

05 April 2020 Palm Sunday

A Sense of Duty

My father was a veteran of World War II. I have memories as a young child of looking at his Purple Heart medal, playing with a helmet he'd brought back to the states. There were pictures of him with his mother, my grandmother, in his uniform. He talked about the friends he made while enlisted. He never talked about war itself. He never shared what it was like to be a soldier fighting, or talk about what it was like to be around bombs exploding and guns firing. I had all these movie-like images of what he'd been doing while in the Army. The closest he ever came to talking about his wartime experiences, was when I came home from college and told him we'd been studying WWII and our professor had shared about the "foxhole promise".

Often when soldiers were in the fox hole, in a period before the fighting started or at a time when there was a lull in the gunshots and grenades exploding; they would clear their thinking enough to make promises to God. His promise to God was a commitment to attend church every Sunday. It would be his thanksgiving for staying safe during the fighting, and coming home to be with his parents. That was the only part of his life as a soldier that he would ever talk about with me. I wondered about his conversations with the "guys" down at the VFW? Were there stories told too difficult to share at home? Or, was their lives as soldiers something they kept private amongst their own? I learned more about World War II in my high school and college American history classes. I was always curious, especially in those moments when I felt he might open up, why he never went deeper into his memories of that time, except for talking about his war buddies?

One of the things that I do you know to be true was that my father, like many of his friends and the friends he made during his war time service, enlisted because they felt a sense of duty to their country. It was a period of our history when the whole country seemed to come together. A time when citizens of the United States looked proudly at the possibilities of helping join forces to save the world.

By the time I came to understand that sense of duty as part of the eagerness to enlist, my thinking was jaded by the protests of Vietnam. That sense of duty never really sunk into my awareness or my sense of patriotism or my sense of a call to action. We didn't talk a lot about war at home, because dad held such resentment around the younger generation's seeming disregard for patriotism and the call to serve their country.

It wasn't until I saw the opening scenes of the movie, **Saving Private Ryan**, a film directed by Steven Spielberg, that I had a better understanding of my father's hesitance to talk war with me. The movie opens with the storming of the beaches of Normandy. There's no need to go into any grotesque or graphic details around what happens. It's a piece of our history. Watching these soldiers approach the beach; you got a sense that they knew, that what they were doing was fulfilling a duty they had for their home country. There's no doubt in my mind, that as those young men - some of them looking like young boys, jumped off the boat and onto the beach, with gun in hand . . . that in spite of this **sense of duty**: They knew exactly what the risk factors were.

Imagine, having full awareness of what you were about to enter into, aware that you were moving forward with hopes of being a part of a story to save human beings from the enemies of this war. And an awareness of being part of the Allies, a strong force building, to take down those enemies. And so, you jump off that boat with all those thoughts, and an awareness that this also could take your life.

So much of my thinking around today's scripture text, and the study and preparation for this sermon found me "locked" into discerning that what Jesus did when he rode into Jerusalem was his duty! But when I put the words duty and Jesus together; I feel like I've combined opposites. When I looked at definitions for the word, duty; I was met by references to words like OBLIGATION and RESPONSIBILITY. It was hard for me to discern that Jesus saw that moment as an obligation, or that he felt it was his responsibility to go into Jerusalem that day. Bothered by the word, duty; I looked at several synonyms of this word. The first synonym that felt like it might be a better fit was **CALLING**. That word can be defined as **a strong urge toward a particular way of life**.

Close, but still not aligning with my thinking. The next word I found was **VOCATION**. A word that strongly connects anyone feeling pulled toward **a particular career**. The word, career, in that definition really bothered me! The next synonym I found was the one I thought would fit perfectly: **MISSION**. Defined as an **important assignment carried out for religious reasons**. The second definition felt even better: **the vocation or calling of a religious organization, especially a Christian one, to go out into the world and spread its faith**. And then I realized, that despite its perfect “fit” for my thinking; I had to let go of this definition. I could partially accept the **assignment carried out for religious reasons**: Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem that day was a part of his following every Jew’s travel to the Holy City for Passover. The second definition, when looked at with a sense of honesty calls me to say, “No!” Jesus was not entering Jerusalem that day **to go out into the world and spread its (Judaism?) faith**. As the gospel of Matthew goes beyond Chapter 21; we know that Jesus has come into the city to begin unsettling the thinking and believing of both Jews and Gentiles. My attempt to find another synonym ironically, and reluctantly led me back to the word, **DUTY**.

The gospel of Matthew was written after the gospel of Mark. It is believed, that Matthew’s community extracted a great amount of Mark’s gospel. However, this particular community was persuasively writing with a heavy emphasis on Jesus being the promised Messiah. The fact that there are three times in this gospel when Jesus foretells his suffering, death and resurrection; you can safely assume that it was important for the readers of Matthew’s gospel to see this as proof. Jesus’s foretelling is precise. **Matthew 16** tells of Jesus’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests, his death . . . and then on the third day, his rising. In **Matthew 17** Jesus’s betrayal joins the litany of his suffering, death, and rising. On their way to the city of Jerusalem, **Matthew 20** shows Jesus taking his disciples aside to one more time bring home the reality of what was about to happen. The betrayal, the condemnation and suffering, death on the cross. “. . . **and on the third day he will be raised.**” Just days before Passover in **Matthew 26**, Jesus tells them one final time: ‘**You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.**’

So, actually; there are four references to Jesus's death before it happens. Four times he tells them about what will happen to him. The initial three references to his suffering and death end with Jesus's assurance that he would be raised on the third day. Believable? After three times written, one would hope that any who read the texts from Matthew's writings would be assured that this Jesus of Nazareth was truly the Messiah. So convincing is the writing, that after the third foretelling; the reader of Matthew's gospel would anticipate nothing more than the specifics around how the scene would be set for Jesus's end. By the time Jesus descends the Mt. of Olives, heading towards Jerusalem; we know- according to Matthew's writing, that Jesus understands what he must do. Jesus descends the hill to shouts of "**Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest.**" In Hebrew, *hosanna* can be translated to mean: "save, I pray". It is his duty to go forth with all that he knows is about to happen. **Save us, we pray, now.**

My first work when we moved to Seattle was in hospital chaplaincy. A career that offers years of memories, intense learning at times of trauma, and little miracles when unexpected healing would occur. One of the first things you learn is, almost all hospital employees are essential to patient care. The second thing you learn, if you are someone who deals directly with patients; you must have training in emergency preparedness. Not long after my start in the Spiritual Care Department; I was sent to Employee Health for a class dealing with emergency situations where we'd need to be in quarantined spaces, and most likely in a HAZ MAT suit! I remember the fitting process for our masks. The HAZ MAT suit itself was sized in similar ways as generic clothing- Small, Medium, Large, etc. However, the HAZ MAT mask was fitted to your head, specifically. At the time this was happening, I did not seem to take on the seriousness of this moment. Me ever needing a HAZ MAT suit was so far out of my thinking. There were guidelines and a whole three-ring notebook with specifics. With every type of emergency requiring a HAZ MAT suit; there were lineups of priority as far as hospital personnel, and a call sheet according to departments allowing us to always be in communication with what I called: COMMAND CENTER! In all my years as a

hospital chaplain; I never had to don my Haz Mat suit. The closest to any of these emergency preparedness learnings came in 2008 when the city of Seattle was hit with a back-to-back snowstorm. And unlike Maine; Seattle floundered in managing life after the snow stopped. Our emergency preparedness came into play when we had to set up common areas for staff to sleep, because some folks could not get home. And some staff stayed so they would be able to be present for their next shift. Spiritual care at that time took us in and out of patient's rooms as well as into every staff gathering making ourselves present for whatever requests were presented.

I've been thinking of those folks a lot these past weeks. Seattle was the first epicenter of the COVID-19 virus. All of my friends from the hospital are fine, symptom-wise. Their emotional and spiritual well-being is another story. Thank God for modern technology and being able to communicate at all hours. They are busy people. They are physically tired. They're grateful to be healthy. They're over worked. They're committed to seeing this through. To them it's a commitment to care for the sick. Their work around infectious disease is not new. Their introduction to a pandemic is life altering! Not one of them has quit their job. No one has slipped in unannounced vacation requests. They go to work believing that what they're doing matters, and hoping that one day soon there'll be that ALL POINTS Hospital BULLETIN announcing the treatment . . . maybe even the cure?

For those who do the work of God there are surprising blessings: hope when all seems hopeless, peace beyond all understanding, love beyond measure, life beyond death.

Hosanna!