

Sermon: Veterans' Weekend

I was an atheist when I was 17, but I was a military cadet at Texas A&M, so I was required to memorize several plaques around campus, including one that read:

Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life for his friends.
John 15:13

It wasn't for the sake of bible learning; the plaque honored those that made the ultimate sacrifice during their military service. I bring that up because that is the specific purpose of Memorial Day. This weekend, we are honoring *not just* those who paid that price, but *all* those who answered the call to serve ... despite that risk.

Before we go any further, **are there any veterans among us today?** *please stand*

Are there any **spouses** of veterans/active duty with us today? *please stand*

Any **children?**... Any **parents?** ... **Other family?** *Thank you all*

As we think about servicemen and women serving our nation, please recognize that they aren't making those sacrifices alone. Amen? *please be seated – and thank you again*

In 2011, a survey revealed that 61% of Americans have an immediate family member who has served in the military. That number has been steadily going down for the past several decades.

NOT for the message:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2011/11/23/the-military-civilian-gap-fewer-family-connections/>

- Whites 68% -- 59% Blacks -- 30% Hispanics
- Republicans 73% -- 59% Democrats -- 56% Independents
- Live in the South (64%) -- Northeast (56%) -- the West (57%) -- and city dwellers are somewhat less likely than those who live in the suburbs or in rural areas to say they have a family member who served in the military.

But for every person who has answered that call and for the families who supported them, it starts with an unequivocal surrender of self for the sake of our country, its citizens, and our ideals. Every person who has worn the uniform has at least once recited the oath of enlistment; let's hear what they promised at the start of their service:

I, _____, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter; so help me God.

That oath is not to a person, nor a party, nor a faith – it is an oath to what defines us as a country in total. Notably, as some of my veteran friends are quick to remind me, **that oath has no expiration date.** *Any the*

vets in the house, say Amen? As such, according to the 2020 census, while only **7%** of US adults are veterans -- veterans make up **10%** of EMTs, **19%** of firefighters, and **25%** of police officers.

- 18% in the 118th congress: 17 Senate | 80 House -- 72 R + 25 D
- <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/07/new-congress-will-have-a-few-more-veterans-but-their-share-of-lawmakers-is-still-near-a-record-low/>

There is a poem that describes why this is such an important day in our nation each year -- and while the poem mentions soldiers, it is inclusive of the spirit and sacrifices of sailors, airmen, marines, and guardsmen as well.

It is the Soldier -- Charles M. Province

It is the Soldier, not the **minister...** who has given us **freedom of religion.**

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

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

It is the Soldier, not the **campus organizer ...** who has given us **freedom to protest.**

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

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

It is the Soldier

Who **salutes** the flag,

Who **serves beneath** the flag,

Whose **coffin is draped by** the flag,

and Who **allows the protester** to burn the flag.

1A (religion, speech, press, assembly, petition-govt) -- and 5A/6A -- and 15A/19A/26A

As we consider the scripture earlier to "lay down one's life"

LAY DOWN ... LITERALLY yes ... perhaps also FIGURATIVELY

Let's bring this back to an interfaith service, let's talk about living a life on "active duty" in your faith. There are faith traditions out there that would go so far as to call fervent followers' part of "God's Army". In the spirit of Veterans Day, I won't go that far, but there is a scripture passage that paints a picture of what someone on Active Duty in their faith looks like.

EPHESIANS 6:13-17 -- Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist on the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having belted your waist with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having strapped on your feet the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Scouting is not about any single faith, so this is not meant as a Christian-centric message -- in fact, that passage was written by a Roman citizen nearly 2,000 years ago to those who lived in Rome.

Regardless of your faith tradition, as a matter of historical fact: if you were a Roman citizen or its subjects, you were subject to conscription from 16 to 46. Somewhat like a draft but your service could last 6 to 16 years (average 10). The author of these analogies was a Roman citizen writing to others who were citizens or subjects of Rome. So, they had potentially served, but were certainly amongst Roman soldiers and therefore had a clear visual.

If you were to close your eyes and imagine a Centurion or Legionnaire ... that visual of a Roman soldier, regardless of faith tradition, is what we'll be working with today:

BELT OF TRUTH -- first thing to wrap around yourself as a starting point. *What do you believe to be true?*

None of the rest of this matters, if you haven't answered that for yourself.

Not for anyone else, regardless of the faith traditions of your family or friends.

What do you believe? What is your truth?

Wrap that tightly around you as the starting point for whatever comes after.

BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS -- guard your heart (and other precious organs).

The world is dark and will try to twist you up, so *guard your heart*.

Social media will try to tell you what to think, so *guard your heart*.

Your teachers and leaders will try to tell you how to feel, so *guard your heart*.

Carl Jung, the father of psychology, said, "*The world will ask who you are ... and if you do not know, the world will tell you.*"

Hear me -- dig into your faith tradition, stay grounded in your truth, and with a proverbial breastplate, *guard your heart*. Amen?

FEET WITH THE GOSPEL OF PEACE -- be prepared to GO and DO!

It has been said that a veteran is "*someone who, at one point in his or her life, wrote a blank check made payable to the 'United States of America', for an amount of 'up to and including my life.'*"

Another description of veterans are that "*All gave some, Some gave all.*"

All gave some -- all signed up to GO and to DO; whatever was necessary.

If you know what you believe and you are signed up, then be prepared to GO and DO something with your faith. Remember what I said about being in a dark world? The world needs people that are filled with love, and empathy, and a heart to serve. So, plan on stepping out.

Those are the first three elements of an *active-duty follower* of faith -- it's about getting yourself ready. Now let's talk about the tools that you'll be using:

SHIELD OF FAITH -- when you are quiet/passive, no one notices. When you step out, convicted in what you believe and ready to act in the world in accordance with what your faith tradition expects ... you should expect that the world will want to quiet you.

- If you are just a little noisy, the world will be a little noisier.
- If you are on fire for your faith, the world will shoot arrows at you (figuratively).

That is the rest of that scripture passage by the way, "*to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one*". Breastplates might guard your heart, but that's not what you want to stop arrows. Shield yourself using what you know and believe. Are you with me?

HELMET OF SALVATION -- your brain is your best tool; and helmets protect your brain.

Your brain is how you listen and look at those around you to understand what is going on.

Your brain is how you consider what you have learned and how to apply it to the situations that need you.

Your brain is what you feed so that you are a better you tomorrow than you are today.

We talked about guarding your heart – be sure to also [protect your brain](#).

SWORD OF THE SPIRIT -- I don't want to call that last thing that you pick up is your 'weapon' -- a better term in this context would be 'action maker.'

It is worth pointing out that swords can be as much defensive (block/parry) as they are offense.

That said, your actions should be led by your faith.

- **In the Christian parlance** that this verse comes from, it clarifies the sword as "**the Word of God**" meaning the scripture given to believers; as discerned by the Holy Spirit that resides inside you and guides your actions in accordance with a life of love and service.
- **If you are a jedi**, it is "*The Force*" and its teachings that guide you ... and your lightsaber.
- **If you have a different belief system**, use that scripture to guide your actions in this world.

CLOSING PRO TIPS

That's what this passage is talking about:

- Answering the call to put yourself into action
- Defending blows from the world that wants to dissuade you from your calling
- Taking action where the world needs action.

Greater love has no one than that they would spend their life serving others (*jason's translation*)

To finish our time today, here are a few pro tips:

Swords (and other action makers) are usually double-edged, which means that they can just as easily hurt you or others around you, regardless of your intent. *So, be gentle, be kind. Words can hurt*, even words that were originally from the Spirit.

To do anything new with your brain or your heart, you will have to become vulnerable again ... i.e. *setting down your sword and shield*. You have to stop *doing*, in order to learn how to *do better* -- and you need to do that regularly!

Soldiers train and practice. **Athletes** train and practice. **Executives** train and practice.

If you want to be ready for when you are needed, you have to take off your outer gear and continually work on you. You're gonna need to get *vulnerable*, so that you can get *better*.

Similarly, if you've already picked up a shield in one hand and a sword in the other, you can't then put on the helmet, or the shoes, or the belt. That's why there is an order to this, so let's finish where the passage started: Start with yourself:

- [Are you confident in what you believe?](#) Do you know your truth? Wrap that around you.
- [Have you guarded your heart?](#) Protect yourself so that you can do for others.

- [Have you guarded your mind?](#) You have to understand the world around you, without being vulnerable to the evil and influences of the world around you.
- [Have you prepared your feet?](#) Remember, all of this is to prepare you to GO and DO.

Only then are you ready to stand firm in your calling -- and truly be 'active duty' for what you hold dear.

Let's pray

To our creator, we give thanks for today.

We give thanks for the adventure of Scouting that binds us together.

We give thanks to those who have served our country, as well as to their loved ones who sacrificed for them.

We lift up those that are serving today – and ask for their protection

We lift up the families of those serving today – and ask for an extra measure of provision and comfort

We ask a blessing of those left behind from the ones who didn't come home.

Please help us to be a nation who understands the sacrifices of the few

Please help us to act in ways that are worthy of those that sacrifices and service.

Amen

Order of service

Welcome

Opening Song – America

Responsive Reading – Scout Oath

Message

Song – God Bless America

Closing Prayer – Scout Law by Baden Powell