

*“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”*

It was my first week as the Chaplain on Duty at Camp Leatherneck, the Marine side of the base at Camp Bastion in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan in the first week of June of 2010 when I was called to the morgue to pray over the first of what would be 12 bodies that week, the first week after the Spring thaw and the Taliban return to their renewed assault on our Marines, Soldiers and NATO forces.

When I arrived at the morgue, which was next to the British Hospital and Emergency Room, the Marine mortuary technicians asked if I would speak with a Marine in the ER who had been on patrol with the Marine whose body I had been called to pray over. They told me they were best friends; and could I inform him that his friend had not survived the IED he had stepped on, only 50-100 feet away from the relative safety of Forward Operating Base Sangin.

I went into the ER and found my Marine on the stretcher in a treatment room, his hands still saturated with dry blood, I held his hand, he looked at me, almost knowing the truth already, he asked me desperately if his friend, “his brother” he called him, “was he alright?” I told him, “No I am sorry he did not

survive.” As I tried to comfort him he blamed himself for being off his mark as they marched back, forcing his “brother” to over-compensate his placement as they walked some yards from each other. I told him the IED had obviously been there for many months, perhaps even before, the FOB had been built for many Marines had walked right by it and not been blown up. “It was not his fault.” I said, the only thing I thought at the moment might help him and that was “that now his mission was to live a life worthy of his friend’s sacrifice, that his brother had not abandoned by God, that he lives forever with God.”

I always feel my words are somewhat inadequate at these moments. We all have our own stories, of that, I am sure.

If you will recall with me the scene from the movie Saving Private Ryan, the Spielberg movie about World War II. The movie begins with the question Private Ryan asks his wife as he stands up from an act of kneeling at the grave of Captain Miller, the man who “saved” him, and he asks his wife, “Tell me I have led a good life.” She is puzzled about the meaning of the question so he asks again “Tell me I am a good man.” She answers, “You are.”

The plot of the movie is framed by the letter Gen Marshall reads from Abraham Lincoln concerning the sacrifice of the war dead as if upon an “altar” of freedom: *“Dear Madam: I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom. Yours very sincerely and respectfully, Abraham Lincoln.”*

I deeply understand those words Lincoln wrote because that is how weak I felt as I held so strongly that courageous Marine’s hand that day in June.

St. Paul in Ephesians urges us “*to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*” And that is the existential question Private Ryan asks of his wife and Captain Miller; have I lived a life worthy of the sacrifice you have made for my life?

On *this* Memorial Day I ask if you would ponder with me the all-important question for personal existence—what is a good life? And how do we live it?

I believe great living comes to those who find the courage to walk honestly toward death. To embrace courageously this reality, in those deep places of the heart is to make passionate, good living possible.

Let’s talk about courage; it takes a strong, genuine, authentic faith for people to face their death with courage. I hope that is one reason why Chaplains are still allowed to serve in our military, so that when life seems bleak, when the lights of the world have gone out, when the dearest ones have been taken from us, when life looks absurd and love seemed mocked and all existence appears futile, when tragedy has drained every ounce of joy from our hearts and filled them with unbearable grief, and when God seemed so distant,

we need to gather and hear the promises of God that our Chaplains, that our faith, might offer in such moments and give us courage.

God is faithful! That's the promise we proclaim in the presence of death. If our Christian faith has no word at such desolate moments, it is worthless. Indeed, the power of our faith rests as Peter Berger the sociologist of religion says, "upon the credibility of the banners we put into the hands of people as they stand before death, or, more accurately, as they walk inevitably toward it."

And when *our* hearts are broken, we need to come to the "altar" and hear the promises of God, to grab hold of those banners where God's covenant of love is proclaimed—a love that never ends. And hear again those words of scripture: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me . . . The Lord God will swallow up death forever . . . and they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength . . . they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Trusting God's limitless love brings courage. My failures, my mistakes, my disloyalties may break the heart of God—but they do not break God's love.

Remember those famous words from the 8th chapter of Romans? Paul says: “I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, not anything in all creation, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

That proclamation of God’s love is the one thing that I believe if everything else was stripped away and that I seek to share time and again with my Marines.

I believe deeply that I belong to Christ and live in Christ’s love. Nothing, nothing can sever me from that love. Not even death itself. I trust God’s love.

And that is *the* question is it not, that question you—we all really want to know the answer to. That God’s hand will hold you forever, and is unshakable? That as the earth shakes and the foundations of life tremble—that you can reach out in the dark and that the divine hand will hold you up in this slippery world—and never, never let you go.

Over the years some of us have laid to rest our closest friends and family—as they had the courage to make the supreme sacrifice in order for us to reap the bounties of freedom. We owe them a debt of gratitude, which can never be repaid.

What is remarkable about these Marines, Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Guardians and Merchant Marines we remember today is they understood the personal risk when they answered the highest calling of our nation. What could be a nobler act than to give one's life to one's country, knowing that in their lives many freedoms would be denied them?

As we remember the dead today, we must commit ourselves to be the bearers of life. We must pledge to walk in the light, and stand against all the bleak forces of death. We must live a life worthy of the calling and the sacrifices “of those loved and lost . . . on the fields of battle.”

Of course, we can never truly earn God's love, because it was freely given, given by Jesus ultimate sacrifice of the cross. But as the rich young man in the Gospel asks at the beginning of his adult life, how can I be a good man, or what must I do to be saved?

So Private Ryan reflects back on his life with grief and gratitude to ask the same question. How does one live a life that is worthy of redemption? Captain Miller said to him, “Earn it” or “Make yourself worthy of it”—make good use of your freedom; that is a worthy way.

Captain Miller in the end lived his life for the good of the men, the battle, and the country. He dies making his ultimate sacrifice. He is a hero. And his dying words are said to Private Ryan, “James, earn this. Earn it.”

The movie ends with Ryan looking at Miller’s tombstone, the cross of Christ (row after row). Ryan says to Miller: “Every day, I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I’ve tried to live my life the best I could. I hope it was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes I’ve earned what all of you have done for me.”

May this Day we remember ALL who gave their life for us and may we return their sacrifice by living a life worthy of their love and our calling.