

Psalm 16 ~ Hebrews 10:11-25

Do We Know the Countersign?

25th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Growing Our Faith Through Generosity (2) ~ Veterans Day

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Introduction to Sermon:

The Letter to the Hebrews is shrouded in mystery: we don't know who wrote it nor can we determine precisely when in the latter part of the first century it was written. Although it is called a letter, it reads and feels more like a sermon. Therefore, we can reasonably guess the author was a preacher. By the content and tone of this sermon we can surmise this preacher was addressing a congregation that is barely hanging on. They had become discouraged in their faith. This congregation is exhausted; bone-weary with multiple struggles they face every day. Kind of like us, as we continue to slog through this morphing and amorphous pandemic.

So, what does this preacher to the Hebrews do? He sets Jesus, front and center, and calls his congregation to go deeper. Deeper into the mystery of the crucified Christ. Deeper into their daily walk with the now Risen Christ. Since this is week two of our stewardship campaign, I would remiss if I didn't add the sacrificial offering layer and say to you today, "go deeper into your wallet." Seriously, there is a vital connection here: as our generosity grows, so does our spirit.

Let's see what this preacher to the Hebrews had to say in the 10th chapter (yes, a very long sermon), beginning at v. 11. As we are seated, let us take a breath and open our spirits to the One who is seated at the right hand of God, waiting for our full attention.

Sermon:

My mom was a substitute teacher for many years. And she actually *liked* the work of a substitute, for the most part. I think she enjoyed the suspense and the challenge. She learned to be ready for anything. Although some teachers left lesson carefully constructed plans and materials, detailing hour by hour what to do, there were others who did not. So, she always brought her own bag full of lesson plans and projects, more than enough to fill a day, as a back-up. She had learned this strategy the hard-way. One day early in her career as a substitute teacher, she showed up to teach a self-contained 6th grade class: she was facing six hours of teaching twenty-five or so students. When she opened the lesson plan book to see what the teacher had planned for the day, it was one sentence long: "Discuss World War I."

This became one of her favorite stories and one that no matter how many times she told it, always drew a laugh. Of course, if you think about it, there really was nothing funny about World War I. And discussing this world war and its global aftermath could actually take a lifetime. World War I was, so horrific, that its end became known as Armistice Day. In 1918, on the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour, the armistice agreement was signed between the Allied forces and Germany to bring World War I to an end. At that moment, the fighting stopped; weapons were laid down, the peace bells rang out, and soldiers finally returned to their families. The lucky ones, anyway. This war had destroyed millions of lives on both sides, and

even on that final day, 11,000 more people died. The hope 103 years ago, was that it had been the war to end all wars. As we celebrated that day, that this past Thursday, we are all facing a world where wars between and within nations continue to rage and to fester.ⁱ

Lives lost in combat become numbers so large that they numb us. Like the 5.1 million people who have died of COVID-19 worldwide as of this day. That number is also just too big for us to comprehend. But we know that every life lost: whether from the battle of war, or disease, mental disorder or addiction, *every life lost* is precious in the eyes of God. Remembering the original intent of what is now Veterans Day in the US, calls us to give thanks for the ultimate sacrifice of all those who gave their lives not only in the First World War, but in all our country's subsequent wars. And to give thanks for peace, to pray for those who are currently living through conflict all over the world, as we double down on our Lord's call to be peacemakers.

You have likely heard the aphorism, "There are no atheists in foxholes." I think this holds true not only for those who say they are atheists, but for all of us, to some degree. We don't really want to depend on God unless we have to. Unless we are on the edge. Don't we all hate being vulnerable and avoid it as much as possible? But when realize that our control is stripped away from us, we will reach for something, anything, even God. And who do we see? We see our Lord and Savior, scars and all. Wounds on his hands and feet and side. We have been given a Savior who showed us the ultimate power and its not in weapons of war, nor is it in economic wealth. Jesus showed us the power of vulnerability. The countersign. That's right, professor and lecturer, Brene Brown, (who gave an excellent Ted Talk titled "The Power of Vulnerability) links vulnerability with courage. She calls it the courage to be imperfect. This is counter-intuitive and counter-cultural.

But so is the cross. Jesus, chose to sacrifice his life, for us. Jesus showed us the path of vulnerability as the path to freedom from ego and the need to be perfectly in control. It takes a foxhole for most of us, literal or figurative, to bring us to our knees. And not just once. Really leaning into and embracing our vulnerability, even though we share it with every living creature, and with our Lord and Savior, is something we avoid at almost all costs. When Free Church Minister Edward Shillito was on the spear of the sword in the midst of World War I, he wrote a prayer. Perhaps from a foxhole. Or a trench. This prayer shimmers with the light of our wounded Christ. It sounds to me like a prayer our preacher/author of Hebrews would have prayed. Here it is:

*If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.
The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
in all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.
If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,*

*Only reveal those hands, that side of thine;
 We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
 Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.
 The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak.
 They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
 But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
 And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.ⁱⁱ*

"Are you nice? Or are you mean?" That was a question posed to my mom one morning on the first day of a new substitute teaching gig. As it turned out, the girl who asked this bold question turned out to be the ring leader of her class. She took it upon herself to size up this Sub even before they said the Pledge of Allegiance. "Are you nice? Or are you mean?" Well, you teachers in the room know how to answer that one. My mom replied, "I can be nice, and I can be mean, that is up to you and the rest of you class." The good news for us today, is that Jesus is neither like a substitute teacher, nor a substitute savior. Regardless of our behavior in class, God's love abides. We do not serve at transactional god. As author and theologian Lew Smedes often said, "Grace happens when it finally dawns on you that, in Christ, your past isn't going to catch up with you."

Jesus' suffering and pain, the bullying and the shaming he experienced were absolutely real. There was nothing substitute about it. As Hebrews puts it, "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)." Imagining Jesus' flesh as a curtain torn open, as one person in our First Look Bible study remarked, is kind of gross. It's definitely graphic and hard to forget. But perhaps that's the point. Christ's wounds are unique, were once and for all and for everyone. At the same time, the work of Jesus on the cross neither negates nor contradicts the faith of our Jewish Savior. Contrary to some of the ways this passage has sometimes been interpreted by Christians, the prophets throughout the Old Testament, up to and including prophet Jesus, railed against religious ritual that had lost its core power and spiritual purpose to bring us closer to God's will and way. The new covenant of Christ Jesus was added to the older or first covenants in our biblical tradition. As we Pastor Shillito's put it so eloquently in his World War I prayer, what Jesus gave us in a new and unique way was this: "*But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak, And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.*"

God does not give up on us, ever, no matter whether we are nice or mean. As we heard in Psalm 16:9, *Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices, my body also rests secure.* Did you hear that? Heart, body and soul: all parts together in gladness and resolve, "because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." (v.8) No matter what may happen to us, no matter how many terrible, bad decisions we make, or sins we commit: God will not give up on us, or leave us in the place of the dead (Sheol) or "in the pit." God will be there with us, our wounded Savior, by our side, taking our hand, letting us rest or helping us stand.

My dad served as a Chaplain in the Marine Corps in the Pacific Theater in World War II, one Protestant chaplain for 3,000 men. Dad was in the battles of Saipan, Tinian and a little of

Okinawa. The cross, cup, and plate on the communion table this morning are part of the set he was issued and used to serve communion to the troops before battle. I will close my sermon today with the prayer he wrote for the service he led on June 14, 1944 in Saipan; the date is written in his handwriting on the upper left-hand corner of the typed sheet. Yes, June 14 was the day before the Battle of Saipan began on June 15. He titled it, "PRAYER BEFORE BATTLE" in all caps on his Smith Corona field typewriter. My dad was only 26 years old that day, most of the men going into that battle were even younger. None of them knowing what the next day would hold.

Some of you in this room, and some of you worshipping on screen are currently serving in the military or are military veterans. We thank you for your sacrifice you're your service to our country. Many of your wounds of war are deep and no longer visible on the surface. They also affect your families for generations. The wounds and scars the rest of us carry are also deep. This is a truth we all share, if we are honest. We are *not* here to pretend that our lives are perfect, and have it all together. We are here because we are exhausted by that. And I dare say, so is Christ. Jesus says, "Come to me all you who weary and I will give you rest." He is inviting us to come as you are--not as you think you should be. Not as someone else or some other god is telling you to be.

I am here to tell you this day, our wounded Savior, our countersign, feels our pain and knows us through and through. Why pretend to be something we are not? It is through the embrace of our vulnerability that we can open ourselves to the love of Christ and to one another. So, I invite you now, *whatever struggle or battle you may be facing this hour*, to let the Holy Spirit work through this prayer my dad wrote in 1944, to lead you forward on the path of life to which God is calling you.

PRAYER BEFORE BATTLE

O God, our strength, our guide, our judge, to you we turn because you know just what each of us needs in this critical hour, because you will surely give it to everyone who honestly seeks that help. We truthfully pray for your forgiveness for all that is wrong in us. Give us the strength to be men of steel in so far as we are an instrument of justice. Inspire us to fight intelligently and relentlessly for victory as good Marines. In hardship and suffering grant that we may be patient and uncomplaining because you are with us wherever we are. Enable us to hit the beach with complete confidence in the goodness and wisdom of your plan for our life, praying whatever may come, "Not my will, but Thine be done." Finally, Father, by faith in Him who died for us, Christ our Savior, may we be able to face both life and death courageously, and "having done all to stand." In His Name we ask it. Amen.

ⁱⁱ Some of the language in this paragraph was taken from the Armistice Day morning prayer, written by Phil Togwell for the Lectio365 podcast for 11.11.2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ This prayer by Edward Shillito was quoted by Phil Togwell in the same 11.11.21 podcast Lectio365