

Chosen to Serve

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Memorial Day Weekend
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 29, 2016
Text: Acts 6:1-6

I'm not from a military family myself. My Dad had health issues that prevented him from serving during WWII and neither of my brothers served in the military either. In fact, both of them took actions to reduce the likelihood of their being drafted. They both married very young and both remained in college for quite some time. So, as I sat down to write this message for Memorial Day Weekend, I was quite surprised when I realized how much my life has actually been directly touched by the Armed Forces of the United States and the wars in which they have been engaged during my lifetime. Let me explain.

Peter's father, Dr. Winston Clarkson Hainsworth, was a paratrooper who fought in the Pacific Theatre of World War II in the 11th Airborne Division of the US Army. As both a physician and a paratrooper, he jumped behind battle lines to provide medical care directly in the battlefields. In this role, he was also one of first physicians to participate in the liberation of the Japanese Prisoner of War Camps in the Philippines. Dad loved to tell his war stories, but not about that experience. Never about that experience. He rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and had decided to remain in the military when he was struck by

malaria which greatly complicated his recovery from wounds suffered in the front lines. So, his health was too compromised for him to remain the army. He returned stateside, recovered and pursued his original dream for a medical career as a pediatrician. Eight years after he returned home, Peter was born and the journey that brought the two of us together began.

My uncle, my mother's brother, served in the Navy during the Korean War. He too was a physician but his tour of duty in Korea was aboard a hospital ship anchored off the coast. He survived the war relatively unscathed and returned to live into his medical career dream of being a General Practitioner. But then, when he realized he was tired of the irregular hours and unrealistic expectations he returned to the skills he had learned on that long ago hospital ship, accepting a job as the head of a local hospital emergency room in upstate New York.

I also had my own friends who served in Vietnam. My high school boyfriend broke up with my in a letter he wrote from the deck of an aircraft carrier anchored off the coast of Vietnam. He had decided he wanted to settle in California after he got out to "start over" after everything he'd seen. I never heard from him again. Several high school friends went directly into the military after graduation and both served on helicopters, one as a pilot and the other as a gunner. I never heard from either of them again although I know at least one of them did survive. I saw them both

shortly before they shipped out. But that was it. Silence after that. War changes people, as it must.

When Peter and I were first married and living in Washington, DC we became close friends with a Navy couple. She worked with me in a real estate office and he was a submarine officer stationed at the Navy Department. We became great friends. Dave was the first person I ever knew who liked his pizza with ham and pineapple on it – Hawaiian pizza he called it. We would laugh and laugh when we went out together on the weekends, sharing funny things that had happened during the week. One time Peter asked Dave what he did on the sub when he was at sea. Dave got very quiet. After a long time he said, “I’m really sorry but I just can’t talk about that.” One of us broke the awkward silence with a silly comment and we went back to our laughing and eating. But we never spoke of Dave’s work again. Shortly after, they moved to Norfolk because he had received new orders. He would be back at sea on a submarine for a long time. We had dinner the night before they left and we never saw them again. We stayed in touch for awhile but life happened – kids, moves – and we just drifted out of touch.

One of my most powerful memories of my ministry years happened during a military funeral held at Newman Church. It was for one of the first casualties of the still ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. A Blackhawk helicopter had been shot

down and the young man who was the pilot was killed. He was from Rehoboth, MA and his family only had a loose connection with the church. But when they lost their son, they turned to the church for support and guidance through the impossible terrain of grief that always accompanies a young man too soon dead in a horrible way. That he died in the service of his country made him a hero certainly. But he was still dead, and that's all his mother and father, his very young wife and his siblings cared about. He was gone far too soon. The loss and pain was excruciating for them. And our job, our ministry, in the church was to support them – and protect them.

Protecting them was a real task which fell largely to me. It was odd to think of needing to protect a grieving family. It happens sometimes, if there's been a split of some sort in a family now forced together to deal with a death. But that's not what the situation was with this family. We had to protect them from the media because as one of the first, if not the first, casualty of this brand new and very controversial war, the media were going to be all over this funeral and we knew. They started calling the church to get permission to film inside as soon as the church was announced as the location of the funeral. We already knew the family's wishes and they said no. Family, friends, people who knew their son, people who cared about their son – yes. Media – no. Absolutely NO. We were also worried about war protestors

trying to use the funeral as an opportunity to protest. We made sure that if protestors, they would have to stay in an area where the family would only have a glimpse of them as they came into the church. We did have several reporters and a camera crew show up, and one print reporter was allowed into the funeral, but not the cameraman. No protestors showed up either for which we were grateful.

That was one of the largest funerals I have ever seen. The sanctuary sat 350 but we still had to use the fellowship hall as overflow space and people stood outside on that warm day. As I think about it, I can't remember if it was spring or summer or fall. All I remember is the grief-stricken family, the military honor guard, the playing of taps followed by the 21 gun salute which happened on the lawn outside the church as the funeral was ending. I was in charge of dealing with the honor guard too and what struck me was how young they all were. I soon realized how difficult their task was for them that day, honoring a fallen comrade knowing full well that one day someone else might be doing the same for them. I could see it in their eyes and in their clenched jaws. I could hear it in their carefully controlled voices as they responded to my offers of a cold drink with a quiet, "no thank you, ma'am."

The funeral came off almost without incident. Almost. The family had wanted to include the usual opportunity for folks to

share stories about the deceased, so much a part of Protestant memorial services. My colleague who was officiating was a little nervous about this, but the family was insistent. They needed to hear those stories right now so we all crossed our fingers and went for it. Wonderful stories of Ben as a little boy, as an athlete, as a young man and as a proud military man brought smiles to everyone's faces, driving away the tears for a few moments. Then, just when we thought it was done, one man rose and walked to the pulpit. None of us knew who he was but we thought surely the family would have. Then the first words out of his mouth made our stomachs fall into our shoes.

“I didn't know your son,” he said. “But I know now what a good, fine, strong man he was. I know now he was doing what he loved. More than that, I know he was doing it because he wanted to, because he felt called to do it. All of you have taught me that. And I thank you for that. I came today hoping to use this as an opportunity to speak out against this war, to use your son's death as proof of what the cost of this will be. But I can't do that. Not after hearing what I've heard today. Instead, I just want to say thank you. Thank you to his parents, who raised such an exceptional young man. Thank you to his wife for loving him and marrying him even though you knew you could lose him this way. Most of all, I want to thank him, wherever he is, for opening my eyes. I still don't agree with this war. I still think his death was a

waste in so many ways. But I know now what a hero is – someone willing to give everything to protect and serve his country as he felt God asked him to do. God bless you all.” And he sat down. The church was deathly silent for at least 20 seconds – a long time! Finally the organist started playing the next hymn and the spell of his incredible words was broken. What could have been an absolute disaster, one we had desperately tried to keep from happening, happened anyway. And it was the most memorable part of the service – at least for me.

So, on this Memorial Day Sunday, I urge you to think about all those men and women who have been chosen to serve in our armed forces. We have all been touched by their service. We forget that, I think. We don't see it each day. We don't feel touched by it most of the time. But their service to us, for us, is very, very real. Just as real as those long ago men who were chosen to serve as what came to be known as Deacons in the earliest churches. The apostles just had too much to do, teaching and preaching. They couldn't meet all the needs the people had. So they called together the whole community and asked them to choose from among themselves seven to serve in providing assistance and support to those most fragile and vulnerable among the community – the widows. Seven were soon identified and agreed to serve. The apostles called them forward, laid hands on them and prayed over them, commissioning them to this

important work that touched the whole community even though it was only directly experienced by a few of them. This little story from Acts fits this Memorial Day weekend because in it we see clearly this whole notion of being chosen to serve and agreeing to do so, praying your way into it and through it.

Memorial Day is actually about recognizing those who served in the military and died while in active service. It's been informally and unofficially expanded over the years to include those who were veterans and survived the wars to die at a later time. It's not uncommon for all loved ones who have died to be rolled into this time of remembering. I remember quite a few Memorial Day trips to the cemetery when I was a child, planting geraniums on my grandfather's grave and I know he wasn't in the military. One year I asked my mother why he didn't have a flag on his grave like some of the others. "Oh, my dad wasn't in the army," she explained. "Those flags are for the people who were given the chance to serve. If my dad were alive, he'd be the first one to put a flag on those graves because he knew what they did. That's why I think I'm remembering them too – all those graves with flags – with every geranium I plant."

May we all do the same, in whatever way we are able this weekend. Amen.