

Christ Episcopal Church
Montpelier, Vermont
Sermon, 11 November 2012
Stephen A. Reynes ©

Are You All in?

[The following is the portion of the Sunday sermon pertaining to Veterans which I gave at Christ Church in Montpelier on Veterans Day in 2012, with added reference footnotes.]

Good morning. I want to share some reflections with you on today's readings I will also offer some thoughts for our reflection on this Veterans Day....

Lastly, this is the one day in seven years when Veterans Day, the 11th of November, falls on a Sunday. This day commemorates all those who serve in the U.S. military, or who have served. The day has evolved from what President Woodrow Wilson first proclaimed as Armistice Day in 1919, commemorating the end of hostilities in World War 1 on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918. King George V of the UK, also in November of 1919, inaugurated what is known in the Commonwealth Countries, including our neighbor Canada, as Remembrance Day. One often sees artificial red poppies as a symbol of the day, inspired by the John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*, where red poppies bloomed across battlefields and their graveyards.¹

I want to tell you of a powerful moment I witnessed and experienced at Gatwick Airport outside London in November of 2010. My wife Janet and I, with our neighbors Dick and Judy, were seated in an airport cafe as we awaited

1. "In Flanders fields the poppies blow, between the crosses, row on row"

our flight. There was a Public Address announcement that there would be a tolling of bells followed by a two-minute silence in memory of UK soldiers killed in World War I and other wars. When the first bell tolled, *everyone* stopped in their tracks at this busy international airport, whether pulling rolling suitcases or whatever, everyone stopped, everyone was silent. It was the most extraordinary tableau I've ever seen. I put down my coffee and closed my eyes. I first prayed for all the soldiers – I feel a great respect for the soldiers and their loved ones and what they go through and I want to help in some way. Then from my heart came these silent words: *"God, I don't know about the discernment process, but I commit myself to whatever ministry you are calling me to."*² It was a powerful moment and the commitment was, and remains, holy and solemn.

I think there are opportunities for peoples of faith to be available and helpful and listening to those Vermonters who have served and do serve in the military – and their families – who are in our midst. This may be a difficult topic for some and bring conflicting thoughts. But whatever one's political or theological perspective may be – Augustinian notion of the just war, pacifism, blame on certain leaders, notions of Red States and Blue States – *none of that, none of that, is a reason to turn our backs or ignore the problems of returning soldiers and their families.* Under the Baptismal Covenants of Episcopalians, we pledge, with the help of God, to respect the dignity of each person and to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Bill Countryman, an Episcopal priest, presents a compelling case that we are all called to ministry in his book, *Living on the Border of the Holy – Renewing the Priesthood of All.* And it isn't just to the folks like us who come to our church

² I was ordained as a Deacon in the Episcopal Church on 12 December 2015.

or are in our demographic. Most of Jesus' work was not in a synagogue or designated place of prayer, it was out in the world, where people were living their lives.

A Lutheran Church in Minnesota – the Episcopal Church in the United States is in full Communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – has provided great leadership in cooperative efforts for returning veterans, and produced this book: *Welcome Them Home, Help Them Heal*, with the subtitle *Pastoral Care and Ministry with Service Members Returning from War*.³ I bought this book last week at Hopkins Bookshop in our St. Paul's Cathedral in Burlington. A few years ago I went to an ecumenical workshop held at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Colchester, involving Vermont families of people serving in the Guard, military chaplains, other clergy and lay people. One of the points was that all of the soldiers who come back from combat zones are wounded in some way, even if there is no visible physical injury.

There is a moving story in last week's issue of *The New Yorker* magazine called *Atonement*. It's about a soldier who, in an intense firefight in Iraq, shoots his automatic weapon at a car that drives into the fight, thinking they are enemy, only to learn after the battle that they were simply a family trying to get home. When it's over, the soldier sees a woman holding a blood-soaked infant and a dead man nearby, and the woman says, "we are the peace people, why did you shoot us?" After the soldier is discharged, still haunted, he finds that the family is now living in the US, he makes a video of himself talking about it and sends it to a person in that family. Step by step, the path leads to

³ Elim Lutheran Church of Blackhoof (ELCA) in Barnum, MN.

healing for both the soldier and the family. *It reminds us, once again, we are all connected, grace isn't confined to churches, or religious brands, living takes courage and sometimes involves difficult choices and interacting with unlikely others.*

There are approximately 3,000 Vermonters who serve in the Vermont National Guard. Nearly 3,600 Vermonters have been deployed in the period of 2001 to 2010, and more since then in Afghanistan. There are also Vermonters who have served in other branches of the military. These people and their families are in our midst. If you search Vermont National Guard under Veterans Outreach Team, Family Program contacts, and the Public Affairs Officer, you will find there are opportunities to help those who serve and their families in Vermont.⁴ Or listen gently to a vet, non-judgmentally. Or pray. But don't forget them.

In closing, let us pray *together* on this Veterans Day the prayer in our Book of Common Prayer on page 823, # 25: [*pause*]

Almighty God, we commend to your gracious care and keeping all the men and women of our armed forces at home and abroad. Defend them day by day with your heavenly grace; strengthen them in their trials and temptations; give them courage to face the perils which beset them; and grant them a sense of your abiding presence wherever they may be; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

⁴ See, https://www.vtguard.com/resources/organization/family_programs/default.html ;
https://www.vtguard.com/resources/organization/family_programs/outreach.html
https://www.vtguard.com/resources/organization/family_programs/outreach_contacts.html
<https://www.vtguard.com/contact.html>