

Broken Vessels

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
on Memorial Day Weekend
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
May 30, 2021 (Originally preached on 5-27-2018)
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 wasn't there for. He missed the births of both our children. 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 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, shattered dreams 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 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.

Some of you know that during this last year of Covid shutdown and Peter’s own recovery from several serious medical conditions, he has undertaken the challenge of writing a book about his dad. This came about when Peter, looking for something worthwhile to do with all his free time, finally found the courage to open the boxes of “stuff” his dad had given him years before. In it he found his dad’s wartime diary, a gift beyond anything he had imagined this battered old box could have contained. What Peter learned about his dad from the diary was that a whole side to his father existed that Peter never knew until he read his father’s own words. The journal begins with Win described his enthusiasm and excitement during all the training he undertook to become a combat regimental physician trained to jump, with the rest of the paratroopers, behind enemy lines. Peter’s dad wrote honestly and candidly pouring out all his thoughts onto the fragile, yellow pages. And what Peter was able to witness in his father’s words was how his beloved dad went from enthusiastic and idealistic physician to hardened soldier as he witnessed, and participated in, horror after horror of war. If you want to know any details, you need to speak with Peter. Or better yet, read his book which is now in the re-edit phase having been reviewed by a professional editor. More to come!

One of the most important insights Peter learned about his dad was that this brave, dear man – the epitome of strength, courage and determination to everyone who knew him in the post war years – was most assuredly a broken vessel such as the psalmist is writing about in this morning’s text. And he is not alone. The damage done physically and

emotionally to so many veterans from all the wars in which they have served – Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm and the almost 20 year battles in Afghanistan – is huge. Thousands upon thousands are hurting and confused. And they deserve better than what they have received in the way of assistance from a government willing to send them to war, but not so willing to invest in helping them in the aftermath of those very same wars. We need to help these broken vessels on the road to recovery and the first step is to acknowledge their suffering. Then, encourage them to get the help they need, offering to sit with them while they make the first phone call or perhaps going with them on that initial appointment. Don't just tell them you care. Show them. Reach out. Keep reaching out. And don't forget to pray for the strength you need to be a source of strength for others. Remember to invite Jesus into the situation and keep inviting him in. You can do this just by asking yourself, what would Jesus do as he sees your friend or relative? 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 an endless stream of days, a broken vessel living a broken life? And as you are pondering and praying about that, remember that Jesus has no hands or feet but yours to help those in need. And of course, this is not just when it comes to veterans who need help. It also has to do with all the folks living at the margins of our society, without enough money or resources to do much more than just make it through day to day. It also has to do with first responders and the price they pay, emotionally and physically, as they devote their lives to keeping the rest of us safe. Bottom line, this endless parade of broken vessels ultimately describes all of

us. At one time or another, we are all confronted by situations that are simply overwhelming. Life can be and often is just so hard.

But the good news, and there is good news here, is that we are never alone in our efforts to glue our own broken vessels back together. Jesus walks with us every step of the way, holding the super glue or the gorilla tape or duct tape or whatever it is we need to rely on in the moment to patch ourselves up and just keep going. But this doesn't mean Jesus doesn't need our help because he does. He truly does need our help just like we need his. Never lose sight of the simple truth that Jesus has no voice but yours to speak the truth that needs to be spoken, to do the work that needs to be done. Responding to Jesus' invitation to help, whoever it is Jesus puts in your path needing help, is 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. Jesus is not asking you to help everyone because you can't. No one can. But Jesus is asking you to open your heart and your mind and dare to care about just one person, one situation where you can make some small difference. No one can do it all. No one. The need is too great. But, if you focus on paying attention to the people you know and interact with, asking Jesus to help you not be afraid to reach out to them, that will be enough. That will be more than enough, because not only might you change someone else's life, I guarantee you will change your own. If each person reaches out to just one other struggling person, imagine how many lives would be touched by that act of compassion and love? Another example of the truth we know and celebrate together every Sunday – with God all things are possible.

Thank you for your service, Win. Thank you for your service, all the veterans we are remembering this morning. Now we understand the price you really paid and we are both sad and enormously grateful and proud to have had you in our lives, for however short or long a time. Happy Memorial Day everyone! Amen.