

Sermon: Thank God for Regular Guys

Year A, Easter 7

[Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11](#)

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On this Memorial Day, we take time to honor those who have died in the service the United States military: Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard. As the daughter of a soldier, who began her life in some of the finest housing at Fort Benning in Georgia, Memorial Day has particular meaning for me. Perhaps it is because so small a portion of our country, less than ½ of 1% is in or has served in the military.¹ While 76% of people over 65 have an immediate family member who served in the military, less than a third of those under 30 do.² We have lost touch with what it means to serve.

When I talk with vets, especially combat vets, they tell me people stories. They tell me about their units and what they did. They tell me about how they have never been colder in their lives than when they were training in the swamps of the Florida pan handle, even though they grew up in Minnesota. They tell me about fighting corruption in the supply depots in Saigon by getting the crew to agree that for the 8 hour day they were supposed to work, they'd work 4 hours, but they'd actually work 4 hours and get accurate inventories of what they had on hand. They'd talk about how nice it was to call in air support from the Navy when you were an Army captain and the dispatcher didn't know enough to check.

They tell stories about regular guys. Somehow this combination of smart and dumb, foul mouthed and prim, fit and lazy, sharp eyed and near sighted – somehow this combination of really ordinary people would do extraordinary things. Even if it were just for a while. Even if it were just for a day. Not that any of them would put it this way, but what I would hear in their stories is that they were never more physically vulnerable to harm and they never had more people watching their back. Just regular guys.

In today's reading from John, Jesus has said what he needed to say to his disciples to say farewell. He has washed their feet like a slave, he has eaten a last meal with them, he has sent off Judas, apparently aware that Judas is going to betray him. And now we see him praying in the room where they have gathered together, just before they head out to that garden. Jesus, who said that he was the gate and the shepherd, who said he would keep the sheep safe, is about to go out into the night and lie in the gate of the garden and protect his disciples from arrest.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus has been preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God for three years. He has walked the length and breadth of Israel. He has healed people like the man born blind. He has converted people like the Samaritan woman at the well. He has brought Lazarus back to life. Three years of work, and his followers fit in one room. And his followers are not the great and the orthodox and the religious leaders. All those people had turned against him.³

¹ Pew Research Center, "The Military-Civilian Gap: Fewer Family Connections." Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/11/23/the-military-civilian-gap-fewer-family-connections/#fn-9923-1> (accessed May 25, 2017)

² Pew Research Center, "The Military-Civilian Gap: Fewer Family Connections."

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 212.

Yet here is Jesus thanking God for these regular people gathered together in one room. Jesus will thank God for the joy he has received from the work they have done together. He clearly sees their work as extraordinary, and he is deeply grateful for the people he has been given. He says that they, like him, are in this world but not of it. He asks God not that they be taken away from this world, but protected within it. Imagine being a regular guy, and hearing the person you believe to be the son of God thanking God for your presence in his life and asking for your protection. Imagine that.

Many of you don't have to imagine what that sounds like. I mean it didn't sound like *I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.* (John 17:6) It sounded more like the standing order I've received that any helicopter pilot is not to buy his or her own beer in my presence. It sounds like the pinning service the VFW does for vets who are passing from this world. It sounds like the welcome you get at Stand Down for Homeless Veterans which we support through Harbor Homes. Now in its 11th year, it's an event to help vets connect with the services they think they need, not what some bureaucrat has told them they should have.

Perhaps it is because of the low rate of participation in the military. Perhaps it is because we allow ourselves to be distracted by the latest political upheaval. But we are letting the lessons the military has taught our nation for years drift away from us. Like the culture around it, the military fought racial integration before they realized it was wasting too much talent. The military struggled with the role of women, with the implication of sexual orientation and gender identity. The military would be the last place to say that they have it figured out. But they are actively engaged and engaging with it. Yes, they have problems. But they also have ways, some more or less effective, for communicating and addressing those problems together. The military is a big messy ball of regular people doing extraordinary things together. And as a nation we are asking them to do more and more extraordinary things every year.

When you come right down to it, that is the lesson the armed forces teaches us in this country with the most powerful military on earth under the control of the civilian government. That ordinary people can do extraordinary things. They can run for office and get elected and pass laws. Or, they can read the laws that get passed and call their elected officials when they're just spinning what they've done. They can work like dogs on the White House communication team, trying to keep the regular people of this country up to date on a whirlwind of moving stories. And they can work like dogs trying to report on the facts that explain or provide context for what is happening in the government. We seem to have forgotten the lesson that the military offers us: it's the regular guys that get things done.

If that lesson comes from too far afield, think of the Eagle Scouts in our community. Think of what they have accomplished: steps at the Historical Society, parking lot, road sign and trail kiosk, sign out front of the church, church shed, board at the cemetery. In one sense they have very little in common. In another, they were identical. Each scout had to figure out how to get regular people to work together and support the proposal he was putting forward. Had to change his proposal when he gained input from other folks. Had to raise money to support the project. An Eagle Scout project culminates a scouting career not because you demonstrate our own self-sufficient mastery of some set of skills. It embodies the Scout law of working with and serving others. Regular people doing extraordinary things.

I've heard it said that there are no atheists in fox holes. I'm not convinced there are Republicans or Democrats there either. There are just regular guys. Who are not perfect, who are frequently annoying, who we might not otherwise choose to hang out with. But we are here together in *this* part of the world in *this* moment. These people are whom we have been given. Whether they agree with us or not, we get the most done when we, as regular people, dig in and do what we do.

In this time of such contention, try and hold onto the lessons we have learned from the military. And make sure that we are using all our talents to keep the lessons coming. Make sure that the Veteran's Administration is well funded and well run. Make sure that vets are not being dishonorably discharged because of brain damage they sustained during combat, since that will deny them the benefits they need to recover from their service. Make sure there is a path for veterans separating from the service to enter civilian life. In all the contention and tumult of this political climate, surely supporting our veterans is something regular people can do. Because that is what they have been teaching us for over two hundred years. Help us to see in each person, no matter how far apart we are politically, that they too have been called by God to be in the world but not of it. We can all be regular guys doing extraordinary things.