

Broken Vessels

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
on Memorial Day Weekend
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
May 27, 2018
Text: Psalm 31:1-16

I remember that day like it was yesterday, but of course it wasn't. It was a lifetime ago, on a cold, snowy January day in 1979. We were standing in the gathering space for funeral families near the gates to Arlington National Cemetery, waiting for everyone to arrive, including the horse-drawn caisson carrying the flag draped casket of Pete's dad. Peter and I were exhausted, cold and numb still unable, really, to process that Peter's beloved dad was gone, dying unexpectedly just weeks after a holiday visit with us.

I have experienced, and officiated at, myriad funerals since Win's death, but never have I experienced anything like what we experienced that day as he was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Since he had been a Colonel and much decorated veteran of the Pacific Theatre in World War II, Win was entitled to, and received, full military honors – the caisson to carry the casket to the grave accompanied by the riderless horse with boots reversed in the stirrups, an honor guard and a full 21 gun salute along with the playing of taps as the service ended. Just thinking about it all still brings tears to my eyes and a shiver to my spine.

Funerals are always unique because people are unique. Some are long, drawn-out affairs dominated by high liturgy, soaring music and on-going remembrances of the deceased. Others are short and sweet, a few simple prayers at the graveside and that's it. But nothing comes close to the powerful, life changing experience of a full military funeral for a loved one at Arlington National Cemetery. As family members, we were treated with a deep respect approaching reverence. Hushed tones, gentle requests of what we might need that we didn't have, everything contributed to the sense that we were special and worthy of profound respect simply because our loved one had been so very special in his service to this country. I have never experienced anything like it, before or since, and I doubt I ever will again. Win would have been so very proud and deeply honored to be laid to rest in the same hallowed ground as President Kennedy and so many other heroes of our country.

What I most remember from Win's burial, and what is always the tenderest moment at any funeral with military honors, is that moment when the flag is removed from the casket, folded so precisely by the honor guard and then lovingly presented to the designated family member, usually a parent, spouse or offspring. The officer presenting the flag to the family leans in close to the one receiving the flag and whispers, "Receive this flag as a token of gratitude for the service of your loved one from a grateful

nation.” These are powerful words putting into perspective, for me at least, in a whole new way the true gift of time, energy, expertise shared, work done, courage lived that Win, and every veteran gives to this country. With the exception of the Civil War, the wars of our nation have been fought in foreign lands meaning the depth and nature of the sacrifice of all these men and women happens out of our sight and lived experience. That makes it far too easy to forget the true nature of what their hard work, bravery and sacrifice has meant to everyone here. Hopefully that is remedied at least a little as we celebrate their service, especially those who have died, on Memorial Day.

Win was only 69 when he died, far too young. Ironically we learned later than he had actually died from complications from a war wound he had received in the Philippines decades earlier. As the months and years since his untimely death pass, we have marked with sadness all the things in life he missed. He missed the births of both Amanda and Jack. He missed so many graduations and weddings, so many family vacations and holidays. All these things he missed, where we missed him, reflect the on-going nature of the sacrifice all veterans make when they give even a portion of their life’s efforts to their country. But these sacrifices are not only in the realm of events missed when death comes too early. Just as sad, just as painful if not more so is the reality of those veterans who come home from military conflicts

wounded physically but also in ways invisible. You can't see a broken spirit, a shattered dream or a wounded soul. But their damaging effects are powerful and just as potentially lethal as enemy fire.

In the numb stares and agitated behaviors of far too many of our returning vets we hear the echoes of Psalm 31: "I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel." Even more poignantly, ringing too close for comfort, "For I hear the whispering of many – terror all around! – as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life." Have you ever been around someone experiencing these very same feelings? Have you ever wondered if perhaps someone you care about, someone you love – a returning vet or anyone really – is caring around the heavy burden of an aching or even terrified demon within? I'm pretty sure the answer to that question is yes, whether you know it or not, whether you acknowledge it or not. Given this reality, what do you do to help? Do you know?

I'm happy to say there is something we can do to help get all those pained souls, these broken vessels on the road to getting the help they so desperately need. The first step is painfully obvious which is probably why it is so often overlooked. The first step is being willing to talk about mental health issues, in public, with other people. This sounds so basic and yet is often the most difficult for all of us to do. Let's face it, this is a challenging topic,

almost rising to the level of being taboo. Sort of like talking about cancer back in the 1960's. Remember those days? John Wayne made history when he talked on television about having "the Big C" because you just didn't dare say you had "cancer!" Gradually this stigma passed as more and more celebrities, like First Lady Betty Ford, took the risk to speak out when they were diagnosed with cancer. Talking about cancer is now commonplace, with certain medications connected with cancer treatments even being advertised on television! How far we have come. That success in moving a vitally important conversation out of the shadows and into the public arena is exactly the thinking behind a new national mental health initiative called the "Campaign to Change Direction."

The Campaign to Change Direction is being coordinated here in the Westerly-Pawcatuck area by the Westerly Health Impact Collaborative affiliated with Westerly Hospital. I am part of this local group which just this past week undertook a "day of action" when we took materials – like these pocket cards – out to local businesses in Westerly to encourage people to know the signs of mental health issues so that folks needing help can be identified sooner in order to receive the help they need. This past Wednesday, we fanned out and reached over 40 businesses downtown and, I am happy to say, we received a very positive response every where we went.

So, on this Memorial Day weekend as mental health awareness month comes to a close, I wanted to take this time to encourage all of you to realize that one of the most important ways, maybe even *the* most important way, to honor those veterans who have served our country so valiantly is to know when the kind of assistance they need is not for the issues visible to the naked eye. Those vets who return home with damaged psyches as well as broken bodies need our help as do their families and loved ones. They need us to see that something is not as it should be and to know they deserve better than that, always. They need us to recognize in their words and actions the echoes of the broken vessel the Psalmist identifies with so vividly in the text we read this morning.

We need to help those broken vessels on the road to recovery and the first step is knowing the five signs that something is wrong with an individual's mental and emotional state. Sign #1 – Is the person expressing an ongoing sense of just not feeling like themselves? Sign #2 – Is the person feeling agitated and restless all the time, unable to calm down no matter what? Sign #3 – Has the person suddenly become withdrawn, backing away from all interpersonal contact, even with persons they're close to? Sign #4 – Is the person not taking care of him/herself physically, no longer paying attention to things like personal hygiene or eating

appropriately? Sign #5 – Is the person repeatedly expressing a sense of hopelessness that life will never improve?

These signs sound pretty simple right? In fact, they are. The trick is, what do you do if you witness one or more of them in someone you love? Then what? Well, the first thing you do is ask them if they are okay. Tell them what you've observed and ask them if they're okay. If they are able to admit something is wrong, encourage them to get some help. Offer to sit with them while they call the doctor's office and maybe even offer to go with them to see the doctor or a counselor. If you are really concerned the person might be at risk of hurting him/herself and they are refusing help, call 911. It's that simple. If you wonder whether or not you should call or even get involved, ask yourself how you will feel if you don't do anything and the person ends up dead.

If you're still not sure what you should do if you're really worried about someone's mental health and well-being, ask yourself, what would Jesus do? Would Jesus pick up the phone if it could save someone from an overdose, or from driving drunk or from hurting themselves? And if you're still not sure if you should take the risk of being involved, I urge you to remember Jesus' story about the Good Samaritan. You remember that one. A man was beaten and left for dead by robbers. A priest saw him and crossed the street to avoid the whole situation. Then a learned man and leader of the community saw him and did the same

thing. Finally, a Samaritan, a man despised just for being from another country, stopped and helped the man, bandaging his wounds and getting him to the help he needed, and paying for it out of his own pocket.

What would Jesus do if he encountered a hollow-eyed veteran stumbling through life, a broken vessel living a broken life? I think you know and I think you also know that Jesus is aware of what you're doing too. Remember that Jesus has no hands or feet but yours to help those in need. Jesus has no voice but yours to speak the truth that needs to be spoken. It's not easy and I don't mean to imply that it is. It's difficult to deal with broken vessels needing to be mended. It's scary to put yourself on the line. The thing is you don't have to do it all the time. You don't need to think you're the only one doing it. You can't be and none of us can. The need is too great. But if you just focus on paying attention to the people you know and interact with them routinely, not being afraid to reach out to them, that will be enough for this nation's challenge to change direction when it comes to improving everyone's mental health. If each person reaches just one other person, imagine how many lives might be changed! And wouldn't that be an amazing way to celebrate Memorial Day and every other holiday?? Amen.