

Readings

Isaiah 49:8–16a; Psalm 131; 1 Corinthians 4:1–5; Matthew 6:24–34

This weekend is the prelude to Memorial Day, or formerly Decoration Day – an occasion for the solemn recognition of the gifts and sacrifices of those who died in service to their country, or of veterans who died after their service. You probably know that the holiday was instituted, for the recognition from a grateful people of service by Civil War soldiers who had died in the line of duty.

First Congregational Church of Evanston has their share of people to be remembered on this day.

World War I saw 104 men and 10 women of the church in service. Among them were **Capt. John Chase Redington**, who received the Distinguished Service Cross for bravery, for rescuing wounded under fire.

Brig. Gen. Charles Gates Dawes was a member of First Congregational Church. He was on the administrative staff of General Pershing. After the war, as a prominent U.S. banker, he served as chair of the committee that drafted the “Dawes Plan,” a program designed to save a flagging German economy and for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Dawes would later become Vice President of the United States under Calvin Coolidge. And yes, his was the Dawes House of such local controversy lately.

In World War II there were 84 members who served from First, including 4 members of the Goff family and numerous church people in attendance today. Tomorrow being a day to honor our war dead, let me mention those who died while serving abroad in World War II. **William Pearson Leisenring**, died when a Japanese ship on which he was a prisoner sank. **Rexford Kinsley** was killed in an aircraft accident. And **Richard Rempfer** lost his life in a midair collision.

Though it would be fitting to remember those who died while serving in Korea or Vietnam, while looking through the archives and discovering these names, I was unable to find any records close at hand for servicemen and women in those conflicts. I have no doubt

at all that there were those from this congregation who served and maybe even died there, but I’ll check with the historian in a more timely fashion, next year, and we’ll have a complete list.

Having recited names of our war dead, There’s a certain temptation to sing, “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” as was done from the late 1800s until about twenty-five years ago, but the song isn’t about soldiers, really – at least not in the customary earthly sense of the word. The entire mainline of churches has removed the song from their hymn repertoires; you won’t find it in any hymnal published since 1985.

The song is both more and less than what most people imagine it to be. It was written by a schoolmaster in England, Sabine Baring-Gould, as a marching song for the boys of his school to sing in a parade.

**Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before;
Christ the royal Master
Leads against the foe;
Forward into battle,
See his banners go.
Onward, Christian soldiers
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before.**

At the sign of triumph
Satan’s host doth flee;
On then, Christian soldiers,
On to victory!
Hell’s foundations quiver

At the shout of praise;
Brothers lift your voices,
Loud your anthems raise.

Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God;
Brothers, we are treading
Where the saints have trod;
We are not divided,
All one body we,
One in hope and doctrine,
One in charity.

What the saints established
That I hold for true.
What the saints believèd,
That I believe too.
Long as earth endureth,
Men the faith will hold,
Kingdoms, nations, empires,
In destruction rolled.

Crowns and thrones may perish,
Kingdoms rise and wane,
But the Church of Jesus
Constant will remain;
Gates of hell can never
'Gainst that Church prevail
We have Christ's own promise,
And that cannot fail.

**Onward, then, ye people,
Join our happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices
In the triumph song;
Glory, laud, and honor
Unto Christ the King;
This through countless ages
Men and angels sing.**

Most clergy nowadays simply find the martial imagery distasteful. The notion of “Christ the royal Master [leading] against the foe” with any armament of death-dealing is an offense to most sensibilities.

Additionally, it appears to diminish the seriousness of our own spiritual battles, and claims the role of conqueror for the Church – conquering the forces of evil, which it is fair to infer was interpreted by Mr. Baring-Gould to be other religions and the irreligious.

It even challenges the armor imagery found in works of the apostle Paul regarding the strength and the fortitude we discover by

the grace of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. The whole point of Paul referring to “the whole armor of God” is the thickness of his irony, to indicate that the peace of having God in one's life should so thoroughly fortify one's spiritual well-being.

The point of religion, especially the Christian religion, is not – after all – to militantly oppose other faiths or worldviews. That is not what Christ's Great Commission at the end of the gospel of Matthew meant, to “go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them.” The point is to so center the individual on one's God that there is a constant desire for union with the divine, and a recognition that this state is so attractive, that when we speak of it or act upon it others may be compelled to it as well, so we ought to tell them about it: “I am loved by God, and so are you. Do you want to know how to make the best and the most of it?”

Further, that those so converted will seek after others' welfare because they have so well established their own, this is what leads us to call for social justice and to act for others' benefit. Not just to do the right thing, but to do the right thing because the right thing has been done on our behalf.

The point is exactly *not* to make some sort of spiritual war or Crusade, however much the first fifteen or so centuries of the Church's existence may indicate otherwise, but to lead people away from such anxiety and pain. And this is important to know, because there is a shift that has taken place in our American society we all need to be attentive to, if we haven't already had our eyes and hearts lifted up to it already. It has to do with today's military, not Christian soldiers... or even necessarily soldiers who happen to be Christian... but soldiers and other people in service, and their families and friends... which eventually, I suppose, is most of us here.

David Pyle, who is the intern minister at the Unitarian Church here in Evanston and a candidate for ordination, is also a candidate for chaplaincy in the U.S. Army. For the past many weeks, he has been speaking to area clergy about the effects of multiple

deployments of Army Reservists, to Iraq and Afghanistan.

David has been serving in the military since before going to college, and served on numerous secret missions in Latin America during the War on Drugs. That duty, he says, was challenging enough on his spirit and his personal relationships – eventually contributing to the demise of his first marriage. With the War on Terrorism, and soldiers being deployed *multiple* times, and most of *them* being Reserve troops rather than regular armed forces, there is quite an effect being observed, on family as well as on the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines.

It is not only the fighters who can feel the heat of battle, anymore. With the advent of cellular telephones, individuals can actually be calling out or receiving calls, while they're on the front lines. And God forbid you should get cut off!

It seems that we may have got ourselves to a point in human history when the nobility of war has been completely uncloaked and revealed for what it is. Let alone the cell phones: the profusion of image-producing devices and the near-impossibility of policing the internet practically guarantee that nothing will escape notice. The results of human-on-human violence – whether they're photographs after a battle, or a video of the beheading of a prisoner, or some other graphic representation of some other moment of death – take only the length of time needed to upload the images for them to be shown to the world.

And we thought the film footage from Vietnam was bad!

Leaders may try to dress up the purpose of violence with noble sentiments, but once you've put yourself in the throes of it, violence

remains violence. The effects stay strongly with the families of the deployed, as well as the military men and women themselves, and hence Lt. Pyle's presentation. He wants – the Chaplains Corps wants – to enlist the aid of as many local church clergy as possible, because the military chaplains cannot possibly fill the gap of need that exists... not with their low numbers.

Mind you, he's not recruiting. David is training and informing the rest of us: *What's a normal reaction to deployment, and what deserves treatment? What should a general-skilled clergy expect to have to handle, and what might require a specialist?* Military, their family, and their friends need to know when things are going normally and when

things deserve special attention. Because, quite frankly, none of what's going on in the lives of these people *feels particularly normal* just now.

It can be easy enough, to get so bogged down with the stresses of everyday life and business and school, depression and addiction can set in.

Imagine fretting daily over the lives of loved ones, then the joy of homecoming, and a few months later having the home broken again by military service! In prior wars, the stress was only once. For some families it has happened to the same person three or four times already.

What the task of clergy, and therefore of the church, is becoming in this day and age, is the ushering of our brothers and sisters, either in or out of the faith, to a peaceful place. The Evanston Unitarian Church and the Zen Community of Oak Park are conducting regular centering sessions: "Coming Home Practice Circles," they're calling them. Just for veterans, regardless of the conflict in which they have served, every last Friday of

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the month at 7 p.m. Numerous Christian churches are conducting regular Taizé music services for the purpose of gathering people together and centering and praying as a group. (It might be well for us to find our way into such a ministry as these.)

There is so much that is out of our control in this life, and the military life is one vivid illustration – because of the fact that you can name the controller in the situation who is not the military personnel! Stated more clearly, you may blame the government. But *we* can end up committing our efforts of control toward so many uncontrollable things, it's easy to become spiritually paralyzed, or else crippled.

We have such a resource for comfort and peace here with us: the word of God and God's very presence. But we will so rarely seek it out, because (at least this is the way it

is in my case) we'll imagine that we should be able to wrestle down the anxiety, to master the moment. *Just a bit more energy expended in the cause of the cause ought to do it*, I'll find myself saying.

But it isn't the truth. Is it?

The truth is that we must find our comfort in God – God's reign over us, God's triumph over this world in Jesus, God's always-abiding Holy Spirit. Conserve energy in one more way, through divine grace and mercy.

That is our calling, that is the meaning of our discipleship. And on this prelude to Memorial Day, as we honor those who have gone before us in service, or who, having served have then gone on before us, as we pray that they may rest in peace, let us pray for the living that we may rest in peace as well.

Amen.