

“Arms”

On Veterans Day - November 11, 2018

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Good morning! And thank you. I'm grateful to your minister, Reverend Heather, for the warm welcome that she has given. And thanks to all of you for the privilege of being with you on this Veterans Day and on the 100th anniversary of the ending of World War One.

I'm with you this morning partly because I'm a veteran. I served in the US Marine Corps and spent some time in Vietnam, and I'd like to say a little bit about that time in just a couple of minutes. But I'm also here because even though I'm an Episcopal priest, I'm also half Unitarian, since my father was a full-blooded Unitarian, of the staunch Boston variety.

I'd like to begin with a very short little story about something that happened in Vietnam. The story concerns two young men who had grown up together. They had attended the same high school, they had played on the same teams, and they were best friends. They had enlisted in the Marine Corps together, and they went to Vietnam together.

At one point, they were in a terrible battle. One of the friends was wounded and fell to the ground. The other friend was behind some shelter. He turned to an officer and said, “Lieutenant, let me go out and get my friend.” The lieutenant answered, “No. I order you to stay here. The fighting is too fierce. You would only be killed if you went out.”

When the Lieutenant was looking in another direction, the Marine took off. He ran to his friend, knelt beside him, picked him up and began to carry him back. But he too was shot, and he barely made it to safety. When he placed his friend on the ground, he saw that his friend was dead. The lieutenant looked down and said to the Marine, “What a waste. What a waste. Your friend is dead. And you are terribly wounded.”

The Marine just smiled up at the lieutenant. He said, “No sir. It wasn't a waste. You see, when I got out there, my friend was still alive. And he looked up at me, and he said, ‘I knew you'd come.’”

So for me, Veterans Day is a time of praying that all of us here this morning, veterans of all sorts of conflicts, may be able to say, "I knew you'd come," to all of those men and women, famous and obscure, who work to bring us healing and reconciliation and peace.

Veterans Day so highlights the aching need for women and men like that. In the 242 years of our country's existence, the United States has been involved in 65 military actions. And in those actions, 2,860,000 American lives have been lost, from the first firefight of the American Revolution to the latest soldier to die in Afghanistan.

It's in the name of these 2,860,000, and in the words of the prophet Micah, that we pray on Veterans Day that the swords of the world may be beaten into plowshares. It's in the name of these 2,860,000, and in the words of the prophet Isaiah, that we pray on Veterans Day that the wolf may lie down with the lamb, and a little child may lead them.

Now, let me briefly share with you my own experience. I didn't join the Marine Corps out of any particular patriotic fervor. I was bored with school, I was looking for adventure, and I was young. So I enlisted in the summer of 1967, and I went to Vietnam at the beginning of 1969.

For two months, my time there was relatively calm. Then, in the early morning hours of February 23, 1969, it all changed. On February 23, 1969, the war in Vietnam stopped being an adventure for me. And the early morning hours of February 23, 1969, have shaped my life ever since.

What happened on February 23, 1969, is a story that I tell with some frequency in high school and college classrooms, in jails, in houses of worship and other venues, and to tell it in full would take some time. For the sake of this reflection this morning, let me simply say that at one point that night when I was in a foxhole with one other Marine, a North Vietnamese soldier threw a grenade into the foxhole that exploded.

I do not have the words that can describe that moment in a way that will convey what that experience was like. The explosion itself was so loud that I didn't actually hear it. It blew holes in my eardrums, but it was too loud for sound. I also felt no pain, although I knew that something awful had happened.

But the main experience of that explosion just yards away from me was of having this unimaginably huge force hit me and go through me, go through my physical body and go through my spirit.

Years later, the image that came to me to try to describe that moment was of a little baby lying on a beach, and a tidal wave coming toward the baby, and the baby being unable to do anything to protect itself. The baby cannot run away. The baby cannot hide. The baby can only lie there, and the tidal wave can do anything it wants.

So in that moment of the explosion, I learned something. I didn't consciously know that I had learned it for many years. But what I learned in that moment was that the experience of that overwhelming and terrible force going through me was so awful, that I would make sure for the rest of my life that I would never allow myself to be vulnerable like that again. Whatever else happened to me, for the rest of my life, I would make sure that I had some walls around me that would keep me safe.

All veterans of combat come home with a need to build walls, to a greater or lesser degree. That's why the vast majority of veterans of combat never talk about it when they come home - because they are behind walls.

The safest wall, tragically, the wall that guarantees that no more pain will ever reach you, tragically, is the saddest wall of all, the wall of taking your own life. The statistics on that wall for combat veterans are terribly high. Alcohol is a wall, drugs are a wall - the statistics for vets for those walls are also off the charts.

A few minutes after the explosion in that foxhole, I saw that the other Marine beside me was wounded. I started to stand up to help him. Then I saw, out of the corner of my eye, for just a second, something floating in the air. Then it exploded. It was a second grenade, thrown I suppose by the same North Vietnamese soldier.

The same thing happened, this unimaginably huge force hitting me and going through me, going through my physical body and going through my spirit. And although I didn't know it at the time, this second grenade killed the wounded Marine right beside me.

When I came home, and when I finally got out of the Chelsea Naval Hospital in Boston, and when my enlistment in the Marine Corps was over, I went back to college. And I began to build my own wall.

The wall that I built was an unusual one. I built a wall of being a really nice person, so that I'd have lots and lots of friends. And the hope was that if I had lots of friends, they would be an adequate substitute for having any one particular person come over the wall, because then that person could maybe be a grenade.

As a result, I've been engaged to be married three times, and each time I have headed for the hills as the wedding day grew closer. That was a terrible thing for me to do to another person. The last engagement was 30 years ago, and I resolved to never do that again.

However, the cry deep in my spirit for someone for whom I could say, "I knew you'd come", was still there. And the cry on this Veterans Day is still there for all of us to say, "I knew you'd come" for some experience of healing and reconciliation and peace. So I would like to conclude on this Veterans Day with some words of hope for the possibilities of peace.

I have four very brief words, and the first word concerns the leaflet insert. As you can see, it's a painting of the Vietnam Wall in Washington, DC. A man is visiting the wall. I assume that he is a veteran, and that his hand is touching one of the 58,200 and some names on the wall, and that it's the name of a friend. From inside the Wall, you can see the image of that friend, who is reaching out to touch his hand. And here is my point. Even though the visitor is crying, he is actually experiencing profound healing in this moment.

I have a Vietnam veteran friend who has refused to go the Wall for many years, because he has been afraid that if he went there, all of the things he's kept bottled up inside him, behind his wall, would come pouring out and overwhelm him.

Finally, a few years ago, he did go to the Wall, and it happened just as he feared. He completely lost it. He fell apart and sobbed and sobbed, just like the man in this painting. But today, my friend says that the day he went to the Wall was the very first day for real healing to begin in his spirit.

That the first word. The second word concerns myself. Eight years ago, a certain young woman came up to my wall. She looked over it, and very slowly she began to climb it. And eight years later, thanks to a really good shrink, and thanks to a really graceful God, and thanks to the patience and the love of this amazing woman, we got married just over a month ago.

I'm 71 years old, I've never been married before, and the healing has been slow and gradual. But it has been very real. That's the second word.

Here's the third word. There is a community in Northern Ireland called Corrymeela. Corrymeela was formed in 1965 when some Protestants and Roman Catholics decided to live together in that violent and divided land.

Early in the life of that community, a conference was held for clergy. It was the first time that Protestant ministers and Roman Catholic priests had sat down together in that land. At the start of the first meeting, a Roman Catholic priest stood up and said, "I just don't see how, if you're a Protestant, you can ever expect to go to heaven."

On the third evening of the conference, there was a session to which the children who lived in a nearby village were also invited. The clergy sat in a circle on chairs, and the children were seated in front of them on the floor.

During one quiet moment, a little girl whose parents were Protestant turned to an elderly Roman Catholic priest and said, "May I touch you?" The priest was a little startled, but he said, "Of course you may." The girl said, "My father told me he'd beat me if I ever touched one of you."

The girl reached out one finger, touched the old priest on the knee, looked at her finger and said, "That didn't hurt." Then she looked up at the priest and said, "That wasn't such a big deal." The priest, with tears in his eyes, said, "Oh yes it was." The little girl climbed up on the lap of the old priest, and they embraced.

That's why this reflection is titled "Arms" - because in the midst of that war torn land, with all the power of the British military and the IRA, the arms of two weak people – a little girl and an old man – did what all those other arms, those bombs and plastic bullets, could not do. They became one. And in their spirits, I am sure that both were saying to the other, "I knew you'd come."

That's the third word for the possibilities of healing, reconciliation and peace. Here's the last word. Thirteen years after I was in Vietnam, I went to Africa with a group of clergy to visit Christian communities. On our first evening in Africa, we went for a walk in a park in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. It was called Uhuru Park, which means, in Swahili, Freedom Park.

Unfortunately, no one told us that it wasn't safe to be in the park after dusk. As we walked along, we were attacked by a group of men. No one was hurt badly, but the attackers stole cameras and purses and knocked some of us to the ground.

The next morning I was walking on a sidewalk in downtown Nairobi. All of a sudden, an overwhelming fear rose up in me. It was so strong that a friend had to take me into a building, sit me down in a chair with my back to the wall, and stay with me.

As I sat there, it came to me that the fear I was experiencing was the same fear that I had experienced in Vietnam. And I was stunned to realize that I had been carrying this fear inside me for thirteen years without knowing it. It had been triggered by the attack in the park the evening before, and it was back with all of the ferocity that it had in Vietnam.

That afternoon, our group drove to the outskirts of Nairobi to visit a church. I sat in the middle of the back seat of our car, making sure that people were seated on either side of me. I couldn't look out the window. It felt as though all of Africa was crushing in on me, and I couldn't escape - just like that baby on the beach with the tidal wave coming.

When we got to the church, I got out of the car and just stood there, frozen with fear. The church itself wasn't much, just a small structure made of concrete

blocks. But out of it came the women's group of the church. There were about twenty women. They were dressed in beautiful dresses of bright colors, they were singing and dancing, and they started walking toward us.

One woman in particular headed toward me. As she drew closer, I realized that she was a very substantial woman. She was at least six and a half feet tall, and she was extremely ample in girth. As she drew closer, she opened up her arms. Then she completely invaded my personal space. Then she enfolded me in her arms, and I kind of disappeared out of sight.

Do you remember that I didn't have words to describe what it's like to be blown up by a grenade? I also don't have words to describe what happened to me as that woman hugged me. All I can say is that as she held me, I felt the fear that had gripped me just fall away, just as the leaves fall off the trees here in the fall. And as the fear faded, it was replaced by a kind of peace that I had not thought possible.

I later learned that she was one of three wives to a man, that she spoke no English, and that she had sixteen children. On an earthly level, she and I have absolutely nothing in common. But I count her as one of the greatest gifts and blessings in my life. I didn't say it out loud at the time, but my spirit was singing, "I knew you'd come."

And that is my prayer for all of us here this morning on Veterans Day, all we who are veterans, veterans of wars overseas, veterans of wars in our workplaces, veterans of wars in our relationships, veterans of wars in our homes, veterans of wars in our spirits.

My prayer is that there may be for each of us the arms of that woman, arms like hers from someone, somewhere, arms that allow us to say, "I knew you'd come."

And maybe most of all, my prayer is that you and I may have the privilege of being those arms for someone else.

Amen.