us the greatest gift that they can give, and they deserve our recognition and gratitude for the sacrifice they are willing to make. Regardless of politics, regardless of agreement or disagreement with decisions behind where and why they've been sent; because of the sacrifice they are making and the willingness they demonstrate with their very lives, our soldiers deserve our gratitude, support and thanks.

In our world filled with uncertainty, when our mortal security is never guaranteed, in a world too complex for quick and easy, casual and simplistic answers, we are always at the same time undergirded by God's ever-creative presence, love and grace. When we

know & trust that, down deep in our bones, that God is good and sovereign, & God's love is everlasting, we can support those in need and walk alongside them, come what may.

And then, as we make that act of gratitude part of our daily practice and pattern, we can best honor the one who made us all, who loves us all, and who one day will bring us all safely home. Amen.