

Veteran's Day

Military veterans have been some of my most influential teachers. I am totally grateful for your service to our beloved country. And, I am also grateful for what you have taught me, and what you have taught the civilian population. You may or may not think of yourselves as teachers, but you are!

+You have taught us that there comes a time when we have to put aside our personal goals and pursuits and go to bat for our country and for the values we stand for. There is a seductive voice that wants me to believe that I am the center of the universe. But our veterans know better. They have taught us there is a time to love country more than self. My dad was a World War II veteran. He returned from Europe, started a family, and occasionally would let us wear his Army jacket. This was his subtle way of teaching us there is a time to YES to country.

+Each year, at South Church, we have what we call Laity Sunday. We turn the pulpit over to a lay person. A few years ago, Mike Perry preached the sermon. He told us, "When you encounter a Vet, just say, 'Thank you for your service.'" So, from the bottom of my heart, THANK YOU for your service! Mike taught me about expressing gratitude. It's one thing to BE grateful; it's another thing to express that gratitude.

+I am particularly honored to be speaking today in this particular location, next to the Johnny Lee Levitow Memorial. You see, I was his playmate in the 1950's. He lived on Kimberley Lane and I lived on the corner of Kimberley and Main. And, let's just say we got into some situations together! We knew how to horse around and raise a little Cain. Eventually, our paths diverged, and we lost touch with each other. When I moved back to Glastonbury in 1988, Johnny and I reconnected. That's when I learned he had been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroic service in Vietnam.

I could hardly believe it! This guy who was my playmate saved many lives one day when his plane was under attack in foreign skies. He taught us all a most important lesson: courage matters. When push comes to shove, courage is what matters. Airman Johnny Levitow saw what needed to be done and he acted swiftly. You can read the full citation. It's right over there! When he returned home, he down-played his courageous act as most heroes do, but it was clear to me and to all of us that God gives us the gift of courage and expects us to use that gift when that gift is needed. So, THANK YOU Johnny Levitow. You were our teacher. Like many of us, you may not have done that well with Shakespeare and Calculus, but you mastered the meaning of courage.

+Military veterans are often the ones who teach us how to take their military training and transform it into community service. You return from the battle field and ask, "How can I use what I've learned to make my own community a safer, kinder place?" My son-in-law is a veteran of the war in Iraq. He married my daughter and they live over in Vernon. They are raising two sons. Recently, he applied for and was accepted into the Governor's Foot Guard. I asked him the other day what the Foot Guard has been doing. They have been training to respond to natural disasters, to set up temporary shelters for the victims of fire or floods. He's using his military background for peace time service. I am proud of him! He is teaching us how to channel the energy for combat in far-away places into energy for saving lives on the home front. Thank you, Jon Harwood, for your service! And THANK YOU to all the veterans who are using what you learned on the battlefield to build up your community.

+One of the greatest theologians of the 20th Century was Henry Nouwen. This Roman Catholic scholar and pastor understood something of the significance of wounds. His book, “The Wounded Healer,” shaped my own understanding of ministry. Military veterans know all about wounds: wounds of the body and wounds of the mind and wounds of the spirit. Henry Nouwen saw that our wounds can become our strengths. They can create in us a compassion for what others are going through. Our wounds give us a little humility. Our wounds help us to understand what it means to be a human being. Our wounds give us a little wisdom. Our military veterans are all too acquainted with wounds. And you all have taught us that our wounds do not define us; they do not identify us. Indeed, in a way, they help us to get in touch with who we really are. I certainly would never wish a wound upon anyone, but I am grateful for our veterans who have allowed their wounds to make them truly compassionate human beings. It’s often a veteran who can look someone in the eye and say with authenticity, “I know how you feel.” And this is what the world needs these days, people who can look you in the eye and say, “I know how you feel.”

+Many of you know I served the church for seven years on a Lakota Sioux Indian Reservation in Western South Dakota. Arriving there in 1973, I was immediately struck by how many of the Lakota men and women wore symbols of their military service. Along with their eagle feathers, they wore a cap or a coat or boots that quietly announced, “I’m a veteran.” But more than that, what I noticed is how military service brought people of all races and ethnicities together. Lakota people and Norwegians and African Americans; people from the East coast and from the West coast; military service proved to be a common denominator, a unifying principle.

To this day, when Brian Hollister goes out to that same Reservation with Hawkwing to repair broken homes, he pals up with Raymond Uses the Knife, also a Veteran, and they are a mighty team in community service. It gives me hope to see how military veterans demonstrating what can be accomplished when everyone rolls up their sleeves and no one is judged by the color of their skin, only by the quality of their character.

+Once a month, I lead a devotional service at two of the memory care centers in Glastonbury. I often ask if anyone in the room is a veteran. Last time I asked, a woman raised her hand! She raised her hand and she smiled from ear to ear. She may not have remembered what she had for breakfast that day, but she remembered instantly what she had done in the Great War. She was a nurse. She took care of wounded soldiers. She told stories that revealed her military service was the most important thing she had ever done. I stood there, stunned. When she told her last story, I saluted her. In a way, she had taught me what a difference it makes to ease another person's pain.

So, you see? You are our teachers! Therefore, I now bestow upon each of you a doctorate degree in Education! And most of all, I THANK YOU for your service to the United States of America. Amen!