

Living by the Sword (Matt. 26.47-52)
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When my grandfather came back from the war he didn't talk about it very much. Like many of his generation he tried to bear it the best he could, go back to school, get on with his life. But something in him had been broken that could not be mended. Having lived by the sword, a kind of dying had begun...

On the surface, his story sounded romantic, even heroic. When I first heard it as a boy, it sounded like a comic book. Grandfather Norman had grown up in West Texas during the time of the Depression. When the war came he enlisted in the U. S. Army and volunteered to become a paratrooper. He was ushered into the 101st Airborne Division, sent to England, dropped over the lines in advance of the Invasion of Normandy, and fought his way through Belgium, France, and Germany. He had been trapped, I learned, at Bastogne during the famous Battle of the Bulge, where he and others waited for General Patton, though none of them thought they would make it. Along the way he was promoted to Captain, collecting a boxful of medals and citations from foreign governments. As a boy, when we visited my grandmother's house I would often go to the familiar bookshelf where I could look through all these things, running my fingers over items that my grandfather had touched: an old French coin, a pin with crossed rifles and the initials "U. S.," a yearbook of the 101st. I thought of this man, who I had not known (he died when I was about two), as a larger than life figure. And I thought of his war in a similar vein; the struggle of good against evil joined by Norman who fought, of course, on the side of the good. Yet there was another side of the story that would not be shared with me until I was much older.

Just beneath the comic book veneer lay my grandfather the real man. He did not regard himself a hero, and, again, was reluctant to speak of his experience. Yet when he did share bits and pieces, it was in the voice of a man who had come home to drink heavily, pace his house in the middle of the night, and sleep, when he did, with the horror of images that he could not banish. He once told my grandmother that what he knew to be true was that the men he had killed were no different from himself—they wanted to go home as badly as he did, they had mothers and fathers and wives and children just as he did, they were as frightened as he was, and when he raised his rifle to shoot at them he was shooting at himself. He internalized this reality, and I don't think he ever knew how to live with the pain of it. The reason I say this is drawn from the other thing I am told about him. After years of being home, building a successful law practice, raising a family, and serving as a deacon in his church, Norman said to my grandmother that what he wished most was that he could feel forgiven for the things he had done. But, he said, he did not think that was possible. And if he did not speak much of the war, then that was his final word: He wished he could feel forgiven but did not believe it was possible. Then he drank until he had a heart attack. He had lived by the sword, and I believe it brought about his death.

I do not tell this story to make a judgment about the rightness or wrongness of my grandfather's war. Indeed, he would have called it necessary, just unforgiveable. I raise the story because it seems to me a true war story, a story of brokenness passed down in our family. We know now that my grandfather suffered deeply from post-traumatic stress disorder and his symptoms of shakes, sweats, dreams, and outbursts were wrought by the horrors he had seen and participated in. And when he came home he was never

the same, though he wanted to be. Grandmother said he really did walk the halls at night, sweating and crying and aching over it. It was with him in mind that I went to the Angelika earlier this week.

It's not an easy thing, going to a film that you know is going to make you feel like hell. So it was with a bit of trepidation that I asked the cashier for one ticket to see "Restrepo," the documentary detailing one American platoon's fifteen-month deployment in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley. But I considered the viewing an obligation of citizenship (and also a requirement of faith, though we'll come to that in a moment), and I went in with an awareness that in June our war in Afghanistan became the longest running war in American history, its 104 months of combat now eclipsing our 103 months of involvement in Vietnam. I walked into the theater wondering if the film might help me to understand a bit more, to look into a mirror, however darkly, and glimpse what is happening to the soldiers and civilians from whom I feel so disconnected. And what the film woke in me was a feeling, a visceral response to the images of war and the suffering and confusion on all sides of it. Here I claim not to be an expert, only a witness to ninety minutes of film. What I saw in the comfort of that air-conditioned theater has haunted me every day since.

The one thing that became clear, as I watched young American soldiers on foot patrols through the Afghan mountains, was the complete lack of clarity. Throughout the film, the objectives seem hazy, the enemy fleeting and difficult to identify. Ambushes are a daily occurrence as rifle fire and rockets rain down on the soldiers over and over again; they return fire and call in devastating airstrikes, though the adversaries are almost always unseen and it feels like they are shooting in the dark. In one scene the soldiers

visit a house that the Army has destroyed; five of its inhabitants have been killed and a number of children wounded. A girl whose cheeks are caked with blood stands near an American Captain, who is clearly upset as it dawns on him that he has bombed the wrong house. Yet as we watch the mistake seems a part of the absurdity of the larger context. For the men are trying to fight back after having so many of their own killed and injured. In fact, there is one scene of a soldier killed in combat and the raw grief of his comrades' response that may be the most jarring thing I've ever witnessed on screen. It gave me nightmares. And all I did was see an edited video. What, then, of the young men and women we are sending over and over again to experience these kinds of things? What of the Afghan people, the men, women, and children, who are daily traumatized by our war? What of the goals of this deeply ambiguous conflict, begun nearly nine years ago with no clear objective or end in sight? The question that ran through my mind, again and again, as I watched the film was, "What are we doing?" One of the soldiers himself voiced the same question, and I walked out of the theater thinking that each of us bears a moral obligation to ask alongside him.

The first part of that moral obligation, in my view, comes from the requirements of citizenship. If we are going to put the lives of our fellow citizen soldiers, and the lives of innocent Afghan people, at risk, then we owe it to them to ask, with all seriousness, to what end? We also owe our soldiers the lifelong continuation of their benefits, including particularly physical and mental health care benefits, and we owe the Afghan people the time, money, and energy required for development, infrastructure, and reparation for the harm we have done. As a citizen I wonder if these are responsibilities we are prepared to meet. Yet I do not hear in our national conversation any notion of the sacrifices that

ought to be required by or the responsibilities inherent in waging a war. There seems a great disconnect as we live by the sword without realizing it. As Wendell Berry observes:

We see and hear...damage reported in the news, but we are not affected, and we don't mind. These limited, "foreign" wars require that some of our young people will be killed or crippled and that some families will grieve, but these "casualties" are so widely distributed among our population as to hardly be noticed. Otherwise, we do not feel ourselves to be involved... We experience no shortages, we suffer no rationings, we endure no limitations. We earn, borrow, spend, and consume in wartime as in peacetime.¹

Yet if we are disconnected from the reality of war as citizens, then reconnecting with its truth for our civic life is, in my view, only the first part of our moral obligation. A second part remains for those of us who claim the Christian tradition; it is made of the stuff of our faith, whose requirements ought to challenge us even more than those of our country. For we live in this time of war as followers of the rabbi who taught us to lay down our swords. This is an uncomfortable truth for Christians, many if not most of whom have never known quite what to do with it. Yet it remains a truth that our faith asks us to hold. I, for one, felt the tension of the teaching while reading it aloud at the beginning of our service. The words are beautiful to me, but they call out a feeling not unlike that evoked by the awful war film, something that knows it won't be easily resolved. Listen to the story for just a moment.

Near the end of Rabbi Jesus' life, he was betrayed by his friend Judas. It's a story that we often read on Good Friday, and Jesus' words about the sword are usually lost in the drama of Holy Week as we move into the grim narrative of his trial and execution. The

¹ Wendell Berry, "The Failure of War" in *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), 26.

scenes that follow are intimate, their words whispered between Jesus and his band of brothers and sisters, or between the rabbi and the God to whom he called out in lament. Yet there may be other words that Jesus intended for all of us to hear. Father John Dear notes that what might be most important are the final public words of Jesus; they exist as an instruction to the entire community.² And Jesus' last public instruction concerns the use of violence, a word that is perhaps rendered best in Mark's gospel, the text we've heard today. After the rabbi is handed over to his political enemies, his friend draws a sword and strikes the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Yet Jesus, who is in imminent danger, puts a stop to it. "Put your sword back into its place," he counsels, "for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." There. His public pronouncement. And if the only thing that was clear about the war film was its complete lack of clarity, then the opposite is true here: In the complete clarity of Jesus' instruction, a great deal becomes unclear. Because the rabbi raises the question of how we are to put down our swords; we, who live in a time of seemingly unending war; we, citizens of an empire that may or may not reflect our values; we, people of a faith that claims the creative nonviolence of Jesus as its own, though the sacrifices such faith requires may be much more challenging than we have been willing to realize. Yet our faith would ask us to take the first steps toward such a realization.

Here the sermon is about to get a bit more difficult because none of us really knows how to stop the war and all of us may feel more than a little disempowered. We may not want to take a step of faith, we may not wish to make ourselves vulnerable, to risk

² John Dear, *Put Down Your Sword: Answering the Gospel Call to Creative Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 3-5.

playing the fool, to raise the public voice of the peacenik or the pacifist, where others may laugh and deride. But, at least in my own case, out of obligation to both the rabbi and my grandfather, I feel compelled to name a tension: I do not know how to be a person of Christian faith in a time of war. What I do know is that to live by the sword is to die by it. Some of us, like the soldiers and civilians in the film, will die instantly in the daily rifle fire and bomb explosions. Some of us, like my grandfather, will die more slowly over time, struck by the nightmares and the bottle, carrying inner wounds gone unhealed until the light flickers and dims. And some of us, citizens and people of faith, may die even more subtly, disconnected from the reality of what is happening, something real but too far away to be seen or felt as a gradual numbing takes place and the wars roll on day after day without any of us saying a word. But what would our word be? That we are waking to the confusion of war without end? That we are deeply troubled by what is being asked of so few? That we are not sure how to reconcile, are not sure if it is possible to reconcile, the killing of other human beings with the teachings of Jesus? That this living by the sword has begun in us a kind of spiritual dying process?

I suppose our answer might be any one of these things. Yet to go along with such difficult thoughts, we might also add to the tension a kind of creativity. For our rabbi didn't only gift us with the tension of his final public words; he also gifted us with the creativity of his life. Over and over again he saw through the powers to glimpse the people, and, in so doing, to love them. He resisted the disconnect and realized instead that the men and women he met were no different from himself—they had homes just as he did, mothers and fathers like him, they were weary travelers along the road, too, searching for something just as he was. When he opened his arms to embrace them, he

was embracing himself. He internalized this reality, and I think he always lived with the love of it. Perhaps that's what gave him the courage to speak and to act. Perhaps that's what will give it to us if we are ever to find it.

So if this sermon lacks a clear resolution, then that's because it is not easy to live with the words of Jesus in a time of war. Yet the words are there. And our community exists to raise them up, to share them with each other, and then to live our lives in response. This is what my grandfather tried to do when he came back all those years ago. After his long nights of pacing, he would shower up on Sunday mornings, don a jacket and tie, and go down to the Baptist church where he served as a deacon. He always wanted to feel forgiven for the things he had done, he always wanted to heal what had been broken within, but from the stories I know of him I am not sure that happened. Now a new generation of men and women have been sent. We who are fellow citizens owe it to them to publicly ask questions. And we who are people of faith owe it to ourselves to think as creatively as we possibly can of all the ways that we might learn to put down our swords, beat them into plowshares, and create a new and lasting kind of peace.

We do not have all the answers. But in faith may we raise our voices again.