

"Withholding Nothing" Veteran's Day Sunday EUMC 11/11/07
by the Rev. Dr. Kathlyn James text: *Mark 12:38-44

Today is **Veteran's Day**, a day of remembrance. In anticipation of this day, several of you sent me a story that has apparently been circulating on the Internet.

It seems that one Sunday morning, the pastor of a church noticed that little Alex was staring up at the large plaque that hung in the narthex of the church. It was covered with names, and American flags were mounted on either side of it. The seven-year-old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside the boy, and said quietly, "Good morning, Alex."

"Good morning," replied the boy, still focused on the plaque. "Pastor," he asked, "what is this?"

"Well, son," said the pastor, "It's a memorial to all the men and women of this church who have died in the service." Soberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque.

Little Alex's voice was barely audible when he looked up at the pastor and asked, "Which one, the 9:00 or the 10:30 service?"

Today we remember and honor all of our nation's veterans: those who have served in all branches in the military, in peacetime and in war. But particularly on this Veteran's Day, during this sermon time **I want to pay special tribute to the veterans of World War II.**

Some of you who are here today were in your youth when World War II began; it became the defining mark of your generation. If you were twenty years old when Pearl Harbor was bombed, you are eighty-six today. Sadly, you are probably now seeing many of your friends passing on. The Department of Veterans' Affairs estimates that 32,000 World War II veterans die every month; that's 1500 every day.

Those of you who lived through World War II are now in the senior years of your lives. **Now is the time for us**---we who are your children and grandchildren---**to pay tribute to you, and thank you** for all that you have done to give us the world we have today. And now, especially, is the time for us to **ask what you can teach us**, as once again our nation is waging war, war that may yet escalate into World War III.

It may seem like a strange thing to be doing in a worship service: honoring war veterans, when Christians are devoted to peace. But...maybe it's not so strange. Most of the veterans of American wars, after all, have been Christian. Most have taken up arms not with the desire to kill, but with the desire to protect the innocent and restore peace. Most have understood war itself as inherently evil, but sometimes the lesser of evils, in a world of imperfect alternatives. No veteran I have ever known has talked about war as something good, something to be glorified or celebrated. In fact, the opposite is true.

I read about one veteran who took his family to France, and had his grandchildren pose next to the headstones at a World War II cemetery so that, in his words, they would be reminded of “*the tragedy of people **not** learning to live together in peace.*” I remember my father---who was a Navy pilot in World War II and Korea---once telling me, when I was a teenager in the 1960’s, “*Don’t assume that military people are pro-war. No one is more anti-war than military veterans. We are the ones who know what war is.*”

Like most veterans of World War II, my dad almost never talked about his wartime experiences. He kept them mostly to himself. Maybe he thought that unless you’d lived through it, you just couldn’t understand what it was like to watch your friends die, or to be lonely and frightened and so far from home. Maybe he wanted to forget his war years and concentrate on the generations that came after him, whose freedom and future he had helped to secure. Maybe he was humbled by the memory of how many of the best of his generation *didn’t* make it even into their early twenties, how many brilliant scientists, teachers, artists, spiritual and business leaders were lost in the ravages of the war.

When I think of my father, and *all* the veterans I have known—of their reluctance to talk about the war, and almost never in a way that would reflect on their own bravery, but only that of others--- I think of our scripture lesson for today. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus describes a Pharisee who stands on the street corner praying loudly to God. The point of the story is that this Pharisee, in his robes of authority and his pious bragging, is a fool. Jesus called for humility. He said, “*Don’t try to put yourself above others. Don’t try to get people to tell you how wonderful you are. Instead, give of yourself for others, even to the point of sacrifice.*” And then he tells the counterpoint story of the poor widow, who quietly comes to the temple and **gives everything that she has**, out of love for God and her neighbors, **withholding nothing**.

Tom Brokaw, the well-known journalist and former news anchor for NBC, has written a moving tribute to the Americans who lived through World War II. Let me share with you a few paragraphs from the introduction to his book, which is entitled, *The Greatest Generation*:

In the spring of 1984, I went to the northwest of France, to Normandy, to prepare an NBC documentary on the 40th anniversary of D-Day, the massive and daring Allied invasion of Europe that marked the beginning of the end of Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich. There, I underwent a life-changing experience. As I walked the beaches with American veterans who had returned for this anniversary, men in their 60’s and 70’s, and listened to their stories, I was deeply moved and profoundly grateful for all they had done. I realized that they had been all around me as I was growing up, and that I had failed to appreciate what they had been through and what they had accomplished.

These men and women came of age in the Great Depression, when economic despair hovered over the land like a plague. They had watched their parents lose their businesses, their farms, their jobs, their hopes. They had learned to accept a future that played out one day at a time. Then, just as there was a glimmer of economic recovery, war exploded across Europe and Asia. When Pearl Harbor made it

irrefutably clear that America was not a fortress, this generation was summoned to the parade ground and told to train for war. They left their ranches in Sully County, South Dakota, their jobs on the streets of Americus, Georgia, they gave up their places on the assembly lines in Detroit and in the ranks of Wall Street, they quit school or went from cap and gown directly into uniform.

They answered the call to save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled, instruments of conquest in the hands of fascist maniacs. They faced great odds and a late start, but they did not protest. At a time in their lives when their days and nights should have been filled with innocent adventure, love, and the lessons of the workaday world, they were fighting in the most primitive conditions possible, across the bloodied landscape of France, Belgium, Italy, Austria, and the coral islands of the Pacific. They were in the air every day, in skies filled with terror, and they went to sea on hostile waters far removed from the shores of their homeland. They succeeded on every front. They won the war. They saved the world.

When the war was over, the men and women who had been involved, in uniform and in civilian capacities, joined in joyous and short-lived celebrations, and immediately began the task of rebuilding their lives and the world they wanted. They were mature beyond their years, tempered by what they had been through, disciplined by their military training and sacrifices. They married in record numbers and gave birth to another distinctive generation, the Baby Boomers. A grateful nation made it possible for more of them to attend college than any society had ever educated, anywhere. They were a new kind of army now... They gave the world new science, literature, art, industry, and economic strength unparalleled in the long curve of history.

There on the beaches of Normandy, I began to reflect on the wonders of these ordinary people, whose lives are laced with the markings of greatness. At every stage of their lives they were part of historic challenges and achievements of a magnitude the world had never before witnessed.... As they now reach the twilight of their adventurous and productive lives, they remain, for the most part, exceptionally modest....I think this is the greatest generation any society has ever produced.¹

This morning, you and I live in a time of war. There are differences, certainly, between our political situation today and the circumstances of World War II. And yet there are also similarities. Ours, too, is a time of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety about the future. It is a time of economic downturn. It is a time of danger, and threats of evil beyond our previous ability to imagine. We are not the first generation to experience these things. In such times, **what can we learn from the greatest generation?**

So many things came to mind as I read the inspiring stories in Tom Brokaw's book. I thought, for instance, about how during World War II, **our nation was unified by a tremendous sense of common purpose.** Black and white soldiers fought side by side; women stepped out of narrow gender stereotypes and into the workforce. The sheer magnitude of the challenge before them required Americans to overcome their

differences, and find a way to work together. This is a lesson that we need to remember and reclaim.

I thought, too, about how **wartime has a way of clarifying our values and priorities.** My parents were married on June 4, 1944, after which my father went immediately back to his ship. I was interested to learn that just after 9/11 in 2001, the Seattle dating service called “Matchmaker in the Market” did an unprecedented level of business! Faced with issues of life and death, people often get to thinking about what they really want in life, what matters most, and find the courage to go for it. Let us do that now.

But what that struck me most forcefully, as I read the testimonies of the generation that experienced World War II, **was this recurring theme of selflessness and sacrifice.** In Brokaw’s book, veterans describe the most amazing acts of heroism. One of them tells, for instance, about a soldier whose legs were blown up by a land mine, who then injected himself with morphine so he could lie there on the hill and point out, to his comrades coming up after him, where it was now safe to step. Remembering this, the teller of this story spoke with sadness, but also with a certain characteristic matter-of-factness. In such stories, it is almost as if he and his fellow veterans are saying, *“What else would you do in that situation? Everyone was doing things like that. You do what you have to do.”*

Sometimes I think that members of my generation are as yet untested by history. We have not really been toughened by adversity. We’ve been able to take for granted the freedoms and the quality of life that have been hard-won for us by others. Perhaps it is time now for us to think less about pursuing our own self-interest, and more about what we can do for the common good. We have spent much of our adult lives talking about rights and entitlements and self-fulfillment; perhaps we need to think more now about such old-fashioned concepts as duty, responsibility and putting the needs of others above our own.

For our time has its own immense challenges. War in Iraq; genocide in Darfur; global poverty; the AIDS pandemic; climate change and environmental degradation that could have more devastating effects than anything humanity has ever faced before. Confronted with such issues, **we need to hear the voices of our veterans---**our parents and grandparents---saying: there are times in life when, without guaranteed outcomes, you must simply rise to the occasion and give your all, for the sake of what is decent and right and good, for the sake of the world, and for the sake of future generations.

Today we pay tribute to you among us who are veterans, especially you who are members of the great generation who brought us through World War II. We are the heirs of your legacy. We ask you to teach us; we want to be faithful in our time, as you have been in yours. We thank God for you, and we thank you for your sacrifices. We salute you in love.

Amen.

ⁱ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. xvii-xxx