

“SOLDIER OF FAITH,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 29, 2016

Several years ago, my brothers and I closed my mother’s house. My mother had passed on. It was time to sell the house that had served as our family home for almost fifty years.

My mother was not a hoarder. But she was a keeper and conservationist, not inclined to throw away things that might later prove useful or that possessed sentimental attachment. My brothers rented a large dumpster, which was set outside the garage. We then started going through the house, deciding what should be kept and what should be discarded. Our announced policy was “When in doubt, throw it out.” Yet as my mother’s true son, I found that policy to be more difficult in practice than principle. I was the one always checking things out twice to make sure that they really had no value.

One of the items headed to the dumpster in my brother’s hands was a box of old greeting cards, long ago sent and received. My youngest brother, Grant, thought I was being foolish but I just had to check them out. I quickly realized why my mother had saved them. Most of them had been written by some of her dearest friends and included hand-written notes. Sad as it all was, I was ready to let them go.

But there was yet another card among them that was definitely a keeper. It was a one-sided Christmas card that was very unusual, given more customary Christmas themes of “Peace on earth” and “Good will to men.” At the top an American eagle held within its talons both a sprig of holly and a blue banner proclaiming “Merry X-mas.” Below in gold letters was the year 1944. The rest of the card included the outlined forms of Great Britain, the United States, and France with images of Kensington Palace, the White House, and the Arc de Triumph superimposed upon them. Two separate fleets of ships were also depicted descending upon the coasts of France.

My own father had personally inscribed the card in his beautiful handwriting. Above the eagle he had written: “To Ma, Pa, and Sis!” At the bottom of the card, below the image of the Arc de Triumph, he had written: “From Gil... Remember Paris ’37.” And he had drawn an arrow from his note about Paris right to the center of the great monumental arch.

What a find! What a memento! This was a card that my dad had sent his parents and sister, who were living in Detroit, after his own landing on Normandy beaches as a part of the Allied D-Day invasion against Nazi Germany on June 6, 1944, and his participation in the Liberation of Paris on August 25, 1944. My dad had lived in Europe for a couple of years before the war and had visited Paris in 1937. Now the sweep of history had returned him there. And he was spending Christmas far from home in a troubled world beset by a war that was global.

I was so glad to find this Christmas card, which I had never seen before. But it also choked me up. My father, who was a relatively modest man, rarely, if ever, talked about his war years and his experience as a soldier. However, at various times other family members had told me what they knew.

His sister, for instance, remembered that my dad had stopped writing home for a long time because he never thought he would come back alive and wanted to emotionally separate himself from those he loved most. His brother, who fought as a soldier in North Africa and Italy, mentioned that my dad was in fact one of the few soldiers in his platoon to survive the first day of the D-Day landing on Omaha Beach. My maternal grandmother, who was emotionally close to my father, her future son-in-law, surprised me one day by noting that his life-long aversion to eating chicken was prompted by his revulsion at the sight of roosters pecking at the bodies of dead soldiers on the battlefield. My own mother, who was probably being very indiscreet, informed us when we were still young kids that my father in their early years of marriage would often stand up on their bed in the middle of the night and start screaming, "Halt, halt!" and other things. He was battling terrible nightmares that we would now diagnose as a part of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. It led to a nervous break-down.

Years afterwards, my mother was still puzzled and disturbed by it all. I remember her asking us, her young kids: "How would you feel if you married and thought you were going to live happily ever after only to have your new husband yelling in the dark?" Even as a young lad, that searching question from my mom made me realize how the effects of war can impact everyone.

I know that my father suffered from survivor's guilt. In mid-December 1944, perhaps just days after he had sent his Christmas card, he fought in the Battle of the Bulge at the intersecting borders of France, Luxemburg, and Belgium where Germans were almost successful in pushing back the American advance. It was the largest and bloodiest battle of the Second World War: 19,000 American soldiers lost their lives. As my father once said to me in a brief aside one day, he

lost more compatriots than he could count. He could never understand why he lived and they didn't.

Years later, my father returned to Europe and visited the beaches of Normandy, as well as the site of the Battle of the Bulge, in the company of my mother and youngest brother. My father was not the most emotionally expressive man. Yet my brother recalls him breaking into tears, amazed and overwhelmed by the present-day calm and quiet of places where he had once witnessed so much human carnage and violence.

One part of me wishes that I would have been able to talk with my dad about these experiences directly and explicitly. But another part of me always respected my father's preferred silence. My dad was certainly proud that he had served his nation in the fight against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. It was the right thing to do, the moral thing to do. Yet he was never disposed to glorify war in any way. On more than one occasion, my father told me and my brothers that those who like the idea of war have probably never seen one up close. He supported my brothers and me in our decisions to serve in the military. At the same time, my father was an early opponent of the Vietnam War, considering it a foolhardy mission to the jungles of Southeast Asia that America was never likely to win.

From my father I learned that you don't have to be a pacifist to be skeptical of war and that it is not unpatriotic to cherish peace. This outlook was informed and shaped by his own quiet Christian faith. For him devotion to God and God's ways was more important than the claims of any nation. He respected and took to heart the words of the Pledge of Allegiance where it proclaims "one nation under God."

Looking back on America's history, I think we have been blessed to have had in every generation quiet and steadfast warriors like my dad who know that our nation has to be defended and the world sometimes has to be policed but all violence is bad and that war should always be our last resort.

Our Savior Jesus Christ was not afraid to sacrifice his own life on the cross for us all. But his own ministry was a stand against violence, which he saw as spiritually corrosive. This is why he called upon to turn the cheek when struck and to love our enemies. (*Matthew 5:39, 43-44*) At the same time, Jesus expressed admiration for a centurion, an officer of the Roman guards, who came to him seeking help for one of his ailing servants. (*Matthew 8:5-13*) Although it likely got him into further trouble with fellow Jews who despised all Roman soldiers as oppressive occupiers of their native homeland, Jesus publicly commended the Roman centurion for his

compassion, dedication, and faith. In that moment Jesus was acknowledging that a “good soldier” or a “faithful soldier” is not a contradiction of terms.

There’s a lesson here for us. In this fallen, troubled world, bearing arms does not disqualify us from being a true Christian disciple so long as our larger intentions and purposes are truly peaceful and loving and a thirst for violence and revenge does not commandeer our soul. In fact, our nation needs Christian soldiers—those prepared to carry arms on behalf our country without forgetting that Christ needs to be served too through a compassion and sense of justice and righteousness that always tempers any necessary resort to violence and force of arms. Thank God for such soldiers who walk humbly before our God, cherishing peace and taking up arms only when there is little other recourse and moral justice and principle truly needs to be upheld and defended.

On this Memorial Day weekend, how important it is to remember and honor those who have served our nation and its more noble purposes both valiantly and faithfully. If they are still living, God bless their lives. If they are gone, may God bless their memory. We honor them all best by cherishing their legacy and following their example of righteous faith. **Amen.**