

Returning veterans. Returning hope.

Seeking peace together

Adult Sunday school curriculum



Table of contents

Lesson 1: Crossing barriers	1
Lesson 2: Our militarized lives	4
Lesson 3: The experience of trauma	7
Lesson 4: Breaking free from trauma and moral injury.	10
Lesson 5: Hospitality: a two-way street	13
Lesson 6: Deepening our peace roots	16

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Lesson 1: Crossing barriers

Objective

To explore the barrier-crossing impulse of the gospel, and reflect on its implications for followers of Jesus in a nation at war.

Many members of the traditional peace churches have had little to no contact with military personnel or military veterans. For some congregations, the place to begin is to name and reflect on the perceived barriers between pacifists and veterans.

Learning about veterans and myself

For a little over a year, I have ... co-facilitated a spirituality group for veterans. My partner is a chaplain from the VA hospital. The group meets monthly at the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin.

Our intention is to provide a safe space for veterans to explore their spirituality. For many veterans, military experience damages their most important relationships, including their relationship with God. That damage can leave some veterans feeling disoriented and alone. Our primary agenda is to think together about what it might look like to repair whatever connection is broken.

I often wonder what I am doing in that circle. As a good Mennonite, I am comfortable remaining behind the walls that separate me from those participating in the military. And, frankly, it's easier that way, neatly dividing the world into us and them. On my side of the wall are pacifists and the innocent victims of military violence. On the other side are those who contribute to that violence, soldiers included.

But, here I am, sitting in a circle of veterans. They say things that affirm every negative feeling I have about the military. They say things that challenge those feelings. And I am surprised as one stereotype after another is

broken open, allowing me to see past my carefully tended walls to the humanity we share. I hear a longing for love, for safety, for communion, for salvation.

It's safe to say that the Pharisees considered Jesus to be a royal pain. They worked hard to maintain the law and the tradition. They believed the future of their people depended upon it.

Then along came this upstart rabbi who blithely crossed every traditional and legal boundary. Jesus ate with anybody. He touched everybody. He turned no one away.

And when his disciples tried to draw some boundaries of their own, Jesus took a child on his lap and revealed something about the kingdom of God. It is, as Jesus described it, a very untidy place. The disciples were constantly surprised by who they met there.

It turns out that God loves all people. We knew that, right? It turns out that Jesus calls *us* to love all people. And that's where the argument starts.

What do we mean by "love?" By "all people?" Don't people have to change their ways before entering into God's reign? Look at how they live and what they've done.

And off we go. Brick by brick, building another wall. Protecting ourselves, or the tradition or the community, by naming someone as beyond the call to love.

I am still a convinced Mennonite pacifist. I remain opposed to violence, whether committed by individuals or blessed by the state. I still believe that war is sin. My convictions are intact.

But none of that excuses me from loving others, including military veterans. Neither the strength of my convictions nor the rightness of my theology can overcome the call to love everyone Jesus loves. Weird as it may be, I now hear Jesus calling me to step over the line and love veterans.

When you look over the borderline, who do you see? Only you can say. But I can tell you this: Jesus is right there with them. And he's calling you to come on across.

*Ron Adams is pastor of Madison (Wisconsin) Mennonite Church. The article originally ran in the July issue of The Mennonite (themennonite.org/opinion/learning-veterans/).*¹

Scripture

John 4:5-9 (NRSV)

“So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son, Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

“A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)”

Matthew 8:5-13 (NRSV)

“When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, ‘Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.’ And he said to him, ‘I will come and cure him.’ The centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, “Go,” and he goes, and to another, “Come,” and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this,” and the slave does it.’ When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly, I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ And to the centurion Jesus said, ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant was healed in that hour.”

Commentary

Who are you? At the core of your identity how do you define yourself and the communities to which you belong? How have you experienced relating to communities whose identities are very different from your own?

Human identities are rich and meaningful. We celebrate family stories and the creative expressions of culture

found in language, music, food and art. And so we should. However, when identity markers such as race, ethnicity, gender, politics and religion become closely linked to social and political power, they have often become the basis for exclusion, oppression, and immense human suffering. As noted by Iraq War veteran Michael Yandell, “The moment one group of people can be labeled evil and another good, is the moment people start dying.”²

And so it was in first-century Palestine, where Jesus lived amidst revolutionary movements under the harsh boot of Roman oppression. Yet Jesus refused to dehumanize those caught in the web of power and exclusion. Indeed, part of the prophetic mission of Jesus Christ, the prophets, and the Christian church is to restore an identity of wholeness to all the people of the earth (Genesis 22:18; Psalm 117; Romans 9; Galatians 3), to those who have forgotten what it means to be humble children of God, and to those who have been told they cannot be God’s children.

On a warm day in Samaria, Jesus approached a Samaritan woman by a well. With a simple request for water, he ignored all the social conventions that would have kept them in separate spaces, and a profound theological conversation ensued. And one day in Capernaum, this Jesus who taught us to love our enemies encountered a Roman military officer who represented an oppressive occupation army. We don’t know what stirrings of resentment or mistrust may have been clanging in Jesus’ spirit. Yet he responded to the officer’s need, reminding his hearers that the boundaries we create may exclude people with great faith, and include those with little faith.

These barrier-crossing encounters involved risk for Jesus, the Samaritan woman, and the centurion. What would become of their reputations? Becoming the “whole people” that God calls us to be is a life-long barrier-crossing, risk-taking journey. This is not merely an exercise in ethnic, social, or ideological pluralism. It’s about opening ourselves to the movement of God’s Spirit so that our faith communities reflect the wideness of God’s mercy and the breadth of the human family.

The biblical story calls us to cast off our old identities and to become “a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:16-18), so that we no longer judge one another by “human standards.” Peace, reconciliation and nonviolence are important identity markers for this new community of faith, rooted in Jesus’ life and teaching. This will stretch us. Can we hold in our embrace soldiers, veterans, and all who struggle to survive in lands tormented by the searing cauldron of war? Surely, as we “cross barriers” to engage with others, we, too, are transformed.

Questions

1. Has following Jesus ever led you to cross barriers in the name of love and mercy? How did it feel? What fears or anxieties did it create? How were your own faith and identity impacted?
2. What are the natural ways that members of your congregation might interact with soldiers and veterans? What common values do you share?
3. What would it look like in your community for pacifists and soldiers/veterans to cross the barriers that exist between them? How would you define these barriers? What does each group have to offer the other? What does each group need from the other?
4. In what ways has your church community created barriers that are difficult for people to cross?
5. What are your favorite stories of Jesus crossing barriers? Your favorite stories of the church crossing barriers?

Footnotes

¹“Learning about veterans and myself,” by Ron Adams, *The Mennonite*, July 1, 2014.

²See video interview with Michael Yandell at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-NdZ6p7ols>.

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Lesson 2: Our militarized lives

Objective

To understand that all of us, soldiers and civilians alike, are caught in a web of militarism that has permeated our culture and the structures in which we live, and to explore together what faithfulness to Christ means in our context.

Preparation

1. Take the quiz on militarism posted as a PowerPoint presentation. If technology is not available, simply print out the “Quiz Questions” as a Word document and ask the questions verbally.
2. Do the exercise titled “Corporate Military Complex.”

Scripture

1 Samuel 8:10-22 (NRSV)

“So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.’”

“But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, ‘No! We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.’ When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. The Lord said to Samuel, ‘Listen to their voice and set a king over them.’ Samuel then said to the people of Israel, ‘Each of you return home.’”

Hosea 10:12-15 (NRSV)

“Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

“You have ploughed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed, as Shalman destroyed Beth-arbel on the day of battle when mothers were dashed in pieces with their children. Thus it shall be done to you, O Bethel, because of your great wickedness. At dawn the king of Israel shall be utterly cut off.”

Commentary

It’s been many millennia since the ancient prophet Samuel stood between God and the people of Israel who were making their case for a king to lead them into battle. Samuel’s depiction of life under a warrior-king is striking in its no-holds-barred review of the harsh realities the people of Israel will face. Six times Samuel uses the word *take* to press home the oppressive impact of a king, his war-making and economic greed. Yet even after Samuel likens their fate to that of slavery, the people insist on a king who will “go out before us and fight our battles.”

Like the people of ancient Israel, many in our nation promote military dominance as the ultimate path to

security. Militarism is what assures us that unprecedented military power, wed to a strong faith in the universality of American values, will lead to peace, prosperity and security.¹ From video games to Hollywood films and our perpetual wars around the globe, the promise of redemption through violence is in the very air we breathe. In the words of Hosea, we have come to “trust in *our* power and the power of *our* warriors.” We also place great trust in our superior war technology.

Preachers and politicians alike routinely invoke the name of God and the cause of freedom to send our sons and daughters across the globe, armed with our most advanced instruments of death. On Memorial Day 2013, President Obama stated:

Today we pay tribute to those patriots who never came back—who fought for a home to which they never returned, and died for a country whose gratitude they will always have ... Scripture teaches us that “greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”²

In this statement military force takes on a spiritual quality, comparing the selflessness of individual soldiers in battle, to the sacrificial love that Jesus spoke of shortly before his crucifixion. We can certainly honor the courage and commitment of soldiers willing to die for one another in battle. In fact, we might well examine whether this kind of loyalty and solidarity with one another can be found in any of our churches. Yet we must also acknowledge that the President’s words paper over a deep divide. Jesus’ love embraces the enemy. The love that soldiers heroically demonstrate for their comrades in battle unites them to kill the enemy.

Killing the enemy is done, of course, in the name of peace. As noted by Dr. Jonathan Tran, “We go to war not because we love violence, but because we love peace, and violence is how we imagine peace ... For Americans, “peace” is not the absence of war, but rather war for certain ends.”³ That is why, in the United States, peace looks an awful lot like war.

For this reason, many U.S. citizens do not see militarism when viewing our nation’s history or role in the world. When blood is spilled and we experience deep and painful losses, we search for meaning, and so we self-identify as a force for good in a world of evil forces, thereby obscuring the evil of war itself. Former Army Chaplain William P. Mahedy describes it this way:

Evil on the scale of war is, to a great extent, denied by the general population. Society constructs

overarching rationales and myths to hide from the reality of evil. Sin, this kind of moral pain, cannot be allowed to exist. Therefore, society denies it. War must be mythologized, for society cannot confront it.⁴

Our leaders speak readily and explicitly about the evils of the enemy, yet rarely while in office lament the evils and failures of war. The vast complex of political, military and industrial interests has convinced many that evil resides in our enemies, and can be killed with hi-tech weaponry.

Yet the more our nation projects military power onto enemies beyond our borders, the deeper it also sinks into the soil of our collective life. We often find ourselves giving up our freedom in order to preserve it, spending vast resources on weaponry, war, and domestic surveillance while struggling to find resources for education, health, and basic human needs. Our warriors return wounded in body and soul while the resources to help them restore their health and well-being are lacking. In our setting, we find Samuel’s words eerily relevant.

Before the prophet Samuel appeared on the scene, God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. As harsh as the conditions were, God taught them how to relate to themselves, to their neighbors, and to God. Upon establishing themselves in the new land, the community life was governed by judges, prophets and priests. There was violence and warfare, but there was no king or standing army. Israel was to trust God for security.

Over time, the faith in Yahweh that was forged in the wilderness was traded for the worship of idols and a desire to function like other nations. They wanted a king to lead them into battle instead of relying on the Lord, institutionalizing the violence and warfare that was already present among them. The idea of a “kingdom of priests and a holy people” (Exodus 19:6) was lost for a time as Israel’s desire for military security led to generations of turmoil, violence and war.

Prophets such as Hosea critiqued the ideologies of violence, offering a vision of peace and security that had the God of justice at its root. In the words of Old Testament professor Bruce C. Birch, the danger of introducing the violent ideology of kingship to the Israelites “is the potential for introducing a social system that is antithetical to the very notion of community to which they were called by God’s deliverance.”⁵

Ultimately, the promise to David (e.g., Psalm 132) of a kingdom of righteousness is revealed in the person and

teachings of Jesus, who rejects the ideology of violent authority, telling Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, then my servants would fight ...” (John 18:36).

Dr. Tran notes that Jesus, in response to his betrayal and impending crucifixion, offers an alternative: bread.⁶ In the real world of Palestine where state-sanctioned torture and violence were commonplace, Jesus becomes bread, Jesus becomes wine, Jesus becomes an act of humble service. This is a very different modeling of power in the face of impending violence than that offered by militarism. In the heart of an empire that equates violence, power and peace, we must examine ourselves. To which model do our lives give witness?

Questions

1. Many in our country view our vast military/security structure as our only hope for safety and well-being in a violent world. Read *The Prophet Samuel and President Eisenhower* aloud. How does Samuel’s critique apply in our setting? What do you think of Samuel’s imagery of “slavery,” or President Eisenhower’s imagery of “hanging from a cross of iron?”
2. How has your congregation, either through its voice or its silence, contributed to our society’s tendency to hide from the immense evil of war ... to portray war as noble and righteous?

3. What examples of resistance to an ideology of security through violence do you see or long to see in your community?
4. How might veterans and non-veterans work together to better understand the systems of violence? How might we work together to promote peace in the midst of a militarized society?
5. What differences/similarities do you see between participating in war as a soldier, and the routine of paying taxes for war and regularly doing business with companies that sell products to the military?

Footnotes

- ¹ *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*, by Andrew J. Bacevich, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- ² President Barack Obama, Memorial Day 2013, http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2013/0518_memorialday/.
- ³ *The Audacity of Hope and the Violence of Peace: Obama, War and Christianity*, by Jonathan Tran, January 31, 2012. See <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/184801.pdf>.
- ⁴ *A Theology and Methodology of Treating PTSD Patients*, by William P. Mahedy, 1996.
- ⁵ One excellent source of Old Testament analysis is Bruce C. Birch’s *Let Justice Roll Down* (1991), which does an in-depth treatment of the issues facing Saul, Samuel, David and Solomon, and makes the case for a God of mercy and justice. This quote is found on page 208.
- ⁶ *The Audacity of Hope and the Violence of Peace: Obama, War and Christianity*, Jonathan Tran.

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Lesson 3: The experience of trauma

Objective

To better understand the experience of trauma and its impact on the lives of soldiers, veterans, and all who are violated by war.

Scripture

1 Samuel 15:3, 33 (NRSV)

Samuel's instructions to Saul

"Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

(Just as Saul and Samuel concluded their worship together...)

"Then Samuel said, 'Bring Agag, king of the Amalekites, here to me.' And Agag came to him haltingly. Agag said, 'Surely this is the bitterness of death.' But Samuel said, 'As your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women.' And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal."

1 Samuel 18:10-11 (NRSV)

"The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand; and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, 'I will pin David to the wall.' But David eluded him twice."

1 Samuel 17:55-58 (NRSV)

"When Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, 'Abner, whose son is this young man?' Abner said, 'As your soul lives, O King, I do not know.' The king said, 'Inquire whose son the stripling is.' On David's return from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand. Saul said to him, 'Whose son are you, young man?' And

David answered, 'I am the son of your servant, Jesse, the Bethlehemite.'"

Commentary

The biblical record is filled with stories of trauma. Open the pages of the Bible and you readily come upon scenes of violence that will chill your soul. Captive kings are hacked to death (1 Samuel 15), Levites kill 3,000 of their brothers, neighbors and friends (Exodus 32:27-28), Jael crushes Sisera's head with a worker's hammer and tent peg (Judges 4:17-21), and King Herod's birthday celebration includes the entrance of John the Baptist's head on a platter (Matthew 14:1-12) to reference just a few stories.

It would not be wise, from across the vast cultural and time chasm that separates us from the Old Testament period, to impose present-day Western psychological diagnoses on biblical characters. Yet we can't help but wonder if King Saul's mercurial moods weren't somehow connected to his bloody history as a warrior. And while the young shepherd boy's (David's) slaying of Goliath is often recounted as a pleasant children's story, our 21st-century minds recoil at the imagery of David severing Goliath's head and carrying it around with him. Surely, this along with David's long guerrilla war with Saul, had some impact on David's psyche and view of the world after he became king.

We do know that people in our day, especially combat veterans, are profoundly affected by the violence they witness and commit. Suicides among U.S. veterans now total 22 a day.¹ Combat veterans now account for more than 20 percent of domestic violence cases nationwide.² This is not because today's soldiers and veterans are weak. These responses to trauma, while troubling, are not unexpected. It is unrealistic for a society to repeatedly send young soldiers into settings of brutality and violence, and expect them to emerge as whole, well-adjusted human beings.

A traumatic experience³ happens when people experience serious injury or threat of imminent death for themselves or others. The body responds by releasing chemicals and hormones that can be overwhelming, sometimes causing a freeze response that traps energy in the body. Unless this energy is released in a positive way, it can often lead to harmful actions toward oneself or aggressive and violent actions toward others.

Exposure to violence in a combat setting is high, and repeated exposure can put a person at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Events, or certain sights, sounds or smells cause the veteran to re-experience a previous trauma. These veterans are not “remembering the trauma;” rather, their bodies instinctively respond as if the trauma were happening again. Unless healed and transformed, this trauma can haunt veterans for years, causing intrusive thoughts, numbness and isolation, depression, addictions, excessive vigilance, high-risk behaviors, and a loss of meaning or spiritual wholeness. This often affects a veteran’s close relationships, and can cause family members to experience secondary trauma.

Other psychiatric issues can accompany PTSD. These include substance use disorders, depression, and other anxiety problems. About 75 percent of people with PTSD have at least one other psychiatric diagnosis.

Another type of trauma or stress often experienced by combat veterans is frequently described as soul wounding, moral injury, or moral pain. Therapist Carolyn Holderread Heggen recounts the story of a Vietnam veteran who told her, “If you want to know what it feels like to be me, read these verses,” pointing to Psalm 38.⁴

“There is no health in my body, my guilt has overwhelmed me, my wounds fester, I am bowed down and look very low. All day long I go about mourning. My heart pounds. My friends and neighbors stay away from me. My strength fails me. The light has gone out of my eyes. I am troubled by my sin.”
(Psalm 38:5-11)

Given what we know about David as a guerrilla fighter or the capricious way that King David took Bathsheba and dispensed of her husband, Uriah, it is not surprising that these words were written by him. Nor is it surprising that a Vietnam War veteran, centuries later, could identify with these sentiments from an ancient soldier poet.

When soldiers participate in or witness actions that violate their own inner sense of right and wrong, this may cause moral pain. Soldiers may begin to question their identity as a “good person” or their implicit faith

in the righteous cause of their country. Since much of what happens in warfare would be viewed as serious crimes in civilian life, some soldiers find that their entire moral framework and worldview is shattered, causing them to live in a world of ambiguity. One Iraq War veteran remarked, “I don’t understand why I can’t feel any empathy for the many dead Iraqis that I saw. What has happened to my ability to feel compassion?”⁵ Unless these soldiers can find new meaning, hope or acceptance, they may be crushed by guilt and shame, or simply feel lost without a moral compass.

The path to trauma and moral pain often begins in basic training. Vietnam War veteran Lt. Col. Dave Grossman (Ret.) writes that “there is within most men an intense resistance to killing ... a resistance so strong that, in many circumstances, soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it.”⁶ After-combat interviews in World War II revealed that between 80–85 percent of U.S. soldiers did not fire their weapons at the enemy.⁷ This innate resistance to killing was directly addressed by the time of the Vietnam War, as the military introduced “reflexive fire” training during boot camp.

As noted by Captain Pete Kilner, this new training greatly increased a soldier’s lethality, by bypassing the soldier’s own moral autonomy. Soldiers were taught to fire automatically in response to certain stimuli. “The problem,” notes Kilner, “is that soldiers who kill reflexively in combat will likely one day reconsider their actions reflectively. If they are unable to justify to themselves the fact that they killed another human being, they will likely ... suffer enormous guilt.”⁸

Father William P. Mahedy, who served as a chaplain in the Vietnam War, describes this introduction into the world of war and violence as a *conversion experience*. “Snatched from the commonplace of life, the combat soldier is ‘born again’ into a different plane of existence from which there is no return ... violence on the magnitude of war lies in the same plane as the questions of the beginning and the end of the universe, of God, and of meaning.”⁹

The profound conditioning and reshaping of identity that many soldiers experience in war, if left unaddressed, is a recipe for deep spiritual struggle. Perhaps King David began to realize this near the end of his reign. “But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘You have shed much blood and have waged great wars; you shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood in my sight on the earth.’”

Unhealed trauma can lead to harmful behaviors toward oneself (acting-in),¹⁰ such as addictions, self-mutilation,

overwork, overeating or failure to eat, risky sexual behaviors, and suicide. Physical symptoms such as high blood pressure, headaches, and digestive issues are common.

In addition, unhealed trauma can lead to harmful behavior toward others (acting-out),¹¹ such as domestic violence and abuse, criminal activity, aggression, intolerance, and lack of empathy. According to the Veterans Administration, 25 percent of female soldiers report experiencing sexual trauma perpetrated by their fellow soldiers, and 1 percent of male soldiers report experiencing sexual trauma.¹²

Not all soldiers return from war deeply conflicted or traumatized. Yet for those who do, understanding the trauma experience is often one of the first steps on the journey toward healing. Counseling resources and therapy are often necessary and helpful in “unlearning” wartime reflexes and behaviors. But at the root of much that happens in war, both for the soldiers and for the society that sends them to battle, are spiritual questions of moral responsibility, guilt, restitution, and ultimate meaning. Perhaps it is the congregations who are ready to struggle with these questions that can be most helpful to veterans.

Questions

1. View “The Trauma of War and Our Collective Responsibility” (PowerPoint). What do you think about the idea that war and its trauma are everyone’s responsibility to address?
2. How does an understanding of the trauma experience shape how you view the experiences of soldiers, or view difficulties experienced by many veterans?
3. What are some of the spiritual questions associated with our nation’s current wars? How might your congregation struggle with them?
4. How do you think the people of Jesus’ day responded to the violence in which they participated? The soldiers who arrested and crucified Jesus? The soldiers who participated in the slaughter of the innocents? Is PTSD and moral injury only a modern phenomenon? Explain.

Footnotes

- ¹ Suicide Data Report 2012, Department of Veterans Affairs. See <http://www.va.gov/opa/docs/suicide-data-report-2012-final.pdf>.
- ² High risk of military domestic violence on the home front, Stacey Bannerman, SF Gate, April 7, 2014.
- ³ Much of the information about the trauma experience and its consequences is drawn from Eastern Mennonite University’s STAR (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience) training program. For more information about STAR, see <http://www.emu.edu/cjp/star/>. For STAR resources, see <http://www.emu.edu/cjp/star/toolkit/>.
- ⁴ *Naming the Pain: A Lenten reflection on transforming the wounds of war*, Carolyn Holderread Heggen, AMBS Chapel, February 28, 2012.
- ⁵ Interview with Titus Peachey, Mennonite Central Committee U.S. (name withheld).
- ⁶ *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning How to Kill in War and Society*, Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, p. 4.
- ⁷ Grossman, p. 24.
- ⁸ “Military Leaders’ Obligation to Justify Killing in War,” by Captain Pete Kilner. Paper presented to The Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics, Washington, D.C., January 27, 28, 2000, Updates as of 2/28/00.
- ⁹ *A Theology and Methodology of Treating PTSD Patients*, William P. Mahedy, 1996.
- ¹⁰ See STAR resources: http://www.emu.edu/cjp/star/toolkit/Cycles_of_Violence-Full.pdf.
- ¹¹ See STAR resources: http://www.emu.edu/cjp/star/toolkit/Cycles_of_Violence-Full.pdf.
- ¹² http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/mst_general_factsheet.pdf

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Lesson 4: Breaking free from trauma and moral injury

Objective

To learn more about how soldiers, who have been traumatized by the brutality of war and the painful losses it brings, find their way toward healing.

Story

This story is excerpted from “Healing: Can we treat moral wounds?”¹, which describes the San Diego Naval Medical Center’s eight-week moral injury/moral repair program for combat veterans.

One participant, now 33, struggles with the guilt of having killed the wrong person. “My big thing was taking another man’s life and finding out later on that wasn’t who you were supposed to shoot ...” he told me. “The [troops] out there, they don’t talk about it. They act like it never happened. Completely don’t ever bring it up.”

But in the San Diego moral injury program, he did summon the courage to stand up and talk about it. “Just saying it was helpful,” he said later. “There were about five people in the room, and they got it. I didn’t need to have anyone say it’s OK, because it’s not OK—that would have just pissed me off.”

What was the response of his peers? “It was silence,” he said. “That unsaid, ‘I don’t care what you did; we are still good ...’”

Felipe Tremillo, the Marine staff sergeant, took part in the San Diego program last fall. One assignment was to write an imaginary letter of apology. His was intended for a young Afghan boy whom he had glimpsed during a raid in which Marines busted

down doors and ejected people from their homes while they searched inside for weapons. The boy had stood trembling as Tremillo and the Marines rifled through the family possessions, his eyes, Tremillo felt, blazing shame and rage.

“I didn’t know his name,” Tremillo said. But in his letter, “I told him how sorry I was at how I affected his life, that he didn’t have a fair chance to have a happy life, based off of our actions as a unit.” Writing the letter, he said, “wasn’t about me forgiving myself, more about accepting who I am now.”

Scripture

2 Samuel 12:13-16 (NRSV)

“David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ Nathan said to David, ‘Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die.’ Then Nathan went to his house.

“The Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David, and it became very ill. David therefore pleaded with God for the child; David fasted, and went in and lay all night on the ground. The elders of his house stood beside him, urging him to rise from the ground; but he would not, nor did he eat food with them.”

Matthew 2:16-18 (NRSV)

“When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were 2 years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’”

Commentary

Buried in the biblical record of wars, disasters, and sexual violence are deep human expressions of sorrow and lament. Tamar pours ashes on her head after being raped by her brother (2 Samuel 13:19); Mordecai tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and ashes, and goes wailing through the city when he hears about the order to kill the Jews (Esther 4:1); and Ahab, fearing death after the prophet Elijah's judgment for his murder of Naboth, tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth, and refuses to eat (1 Kings 21:27).

The book of Lamentations recounts the destruction of Jerusalem in graphic and painful detail. In words that reveal the writer's shattered worldview, we read: "I cry aloud for help, but God refuses to listen ... he waited for me like a bear; he pounced on me like a lion ... our leaders have been taken and hanged ... happiness has gone out of our lives ... Why have you abandoned us so long? Will you ever remember us again?" (Lamentations 3:8, 10; 5:12, 15, 20).

The depth of trauma in war cannot be overstated. Neither can the anguish nor the lament. To portray the profound violation that the villagers of Bethlehem experienced at the hands of the Roman occupation troops, Matthew recalls the lament of Rachel of Ramah from an earlier time in Israel's history. As the mothers of Bethlehem release the flood of cries within them without restraint, their truth is spoken. In speaking their truth, they open the door to healing. Yet in the depth of their grief they "refuse to be comforted" (v. 18). Do they dare to name King Herod or the soldiers who killed their babies? Their journey, like that of many who experience such deep violation, is a long and painful one.

In contrast to the mothers of Bethlehem, King David is forced to face the crushing guilt of his own violence and abuse of power. His immediate response to the realization that he had sinned by using his power to kill Uriah and take Bathsheba was to withdraw in silence and isolation. Withdrawal is a common response to deep trauma, but withdrawal can often lead to self-harm or aggression toward others. Guilt is especially difficult to acknowledge as it may imply a negative core identity. David released his guilt and pain in the moving poetry of the Psalms, which voiced his sin and need for cleansing (Psalms 38, 51).

Yet David's lament, however genuine, could not undo the harm he had caused. Silenced in the story of David's violent and duplicitous use of power are the voices of Bathsheba and Uriah. Who would hear Bathsheba's mourning for her husband, Uriah? Would David's lament ever turn into confession to Bathsheba or restitution

to the family of Uriah? Could David, in his position of power, see and understand the pain he had caused?

Some veterans of current wars may find themselves so gripped by their own inner pain that they are unable to hear the cries of lament that still rise to the heavens from the wounded souls who "would not be comforted" in Iraq and Afghanistan. War is layered with laments from all who are tormented as violators and violated. To hear and acknowledge the lament of another, even an enemy, is an important step on the path to wholeness.

Other veterans may find themselves in the injustice visited on Uriah, who died at the whim of a powerful and duplicitous king. For some veterans, loyalty to their government and the call of duty has cost them their soul, and the lives of their battle buddies. What do veterans do with their pain and lament?

Eastern Mennonite University's STAR program² notes the importance of finding a safe, supportive environment for lament and mourning, something that is often difficult for veterans to find. Many veterans look for nonjudgmental environments in which to lament, ask questions, and speak their truth, yet don't want false or easy assurances about what they may have done or not done.

Indeed, veterans who truly lament the violation and suffering in which they have participated, often seek ways to confess their sins and seek redemption. Rather than hiding from the immense evils of war, they look for a spiritual authority to hear their confession, pay attention to the depth of their remorse, explore the meaning of accountability, and help them make restitution. In so doing, they directly address the spiritual dimensions of their experience with the spiritual power present in a faith community. In addition, they cease believing that they have become irredeemable monsters.

As noted in *Welcome Them Home*, "Confessional conversation, whether informal or formal, is not meant to be a one-time fix, but rather a spiritual exercise to be repeated as memories and awareness unfold."³

Iraq War veteran Camilo Mejia moves the conversation beyond confession to atonement.

I believe those of us who have lived through war have a moral obligation to educate the public about what is being done in their name. But first we must recognize the fact that we have injured our moral being and core, and that repairing that damage within ourselves will require a life-long commitment to atone for the wrongs we have committed against others ...

I have come to believe that the transformative power of moral injury cannot be found in the pursuit of our own moral balance as an end goal, but in the journey of repairing the damage we have done onto others.⁴

Many veterans from the Vietnam War have eventually returned to Vietnam to engage in humanitarian work, such as removing unexploded ordnance from rice fields or addressing the long-term effects of Agent Orange.⁵ But even these acts, while highly significant for the veterans' healing journey, are largely symbolic, as the original harm caused by the war cannot be undone. This path toward healing is not yet possible for Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. And even after war's end, it may take some time for communities ravaged by war to receive former warriors. Sometimes, the healing journeys of warriors and the healing journeys of civilians harmed by war, do not intersect. They may have very different needs.

Other steps on the path to resilience include finding meaningful rituals to acknowledge the trauma, reflecting on root causes, learning about the other's story, choosing to forgive so that one is not bound by bitterness, and moving toward a new self-understanding or identity. These are all complex steps, many of them spiritual in nature. In the face of our human brokenness, we find that we need the help of God's Spirit to find our way.

This journey to increasing resilience may be long, and is often not a linear process. There may be setbacks, twists and turns along the way. But giving voice to trauma in a supportive environment, and directly addressing the spiritual dimensions present in the violations of war, can help veterans break free from the harmful cycles often caused by trauma.

Questions

1. Can all trauma or moral injury be transformed or overcome? Explain your answer.
2. What other biblical stories or passages do you find helpful in addressing trauma and moral pain?
3. Does your faith community provide a welcoming environment for public lament and mourning? What would be the important ingredients of such an environment? How would you create it?
4. What historical or contemporary figures have exhibited resilience in the aftermath of trauma? What were the important factors in their resilience?
5. What role do confession, restitution, and accountability structures play in overcoming trauma that comes from violating others?

Footnotes

¹ *Healing: Can we treat moral wounds?*, by David Woods, March 20, 2014, <http://projects.huffingtonpost.com/moral-injury/healing>.

² Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience; see "Breaking Cycles of Violence-Building Resilience Model" at http://www.emu.edu/cjp/star/toolkit/Breaking_Cycles_of_Violence-Building_Resilience.pdf.

³ *Welcome Them Home, Help Them Heal, Pastoral care and ministry with service members returning from war*, by Sippola, Blumenshine, Tubesing and Yancey, Wheat Ridge Ministries, 2009, p. 75.

⁴ "Healing Moral Injury: A lifelong journey," by Camilo Mejia, *Fellowship Magazine*, Winter 2011; see <http://forusa.org/fellowship/2011/winter/healing-moral-injury/11606>.

⁵ "Why U.S. Veterans are Returning to Vietnam," Nissa Rhee, *Christian Science Monitor*, November 10, 2013; see <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2013/1110/Why-US-veterans-are-returning-to-Vietnam>.

Returning veterans. Returning hope.

Seeking peace together

Lesson 5: Hospitality: a two-way street

Objective

To explore the meaning of hospitality as an approach to engaging with military veterans and their families.

On hospitality

by Logan Mehl-Laituri, Iraq War veteran

I think listening is hospitality, and it is at the heart of the Gospels (hospitality, that is). Hospitality has nothing to do with dogma or doctrine or uncompromising convictions; it has to do with responding to the image of God in our neighbor ... I can't begin to imagine the ways that God might work in various congregations, but if the Spirit is there, it will move in love, not condemnation, not in indifference, not in distancing ourselves from one another. Preachers will preach difficult, loving sermons; pastors will pray difficult, loving prayers; and educators will teach difficult, loving subjects. It won't be easy, but it needs to be loving.¹

Scripture

2 Kings 6:20-23 (NRSV)

Through remarkable circumstances, Elisha encounters the enemy army of Aram with whom Israel had fought many battles, and takes them to the King of Israel.

“As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, ‘O Lord, open the eyes of these men so that they may see.’ The Lord opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria. When the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, ‘Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?’ He answered, ‘No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master.’ So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their

way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.”

Acts 9 (NRSV)

“Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.”

Commentary

These remarkable stories from Scripture embody the spiritual practice of hospitality. This is not hospitality at Sunday dinner with china and a white linen tablecloth among friends. This is tension-filled hospitality in contexts where bitterness and enmity could easily result in bloodshed. In the 2 Kings account, the prevailing political and military powers are all poised to kill the enemy. Only the prophet Elisha is able to envision a different outcome. To the astonishment of the king and his soldiers, he proposes a feast instead of a

slaughter. This amazing act of hospitality initiates a time of peace between these bitter, warring parties.

In the Acts story we meet Ananias, who openly voices his fear of Saul who has been “breathing murderous threats” against the followers of The Way. To visit Saul, Ananias has to go against his own security instincts and the safety of his community. In addition, he may have had a strong urge to denounce Saul for his role in the murder of Stephen. Surely the trauma from Stephen’s brutal stoning was still a raw and open wound among the believers. Yet Ananias finds the courage and grace to address this feared enemy as “Brother Saul,” thereby welcoming him into the community of The Way. This is remarkable hospitality.

In neither of the biblical accounts do those extending hospitality seek to control the response of those receiving it. And in both cases, extending hospitality requires great courage. Hospitality is active, engaging, and willing to cross barriers. Hospitality, like God’s love, is extended without condition. And while extending hospitality does not guarantee a receptive response, in both of these biblical stories the impact of hospitality is powerful and transforming.

The practice of hospitality is perhaps a good guiding story for peace churches who want to welcome veterans and together deepen their understandings of Christ’s peace. How might churches deeply rooted in a peace tradition engage with fellow human beings whose bodies and souls bear the marks of war? What does peace-church-hospitality-for-veterans look like in the context of a militarized culture?²

It is important to remember that peace churches and veterans are all part of one militarized context. We are Saul, the one who stood and watched Stephen being stoned; and we are Paul, who urged the early church to love their enemies and overcome evil with good. We are both at the same time, longing to live for peace while also tied to systems and economies of violence. As pacifists and veterans engage with one another, we do so with humility, knowing that we all need God’s help to overcome the violence within and the oppressive systems from without.

As a society, we have failed to find alternatives to our persistent use of bombs, tanks and bullets. So we all share responsibility for the wounds and scars that veterans bring home. With this in mind, we offer these practical steps for engagement with veterans:

1. Listen, listen, listen. Be willing to create an unhurried space where the experiences of veterans can be shared if and when they are ready. Be respectful of their stories. Ask open-ended questions. Never ask a veteran if they have killed someone.
2. Do not assume that all veterans are “broken” and need to be “fixed,” or that you would have the capacity to repair whatever may be in need of healing. Veterans also have agency and the capacity to be resilient. Be prepared to receive some positive stories from veterans about their military experience.
3. Learn about other agencies and groups within your community that offer services to veterans. Don’t work in isolation. Refer when appropriate.
4. Remember that veterans have gifts to share and lessons to teach. Genuine relationships are reciprocal. Open yourself to receive. Express appreciation for what the veteran brings to your relationship.
5. Relate to the veteran, not the war. Don’t project your own political views onto the veteran’s experience.³ Create a “safe place” for the veteran to talk.
6. Veterans returning from the context of war may find it difficult to trust. Maintain confidentiality, follow through on your appointments, and keep your promises.⁴
7. Take expressions of guilt and remorse seriously. Some veterans have seen and done things in combat that have been deeply harmful and wounding on many levels. Don’t minimize what the veteran may be feeling; yet be especially attentive to expressions of shame or worthlessness. Offer grace. Refer to spiritual counselors or pastors as appropriate.
8. Be aware of your own perspectives and emotions as you relate to veterans. Don’t argue. Engage in genuine, respectful discussions. Be collaborative. Explore issues and concerns together.
9. Pray. Offer public and private prayers for veterans and their families even as you offer prayers for the civilian victims of war. Pray for your own sensitivity to veterans’ needs and for the leading of God’s Spirit in your relationship.
10. Be yourself. Don’t hide your beliefs about Jesus’ way of peace. Many veterans are genuinely in search of understandings of God and faith that offer courageous alternatives to war and violence.
11. Don’t assume that every relationship with a veteran will blossom into a deep, mutual friendship, or that all veterans that you meet will readily respect peace and nonviolence as the path to true security. If/when perspectives clash, engage in respectful dialogue.

12. Remember that the families of veterans may also be experiencing stress, especially if the veteran is struggling with PTSD or moral pain. Pay attention to the needs of the family.

Perhaps one of the best things that churches can offer veterans is authentic Christian community. Many soldiers experience strong bonds of friendship and trust among their fellow comrades-in-arms in very intense, difficult environments. You will not duplicate these relationships, but modeling a community that cares and offers mutual support can help veterans increase resilience and successfully re-enter civilian life.

Questions

1. Which of the practical hospitality steps listed above do you feel drawn toward? Why? Are there any steps you would not be ready to take? Explain.
2. How does the thought of pacifists and veterans being together in a worshiping community make you feel? Explain.

3. Does your congregation model a pattern of community that would welcome new members or exclude them? Explain.

Footnotes

¹ *Consider This Perspective*, Logan Mehl-Laituri, Dec. 7, 2012; <http://loveboldly.net/maintain/tag/military-veterans/>. See also: "How to Treat Veterans in Your Church," Logan Mehl-Laituri, *Christianity Today*, Nov. 12, 2012; <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/november-web-only/how-to-treat-veterans-in-your-church.html>.

² Many of the points below come from personal conversations with veterans, some of whom are now pastors.

³ *Welcome them Home, Help them Heal: Pastoral care and ministry with service members returning from war*, Sippola, Blumenshine, Tubesing, Yancey, Whole Person Associates, 2009, p. 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Returning veterans. Returning hope.

Seeking peace together

Lesson 6: Deepening our peace roots

Objective

To acknowledge that military veterans can help us deepen our understanding of and commitment to peace.

Story

From 2003 to early 2004, Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq were physically and sexually abused, humiliated, tortured, raped and killed. In the aftermath of this scandal, a young U.S. soldier and evangelical Christian, Joshua Casteel, was sent to the prison to work as an Arab language interrogator.

During his time in Iraq, Joshua reflected more deeply on his Christian faith, and became troubled by the growing contradictions he sensed between his role as an interrogator and his identity as a follower of Christ.

One day, during his interrogation of a self-described jihadist from Saudi Arabia, the contradictions became all too glaring. Eager to trip up this composed and confident young Saudi, Joshua asked him, “Why did you come to Iraq to kill?” The young Saudi quickly turned the question back on Joshua, asking, “Why did you come here to kill?” A lengthy discussion ensued in which both Joshua and the young Saudi talked about their duty to their people and their country, Joshua noting his Christian faith and the Saudi referencing his Muslim faith.

Finally, the young Saudi looked at Joshua and said, “You claim to be a Christian, but you are not following the teachings of Christ to love your enemies, to pray for those that persecute you, and to turn the other cheek.” Joshua immediately felt the irony of being schooled on the Sermon on the Mount by a self-declared jihadist.

Joshua soon realized that he had lost all objectivity in the

interrogation and could no longer continue. In a 2007 interview with Mennonite Central Committee, he reflected: “We were both idealistic kids devoted to our people, and devoted to our religions, willing to kill and to sacrifice ... wouldn’t it be great if we were both able to put down our weapons and find a different path?”¹

This experience became the energizing catalyst leading Joshua out of the military with a conscientious objector discharge. Joshua’s vibrant voice for peace, sparked in the dark cauldron of war, blessed many until his death from cancer in 2012.

Scripture

Isaiah 9:2-6 (NRSV)

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

“You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

“For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

“For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Micah 4:1-4 (NRSV)

“In days to come, the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills.

“Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’

“For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

“He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.”

Commentary

Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries of one another, living in Judah as the great empire of Assyria flexed its military power, conquering Samaria (northern kingdom, 2 Kings 15:29, 17:5-6) and marching southward into Judah. There was a climate of fear, anxiety and trauma in the land.

When word reached the king of Judah that the armies of Syria were already in the territory of Israel, he and all his people were so terrified that they trembled like trees shaking in the wind (Isaiah 7:2).

In addition to the terror of war, there was much violence and social oppression. *Your rich people exploit the poor, and all of you are liars ... there is not an honest person left in the land, no one loyal to God. Everyone is waiting for a chance to commit murder (Micah 6:12, 7:2).* It is striking that out of this context of violence, fear and oppression, arises some of the most soaring poetry of hope, peace and security found anywhere in the Hebrew Bible.

Isaiah’s explicit reference to the gruesome reality of combat (*the boots of the tramping warriors and the garments rolled in blood*) is stunning, placed as it is just before his announcement of a child to be born who would usher in an era of peace. The boots and uniforms of war are burned to make way for a kingdom based on justice and peace, one that we see coming to fruition in Jesus (Luke 4:18). Likewise, Micah’s poetry about *turning swords into plowshares* follows on the heels of his scathing indictment of Jerusalem, “*You are building God’s city, Jerusalem, on a foundation of murder and injustice*” (Micah 3:10). Micah’s vision is born out of a love for his people and a longing to see Jerusalem become a place of peace and security.

As is evidenced by the story of Joshua Casteel and the experiences of many soldiers/veterans, war and military service itself can become a catalyst for deepening our commitment to peace. Indeed, we might ask if such profound visions of a world at peace can ever spring from a people whose lives are untouched by war and its horrors. This is not an argument for war. Rather, it is to acknowledge that perhaps it is the voices of warriors and veterans among us who can awaken the gospel seeds of peace planted in our congregations, yet often found withering and unwatered.

Dick Davis, former Army chaplain who currently serves as conference minister in the Pacific Southwest Conference of Mennonite Church USA, is one of many such voices. His thoughts on allegiance, arising from his experience with allegiance to “the god of war,” invite us to think critically with our youth about the lure of military enlistment in a time of endless war.

I realized that the type of allegiance that the military calls from ... people is an idolatrous type of allegiance. It calls you to a different God ... to the god of war ... to the god of destruction ... to the god of anything else than the gospel of peace and justice and nonviolence. Ultimately, I just had to say I have given my allegiance incorrectly to the United States of America. I need to retract that and pull that back and then give it back to Jesus Christ because he is the only one that has the right ... to call from us this kind of allegiance.²

Evan Knappenberger, a former intelligence analyst in the Iraq War, describes the witness for peace offered by veterans in this way:

St. Paul is perhaps the greatest of all ex-intelligence professionals. Having spent years as “Saul” hunting down and eliminating Christians, he was called by Christ, quite literally, to quit his violence ...

Through the conversion of Saul, Christ sends us a clear and relevant message: It is precisely those soldiers with dark and heavy hearts, whose consciences have turned, who will lay down their weapons and take up the cross. Christ is also telling us that the real moral authorities are not political or military leaders, but rather the formerly dejected and the radically transformed. Though nations wantonly continue to send their precious sons and daughters off to kill—then ignore, jail, and often destroy those sons and daughters who finally object to the violence—Christ’s peace also rises in the hearts of these weary ones.³

Jesus' startling entreaty to love our enemies, his engagement with the hated Samaritans, and prayer for his crucifiers all call us to a way of living that contrasts sharply with the "shock and awe" of military intervention. As we engage with the veterans among us, together we will learn to read our gospel with new eyes.

Questions

1. Why do you think the bold and sweeping visions of peace present in Isaiah and Micah emerged from such desperate environments where the people were so terrified that they "trembled like trees shaking in the wind?" Where might such voices and visions be coming from today?
2. How might listening to the voices of veterans lead us into a deeper relationship with God's Spirit and Jesus' way of peace?
3. How might the voices of veterans be helpful to young people considering post-high school options and military enlistment? How do the voices of veterans contrast with those of military recruiters? How does your church help youth find alternatives to military enlistment?

4. Consider reciting the following "pledge of allegiance" each day: *I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ and to God's kingdom for which he died, one spirit-filled people the world over, indivisible, with love and justice for all.*⁴ Recite this pledge together at the end of your lesson.

Footnotes

- ¹ For the complete interview, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fM8jjqxtSpY>.
- ² See Change of Command, video production by Mennonite Central Committee, 1998.
- ³ See *Sojourners*, July 2011; <http://sojo.net/magazine/2011/07/stranger-strange-land>.
- ⁴ See "The Pledge of Allegiance," by June Alliman Yoder and J. Nelson Kraybill, <http://www.thirdway.com/peace/?Page=1843|Pledge+of+Allegiance>.



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