

## Sermon for November 11, 2018 – “Sacrifice”

Texts: Isaiah 2:1-4; (Hebrews 9:23-28); John 15:9-17

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There's a story that's told about President Dwight D. Eisenhower. One day he received a letter from eight-year-old Keith Aiken of Trumbull, CT. Kevin wrote, "After listening to the news about the cold war, I am worried about the people in the world. In thinking it over, I have a plan. Get all the leaders together who want war, put them in a ring and let them fight it out." I'm sure that many veterans of wars feel this way about war. Just let those who want to fight, do the fighting! Don't involve everybody else in it!

War is a terrible thing and yet it seems that war's inevitable in our world. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says to His disciples **"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom."** So, it seems then, that wars do seem inevitable, terrible as they are. General William Tecumseh Sherman famous for his "March to the Sea" during the Civil War, knew this more than most. He once said, "You don't know the horrible aspects of war. I've been through two wars and I know. I've seen cities and homes in ashes. I've seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies. I tell you, war is hell!" It's hard to argue with a general. After all, as Michael Shaara wrote in his book *Killer Angels* about the Battle of Gettysburg, "There's nothing so much like a god on earth as a General on a battlefield." Did you know that **1,264,000** American soldiers have died in our nation's wars? Yep, **620,000** in the Civil War and **644,000** in all other conflicts. It was only as recently as the Vietnam War that the amount of American deaths in foreign wars eclipsed the number who died in the Civil War. During World War I more than 70 million military personnel, including 60 million Europeans were mobilized in one of the largest wars in history. It seems that an estimated 9 million combatants and 7 million civilians died as a direct result of World War I. It was described as the "war to end all wars." Sadly, it was not. We wish. Twenty-one years later the second great war began. World war II qualifies as perhaps the greatest war in history. In all, 1.7 billion people from 61 countries, three quarters of the world's population, took part in that war. Over \$1 trillion dollars was spent making it the most expensive war of all. The human cost of lives, not including the 6 million+ Jews killed in the Holocaust, is estimated to have been 73 million dead, 24 million military and 49 million civilians. War is indeed hell! But whether you believe in the "Just War" theory or whether you are a pacifist, I believe that we must support our Veteran's and all active military personnel; all those who were (or are) willing to go and serve on behalf of their country!

By the way, did you know that the word "veteran" stems from the Latin word "vetus," meaning "old"? We think of Veterans that way, older men and women. Yet, when we look around these days, we see veterans who are much younger. The parades are no longer for older men and women but also for younger men and women. This, in my mind, is no small thing.

Barely a month before his death Abraham Lincoln strode to the rostrum on the steps of the Capitol Building. There, he gave one of his greatest speeches, his Second Inaugural Address. The Great Emancipator ended his short speech with words that've echoed down through history and which would eventually be engraved on his memorial "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds...to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all

nations.” The long Civil War was ending, and Lincoln knew it. His thoughts had already turned to reconstructing a nation that had been torn apart by a war, that killed more than a half-million men. And, in those thoughts Lincoln chose to lay the groundwork “...to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan...”. Today, those words still hold as a receipt for a debt owed by a nation that sends its young folks off to war as surrogates for its citizenry, as representatives of a National Policy and as the purveyors of Democracy, Liberty, and Freedom during that time soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, Coast Guardsman. But once that service is ended, they are forevermore Veterans of the United States military. As Veterans, they deserve a special place of honor in our society **and** our culture. Why? Because they’ve written a blank check backed by their own life and limbs serving in place of all who do not go to keep us all safe and free in an increasingly dangerous world. We say that they “sacrifice themselves.”

Sacrifice. It’s a word people use when they find themselves indebted to someone or some group for things that sustain or rescue life. People speak of their parents making sacrifices. We honor people who speak the truth and who suffered consequences for it; people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Salvadoran priest Oscar Romero who died while celebrating communion.

Sacrifice. We describe the loss of life in war as a sacrifice, a sacrifice made to defend a nation or for a cause like freedom. When the sacrifice involves the shedding of blood, we reach a level that has power far beyond what we can estimate in words.

Sacrifice. What does it mean? From the Latin “sacer” meaning “holy” and “facere” meaning “to make. On its most basic level it means “to make holy.” But there must be more to it, and Christ Himself tells us what that is. In John’s Gospel, during the Last Supper, Jesus said, **“No one has greater love than this to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”** In this way, Jesus defines sacrifice as an act of love. Not an act of hate or act of war, but an act of love! So, who’s the object of this love? Well, certainly, most veterans will say that it’s those with whom they serve. Any veteran can tell you that the bond between comrades in arms indeed creates a “band of brothers.” They may not be so quick to call it love as they would brotherhood, but it is most definitely so as Jesus Himself demonstrated. Did He not lay down His life for all of us? Did He not willingly offer His life for the world? Did He not take up His cross without complaint? Without question? Without regret? Without remorse? Without even a second thought? Doesn’t that love extend back to us? To you and me? To each and every one of us? Didn’t He go for us, in our place? Didn’t the veteran not do the same? Didn’t the veteran go in our place? Far too often those blank checks are paid for in blood, sweat and tears yet, were written and tendered with love. In this sense, it can be said that they have much in common with Christ’s sacrifice on the cross drawing from the same well of holiness with one great difference. That difference is that the sacrifice of Jesus shows us the way **out** of the cycle of violence in which we’ve been held for millennia. And, brothers and sisters, here’s the thing...Jesus lived a non-violent life and through His life teaches us to do the same. Nevertheless, we remain locked into a vicious cycle of violence that continues to send out substitutionary sacrifices; those of our military men and women. It will continue until we figure out a way to live taking Jesus’ words – “blessed are the peacemakers” – seriously. As a species, we’ve yet to figure out a way to live in the new way that Jesus demonstrated for us in His sacrifice. In Christ, God is creating a new way of being, a new community of reconciliation by resisting and overcoming the power of the world with God’s saving power. In His resistance to violence, willingly accepting the cross, Jesus breaks the cycle of violence. He knew that it was the only way! He didn’t grab a sword, call His followers to arms and charge head-long into battle.

Instead, He picked up His cross, carried it to Calvary and as they nailed Him to that cross He said **“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”** With these words Jesus inaugurates a new age. It’s begun and will one day come to fruition. Isaiah spoke of it in our first reading, **“In days to come, the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills. All the nations shall stream to it. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore.”** It will happen – make no mistake. Until then, we must embrace this wondrous love and allow it to permeate all we do and say.

It seems to me that the best way to honor our Veterans is to work for peace so that this generation of warriors might be the last. Until then, we must remember that...

It is the VETERAN, not the preacher...  
...who has given us freedom of religion.

It is the VETERAN, not the reporter...  
...who has given us freedom of the press.

It is the VETERAN, not the poet...  
...who has given us freedom of speech.

It is the VETERAN, not the campus organizer...  
...who has given us freedom to assemble.

It is the VETERAN, not the lawyer...  
...who has given us the right to a fair trial.

It is the VETERAN, not the politician...  
...who has given us the right to vote.

It is the VETERAN, who salutes the Flag...  
...who serves under the Flag.

Today we honor our veterans. To them, I say – God bless you! Thank you for your service, for your sacrifice!

Thanks be to God...

Amen and amen.