

**What a Gift! (Veterans Day)**  
**Ephesians 6:10-20**  
**November 10, 2013**

Today is a great day. It is an important day. It is a day in which we honor our veterans, those who have freely and willingly served God and our country to bring safety, freedom, and prosperity to persecuted and downtrodden people throughout the world.

I am proud to name many veterans among my family and friends:

- My grandfather Smiley served in both World War I and World War II, and retired from the army as a lieutenant colonel.
- My father, Tom, served as an army officer in Texas, Virginia, and Germany in the mid-1950s
- My uncle John served in the Army just after World War II, mainly in the Japanese city of Kobe
- My sister, Ginger, served in Army intelligence in Arizona and Virginia
- My father-in-law, Harold, served in the Air Force in the early 1960s
- And my closest friend from college, Jim, recently retired from a career of 25+ years as a Naval supply officer

So I am well familiar with military service and military ways, even though I myself was never in the service. I am proud of my family members and friends, and I am grateful for their service and their commitment to what they believe is right and good for all. They moved beyond themselves and their own comfort and safety to help others throughout the world be safe, free, and prosperous. I also want to honor their families, who sometimes struggled mightily to keep hearth and home together while their loved ones were far away and often out of touch.

I love and honor my family members and friends this day, and I love and honor all of you who have served in the military. I also honor all of you, family, friends, and fellow church members, who have supported those who have served behind the scenes in powerful and compelling ways under often extremely difficult conditions.

I honor, and I thank God for you, very, very much.

In my family, at least, service in the military is inextricably joined with service to God. God gave us certain gifts, certain blessings, certain abilities, and we are called by God to joyously and freely offer our gifts to help those in need. We believe we are called to help either by deeds of kindness or by acts of justice, both in our own community and throughout the world. Although only some of us actively served in the military, I am proud to say that nearly all of us in my family, on both sides, actively serve and give their time as volunteers in our churches. That's just what we do, and I am proud of the strong heritage of service and commitment to church that was given to us by our parents and grandparents. They put their lives, their time, and their treasure on the line for others, and I am thankful.

So I am proud of my family members, and I am proud of the many of you who have served and continue to serve God, our community, our country, and our world. I love them, and I love you.

I need you to hear, however, that I don't love war. I absolutely hate it. I want to be clear that I don't want to glorify or encourage armed conflict in any way. I love my family, I am grateful for their military service, but I don't love war.

I don't know many people who do love war. Some have told me that they relish the thought of getting into a fight and whooping the bad guys. But those who have actually been in battle, who have known the fear or the reality of being shot at, who have seen their buddies get killed, and who have seen the suffering of innocent civilians will tell you that war is hell. War is the last thing most sane people want.

Jesus talked about loving our enemies, and doing good to those who hurt us. I think we can safely say that Jesus is on to something here. Jesus told the truth that "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" can cycle into an endless range of violence upon violence upon violence upon violence until no one knows why the fight started in the first place. Somebody needs to stop it. Somebody needs to say "I forgive you" and "I'm sorry." Somebody needs to be the first to let bygones be bygones.

Now, I know that it's not easy to forgive. It takes a lot of courage. It can make us swallow a lot of pride. I have images in my mind from the movie "Gandhi," where Gandhi and his followers tried time and time and again to enter a place that was forbidden to ethnic Indians, only to be beaten back time and time again by British soldiers with sticks. And yet Gandhi and his followers kept coming back, peacefully, just to be beaten again. It takes courage to forgive.

Truth be told, I'm probably about a 75% pacifist – maybe 80%. What do I mean by that?

What I mean by that is that I believe most wars fought through history have been for the wrong reasons, with some notable exceptions. Wars have been started, not to protect borders, but to expand them; not to protect the weak, but to take advantage of them; not to share kindness and generosity, but to make money from a country's peoples and natural resources. Leaders throughout history have often been untruthful with their peoples about the real reasons for war. There are lots of mixed motives for wars, and it is sometimes difficult to find the truth behind what people have been told.

But am I a 100% pacifist? No.

To me, it is hardly kind or compassionate to stand by in those cases when innocent people are being slaughtered, or persecuted, or starved, or denied basic freedoms. It is hardly showing Christian love to stand by when there is something I can do to stop it. Jesus spoke kindly to the children, and welcomed them, and rebuked his disciples when they forbid the children to come. Protection of children, the innocent, the aged, and the sick is what Jesus called us to do. I can hardly stand idly by if someone is about to beat or shoot a child. Pure pacifism, 100% pacifism, does not seem to me to be an appropriate Christian response to pure evil.

When we see evil, we must stop it. Pure and simple. We should try every other means we can first, before we resort to violence. But sometimes violence is the only response that will work. Should it be the first resort, for a Christian? Absolutely not. It should be the last resort. But sometimes it is the only option.

St. Augustine talked about a “Just War” concept. There is a place for war, he taught, but war must not be the normative response to threat. It must be reasonable, limited, and specific to those committing the crime. Total destruction of the enemy, or even “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” is not what the Christian’s goal should be. As much as possible, a Christian should be a peacemaker. War is the last, worst, alternative, for a Christian.

Most veterans I know understand these concepts very well. They are decent, honorable, caring, giving, and above all, committed people. They entered military service wanting to make the world a better place. They put their lives on the line because they cared about the less fortunate and wanted to give them a better life. Those who have been in battle have been forever changed by the horrors of war, and they have no desire to see it happen again.

In one of my previous churches, I remember a veteran named Dick Wolfe. Dick was a great, generous man, and he was an active supporter and participant in the church’s ministries for many years. Dick was fortunate not to have been in any battles. He entered World War II near its end, helped to liberate a German concentration camp, and was preparing for the invasion of Tokyo when the atomic bombs were dropped and the Japanese surrendered.

Dick wrote to his granddaughter, Donna, on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1994, about his experiences in Germany. I’d like to read a portion of that letter to you today:

“When you told me that you were studying about World War II and about concentration camps, I promised to lend you a book for your class to review and give you a letter – a letter of my observations of the concentration camp that I had an opportunity to see first-hand one half day after it was discovered.

We arrived in a town called Hagenow, Germany, in mid-April 1945. The weather was cold in North East Germany and the ground was still frozen. ...

Our First Sargent told us to prepare for a trip the next morning to Ludwigsbit. It was a concentration camp that had been found the afternoon before our arrival. ...

What I saw, I want you to know, was seen through the eyes of a twenty year old paratrooper who felt he had seen and knew everything there was to know about war. But, when we got off the trucks, I was not prepared to comprehend what I saw, or to believe that this was a reality. ...

I have never felt so helpless in my life as I did before or after that day.

We passed the American guard and went inside. From the outside of their quarters it was a mess, even though the quarters were made of brick. We could not walk near or into the quarters without stepping into human waste. ... Only a few [prisoners] were able (strong enough) to go outside to relieve themselves. ... The so-called “beds” were made of wire (in some cases barbed wire [with the prongs bent down],” tied across two poles. ... For a mattress the inmates had only straw or grass. Each barracks held forty men, of which more than half could not get out of bed. Some men had one light weight blanket. There was no heat in the building. They all wore filthy cotton, black and white striped, long pants and a shirt.

[He concludes by saying,] When you study World War II (or any war), please don't glorify it. It is the worst thing that can happen to you. Instead, think positively! Love and help one another and be a friend to all. The world can be peaceful, but it takes hard work to make it so.

Wow. What a story, and what a testimony as to how one ought to live in life. "Love and help one another and be a friend to all." I honor Dick Wolfe this day, and I honor all of those who have served faithfully in the military and who continue to serve in their communities and churches up to the present. I honor the fallen; I honor the wounded; I honor their families. I pray for the many in our world whose lives are still ravaged by war. And I pray for those leaders of our country and all countries who must make difficult decisions about war and peace. These people must give, and give, and give some more, every day. I honor them, and I pray for them.

For God so loved the world, that He gave... and gave ... and continues to give today ... His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him might not perish, but will have eternal life.

As we have received, so may we give.  
To God be the glory, and the honor, and the praise. Amen.

--- Mark Smiley, Lead Pastor  
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