

Veterans Day Sermon
November 10, 2019
St. Peter's Glenside

Year C
Luke 20: 27-38
Laura Palmer

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

A decade or so ago, someone approached the pastor at the Methodist Church where I grew up shortly before Veterans Day and mentioned my book *Shrapnel in the Heart*, about the letters and poems left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as perhaps having something to offer for the service that day.

He politely declined because, he said, "We're a peace church." He's right about that. Every Christian Church worships Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

But he's wrong to think that those of us who pray, work, or hope for peace, have nothing to learn from war. And we have every reason to honor and respect our Veterans on the 364 other days of the year. But tomorrow, on November 11th, we rightly shine a focus on the women and men who have served and died for our democracy and in our names; this morning, we're going to get a head start.

As background, many of you know I was a freelance radio reporter in Vietnam from 1972-74, and returned in April, 1975, and left on a chopper as part of the

U.S. Evacuation of Saigon.

In a few minutes, Rick DeKalb and Jack Rogers will read two letters from *Shrapnel in the Heart*, and I will share a poem.

But first this question: “Where was God in Vietnam?”

If you interview veterans extensively, as I have, a common theme emerges: “I have never loved the way I did in Vietnam.” When soldiers talk about their buddies or nurses, their patients, they describe an uncommon intensity in their feelings for one another. This became so familiar to me, I missed its significance entirely.

In 1993, I was interviewing Lynda Van DeVanter, an Army nurse who served in Vietnam from 1969-70. Lynda was talking about the love she felt for her patients and then said simply, “And that love for me was where God was in Vietnam.”

I didn’t stop my tape recorder but my life was stopped in its tracks. I had by that time, listened to hundreds of stories from vets, and failed to see what was suddenly so evident. God is right there with us. Always. In the love. The deep and profound love.

But many, soldiers lose their faith in war and it is not uncommon for vets to come

home angry at God because they feel profoundly abandoned by God. In a brilliant book, *Out of the Night*, the Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Vets, a Catholic Army chaplain in Vietnam, William Mehedy, who became an Episcopal priest said the cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” can be the beginning of the deepest spiritual journey—if one is helped and supported along the way. Mehedy reminds us we send teenagers to war, not theologians and philosophers, and many are left stranded in the dark night of their souls with doubt, guilt and shame by what they have seen and done. It’s not easy for many vets to walk through a church door. And churches, by and large, have failed to reach out to them.

We don’t listen to their stories, and often ignore the pain. We fail to learn what they have to teach and turn potential prophets into pariahs.

As Mehedy writes:

“For countless veterans the same question remains unanswered. They often call God obscene names like bastard, son of a bitch—because they are convinced that he failed them at their moment of greatest need. Our teenaged soldiers, like most Americans had been led to believe that God would never let them down,

that he would always lead them to victory over evil and preserved them in battle against the foe. In Vietnam, it didn't turn out that way. There, young men discovered that they'd "been had," and they feel terribly betrayed to this day."

We, as a parish, can think about whether St. Peter's might want to have a role in a veterans ministry, a new program the diocese is initiating. That's a conversation for another time, but a seed worth planting today.

We've all learned to say "Welcome home" and "Thank you for your service" to veterans but could we imagine, as a church community saying "Welcome to St. Peter's" as well?

But now it's time to let the soldiers speak, in their own words, which were part of the stories I wrote about in *Shrapnel in the Heart*.

Joseph Sintoni didn't have to go to Vietnam. For the last 18 months of his three-year Army tour, he was assigned to the honor guard at Arlington National Cemetery. His family was relieved. He'd never go to Vietnam. But after participating in the funerals of young soldiers who did go, Joey decided it was wrong for others to serve while he stayed safe at home. So Joey Sintoni volunteered for Vietnam.

Angela Prete, his fiancée didn't want him to go. They'd picked out names for the children they hoped to raise in a house, overlooking the Cape Cod Canal. But Angela loved him too much to stop him, even if she could.

The night before Joey left home, he wrote a letter to be opened in case he never came back. 90 days later he was killed in Vietnam on March 27, 1968. Joey Sintoni was 23 years old.

Here is what he wrote, in part, read by Navy veteran, Jack Rogers:

Dear Angela,

This is by far the most difficult letter I shall ever write. What makes it so difficult is that you'll be reading it in the unhappy event of my death. I hope the news was broken to you gently. God, Angie, I didn't want to die. I had so much to live for. You were my main reason for living.

Please don't hate the war because it has taken me. I'm glad and proud that America has found me equal to the task of defending it.

Most people never think of their freedom...Freedom, like breathing and circulating blood is part of our being. Why must people take it for granted?

Patriotism is more than fighting or dying for one's country. It is participating in its development, its progress, and its governmental processes. It is sharing the never fully paid price of the freedom which was bequeathed to us who enjoy it today. Not to squander, not to exploit, but to preserve and enhance for those who will follow after us.

I want you to go on to live a full, rich, productive life. I want you to share your love with someone. You may meet another man and bring up a family. Please bring up your children to be proud Americans. Don't worry about me, honey. God much have a special place for soldiers.

Feel some relief with the knowledge that you filled my short life with more happiness than most men know in a lifetime.

The inevitable, well, the last one: I love you with all my heart and my love for you will survive into eternity.

Your Joey

During the Vietnam war, 11,500, women served in the military, many of whom were nurses, often only a few years older than their patients. The names of 8 women who died are included among the 58,000 names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Written anonymously, this poem speaks to the enormity of that Army nurses did in not only Vietnam, but in all wars.

Hello, David--- my name is Dusty.
I'm your night nurse.
I will stay with you.
I will check your vitals
 every 15 minutes.
I will document inevitability.
I will hang more blood
 and give you something for your pain.
I will stay with you
 and I will touch your face.

Yes, of course,
 I will write your mother
 and tell her you were brave.
I will write your mother
 and tell her how much you loved her.
I will write your mother

and tell her to give your bratty kid sister
a big kiss and hug.
What I will not tell her
is that you were wasted.

I will stay with you
and I will hold your hand.
I will stay with you
and watch your life
flow through my fingers
into my soul.
I will stay with you
until you stay with me.

Goodbye, David—my name is Dusty,
I'm the last person
you will see.
I'm the last person
you will touch.
I'm the last person
who will love you.

So long, David—my name is Dusty.
David—who will give me something
for my pain?

And finally, Rick DeKalb will read an excerpt from the journal entry written by Mike Massaro, who volunteered for Vietnam, and served in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division for 17 months. He wrote about what it was like to return home to New Jersey.

I didn't feel like I belonged. The other people that didn't go, the people that protested and burned the flag in Washington, hated me because I went and fought, I was a man without friends, nobody to help me, no one to listen, no one to tell. Fear drove me inside myself. And now, today, about twelve years later, I'm in the same situation today, except for my wife and a few

friends and twelve Vietnam vets, I have someone to talk to and maybe, just maybe, I can come home. I've been a P.O.W. in my own mind for twelve long years, flashbacks every day, sometimes a few in one day. A few days after I was home, my family gave me a homecoming party, some friends and family. I remember it was raining so we all sat under the car port. Rain always does something to my head. I could even smell Vietnam, even though I was home for a few days, the people packed under the car port all together gives you the feeling of Vietnam, close net feeling.

Nobody wanted to hear Vietnam. My mother watched it on TV every night, my older brother, Jim, was in Vietnam in the Marine Corps for two years on the DMA. My mother had enough of the war, we all had enough of the war, but for me, the war isn't over yet. My wife's war isn't over yet either. When will it be over, when can I turn the light out at the end of the tunnel?

I hope the light at the end of the tunnel isn't the sun.

AMEN