

WGUMC May 25, 2014 "Volunteer Army" I Peter 3:13-18a

It being Memorial Day weekend, I got to thinking about how being a disciple of Jesus Christ is like getting called up to serve in the military. First of all, like the U.S. military, the church has an all-volunteer army. But in the church, you can even enlist as a baby. Joining up only requires that you get baptized. Your baptismal certificate takes the place of enlistment papers.

But there's another similarity between the church and the military. Once you're signed up, you must submit to a higher authority. Only here you don't belong to Uncle Sam; you belong to Jesus Christ. And I should probably tell you, Jesus has a stop loss policy, too. In fact, there is no leave from this duty. There is no end of service contract. And there's no such thing as a reserve soldier of Christ. Here is a big difference between the church and the army: Being a follower of Jesus is a fulltime, lifetime active-duty commitment.

Having served in the church for 25 years, I'm accustomed to hearing people tell me, "I really don't want to (fill in the blank: teach Sunday School, serve on the Finance Committee, work on the rummage sale) because I've been there, done that, and it's someone else's turn." Now I can understand that sometimes we get burned out and we need to rest and revive our faith before we can renew our commitments. But what I don't get are the folks who think that because they've served in the church for a long time, somehow they have earned the right to retire. Guess what? There is no retirement from serving Christ. I've never met a church member who couldn't serve in some way, even if they physically couldn't warm the pew on Sunday.

Marian was diagnosed with a degenerative neurological disease. In her later years, she was eventually confined to a wheelchair. And though she barely had strength enough in her hands to hold a sheet of music, she sang in the choir. Besides

that, she also volunteered for the Nominations Committee because she had a serving heart and could still talk on the phone.

Friends, being a Christian means being a member of a very large volunteer army and showing up for duty every day of your life. In the first chapter of I Peter, it says, "...prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves...." [I Peter 1:13] Yes, "disciple" and "discipline" come from the same root for a reason. A disciple is one who learns and discipline is the process by which we learn. You can't learn how to be a Christian from a book, not even the Bible. To be a Christian takes practice. You have to take action.

So, when we get to the third chapter of I Peter, the author is talking about what happens when disciples take action, when they are eager to do what is good. If you're a volunteer in the U.S. Army, you're in it, I hope, to do some good for your country. If you're a volunteer in the church, you have answered

a higher calling. You are eager to serve not just your country, but God and all of humanity.

You are eager to do good, even if it doesn't bring you a single thank you or an ounce of glory. There are plenty of jobs like that around this church. Everything from running the sound or projector system to counting money, setting up the coffee or locking up the building, greeting, ushering, serving on a committee, singing or ringing in the choir, playing in the band, leading a small group, or working with our kids and youth. For doing any of those things, we won't give you a purple heart, but we will try to grow yours.

You are eager to do good, even if it brings you suffering. Volunteer armies work great in peacetime. But when war is declared and then begins to drag on, as more men and women die, recruitment and retention gets more difficult. In the church, we see our share of dying, but we don't like to talk about suffering. We treat it as if it's our dirty little secret. Yet the

author of I Peter is very clear that you will suffer if you are a disciple: "because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps." [I Peter 2:21]

For some Christians in the ancient world, suffering for Christ meant dying for him. And still today, in too many parts of the world, being a disciple can be a death sentence. Here in this country, we rarely have to pay the ultimate price for our faith, yet following Christ still has a cost.

I was in Trader Joe's the other day, making small talk with the checker. I made the comment that, like him, I have to work weekends, so he asked me what I did. I said, "I'm a pastor." But he didn't know what that was. Neither did he know the words "clergy" or "minister." I guess the language of our faith can be a very foreign language in Silicon Valley. Finally, I said to him, "I work at a church." And he looked at me as if I were from outer space. Yes, it can make you feel pretty foreign to follow Jesus around here.

But the real cost comes not when you confess to being a Christian but when you start acting like one. We know that living as an un-closeted Christian can be problematic at work. Loving your enemies doesn't win you friends in this highly competitive valley. Turning the other cheek or going the second mile won't get you the promotion. Following the Way, the Truth, and the Life will not get you a house on Easy Street.

Unfortunately, being a follower of Jesus can also get you into trouble at home. Your spouse may not appreciate all the time you give to God, all the hours you spend at church. Or you may get grief from siblings or parents for trying to be the Christian in family conflicts. You may be misunderstood and mistreated, even despised and rejected, just because you choose to love your family the way Jesus does.

Oh yes, families can make us suffer for Christ's sake. I'm afraid that the same is true of church families. I've seen the suffering in churches. Someone says or does a hurtful thing

and someone else gets wounded and goes away. It's not supposed to happen in a church, and we're always shocked and disappointed when it does. But don't you suppose that's why Jesus taught us the Lord's Prayer? Because he knew that we needed to ask for forgiveness and to offer it each and every day. If you think about it, Jesus suffered his disciples and, if we're going to follow him, we have to suffer each other. That's how we learn to love one another and God. I Peter says that it is through suffering that Christ brings us to God. [I Peter 3:18]

Just remember the words in our text today: "even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed." Because your suffering is bringing you closer to God. So "do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord." [I Peter 3:14]

I'm pretty sure that I witnessed some hearts being sanctified in this church last weekend. One of the ways that we suffer for our faith is by not being afraid to enter into the

suffering of others. I was so amazed by your willingness to step in and be the hands and heart of Christ for two of our grieving families. We had the memorial for the Ralphs last Saturday and the funeral for Shirley on Monday, and this volunteer army reported for duty both days. I didn't know the sanctuary could fit 360 people, but I'm told that's how many showed up for Shirley. I was just so overwhelmed by your coming together to be family for one another that I couldn't come down from the high of being your pastor. I was so proud of you that I had a hard time getting to sleep Monday night.

But you are not just a weekend wonder. There are other families who are suffering in this church, too, and I'm daily watching you be family for them, and that is supremely humbling and gratifying. In fact, you are one reason that I am ready today to make my defense to anyone who demands of me an accounting of the hope that is in me. You are the visible

sign of God's invisible grace, so all I have to do is point them to you.

So don't ever doubt that we need you, and for every little thing you do, we thank you.

For all you are and all you do
I give God thanks and praise that you
have come alive to grow in grace,
to fight the fight and run the race.

There's always so much good to do,
yet there's only so much of you.
Don't ever think your work is vain.
What seems like loss, God turns to gain.

And when it hurts to love this much,
when pain is real and hard to touch,
when faith gets weak and hope grows dim,
remember Christ and come to him.

His power is here; the gift is yours.
Into your heart, the Spirit pours.
You will be lifted up, my friend,
to love and serve God to the end.

tune: "The Gift of Love"