



A few weeks ago, Lee Ann asked me if I would be interested in providing a sermon for laity Sunday. She framed that request in the context of being the Sunday after Memorial Day, perhaps Doug Miller and I may want to share the pulpit about our experiences in uniform. When I inquired of Doug's willingness I discovered that Dale was in the hospital, not feeling so well but I'm glad to say she is back and feeling much better. Well, Doug later told me he had the opportunity to speak in a lay sermon and would be interested and hearing what I had to say so it's good to know at least one person is interested and Doug, I know you got my 6 o'clock (that's the Infantry way of saying "I got your back) in case I crash and burn during this sermon. Oh, and in case I do crash and burn, please be aware that we do have three emergency exits; one directly to the rear of the sanctuary and two to your front, one on either side of the altar. And please note, we do have seat cushions but they are not Coast Guard approved flotation devices. So here goes. What does it mean to serve? Interestingly, the words meaning is derived from the Latin word "servire" which means "to be a slave." According to Mr. Webster, the verb "serve" has a myriad of meanings, allow me to rattle them off for you; to be a servant, to do military or naval service, to assist a celebrant as server in mass, to be of use, to be favorable, opportune, or convenient, to stand by, assist, hold office, discharge a duty or function, to prove adequate; suffice, to help persons to food, to wait a table, to set out portions of food or drink, to wait on customers, to work through, to perform, to bring to notice, surprising to me definition #10 states "of an animal: to copulate with, and finishing of the list is #11; to wind yarn or wire tightly around (a rope or stay) for protection #12; to provide services that benefit or help and lastly #13; to put (the ball or shuttlecock) into play (as in tennis or badminton). As many of you already know, for most of my adult life I served in uniform to my country and though at times I felt like that earliest definition from the Latin root that i was indeed a slave but perhaps it's better for my psyche to believe that my time was more like definition #12; to provide services that benefit or help. Now I was quite fortunate to turn 18 in April of 1975, just after Saigon fell so I did not have to suffer the ravages of the Vietnam War. By that I mean not just the conflict itself but the ravages heaped upon the returning service members by the American public, stories of being spat on, being called baby killers and those missing limbs being told "serves you right!" As cruel as those words sounds, one does not truly serve in hopes for recognition anyway. Well, I suppose that if one serves well as wait staff then one is expecting a good tip but truly excellent wait staff continue to perform regardless of the tip. It's part of what they do, who they are. To me, to serve, to sacrifice if you will, means to offer something up without expecting a reward or something in return. To give of yourself, freely, without expectation of anything in return. Anything, except perhaps a sense of gratification and accomplishment

of having done "the right thing." The mentors during my initial enlistment in the Marine Corps were Vietnam Veterans. As I became a Corporal and then a Sergeant, entering the ranks of the Non-Commissioned Officer or NCO Corps, these Vietnam Era Veterans continued to serve as my mentors right on through my Company Grade Officer years in the Army - those years as a Lieutenant and Captain. You know, it is interesting that even as we see the same event unfold before our eyes, we all tend to come away with different observations of that same event. Some NCOs I served with were convinced by their combat experience that there simply cannot be a God after what they witnessed man doing to man. Other NCOs were equally convinced that there must be a loving and gracious God after what they witnessed man doing for their fellow man in that same combat. I took council from both viewpoints. I learned from both. When at the Infantry Officer's Basic Course in Fort Benning, GA, all of us new "lootenant-butter-bars" got issued, among other things, a lot of books and manuals to read, issued to us, by the words of one instructor as a "75 pound hernia just waiting to happen." One of those books was *Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara. Perhaps you've read it. It was the basis for Ted Turner's movie *Gettysburg* which was accurately filmed using reenactors on the actual battlefields of Gettysburg. I highly recommend both the book and the movie. I'd like to read you a bit where the Commander of the 20th Maine Regiment, Colonel Lawrence Chamberlain, received some 120 "mutineers" from the disbanded 2nd Maine Regiment just prior to the battle of Gettysburg. A Regiment is approximately 1,000 soldiers. The 2nd Maine was formed for 2 years but these 120 men had signed 3 year contracts and, well, Uncle Sam just won't let you go until that contract is up. So, imagine receiving 120 men just prior to a battle when they thought they were headed home. Here goes: "Well, I don't want to preach to you. You know who we are and what we're doing here. But if you're going to fight alongside us there's a few things I want you to know." He bowed his head, not looking at eyes. He folded his hands together. "This regiment was formed last fall, back in Maine. There were a thousand of us then. There's not three hundred of us now." He glanced up briefly. "But what is left is choice." He was embarrassed. He spoke very slowly, staring at the ground. "Some of us volunteered to fight for the Union. Some came mainly because we were bored at home and this looked like it might be fun. Some came because we were ashamed not to. Many of us came...because it was the right thing to do. All of us have seen men die. Most of us never saw a black man back home. We think on that, too. But freedom...is not just a word." He looked up in to the sky, over silent faces. "This is a different kind of army. If you look at history you'll see men fight for pay, or women, or some other kind of loot. They fight for land, or because a king makes them, or just because they like killing. But we're here for something new. I don't know...this hasn't happened much in the history of the world. We're an army going out to set other men free." He bent down, scratched the black dirt into his fingers. He was beginning to warm to it; the words were beginning to flow. No one in front of him was moving. He said, "This is a free ground. All the way from here to the Pacific Ocean. No man has to bow. No man born to royalty. Here we judge you by what you do, not by what your father was. Here you can be something. Here's a place to build a home. It isn't the land - there's always more land. It's the idea that we all have value, you and me, we're worth something more than the dirt. I never saw dirt that I'd die for, but I'm not asking you to come join us and fight for dirt. What we're all fighting for, in the end, is each other."

So, according to Chamberlain, they showed up, because it was the right thing to do. But the sacrifices made were not for reward, but for each other. To those who have served in uniform, in combat, they will acknowledge that it was the person on their left and their right that they fought for. We teach that, we train that, Sorry, it's not for mom or apple pie or the flag, really, it's for each other. "It's the idea that we all have value, you and me, we're worth something more than the dirt." Why do some jump on a

grenade to save others and not save themselves? What is the bond, the connection? Some say it's through shared misery and tribulations, a belief in mutual dependence, mutual love, mutual care and concern that we all have value. Truly, no one has a greater love than this, to lay down one's life for another. Indeed, is that not the beginning of the Christian religion? God so loved man that he sent his only son to us, to be betrayed, and to lay down his life for us, so that our sins may be forgiven. What greater love is there than that? Now I'm not saying that you need to lay down your life to serve. Kind of like bacon and eggs in the morning. The chicken has an obligation but the pig, well, he's committed! I'm not asking you to be the pig. Heck, I'm not even asking you to be the chicken. What I am asking is...I'm asking you to consider what does it mean to you to serve? How do you serve? How do you serve others and support your belief in the Christian faith?

As I said earlier, I've spent almost my entire adult life in uniform and what a long strange trip it has been. From "baby killers" to "baby savers," from "serves you right" to "thank you for your service." And please, do not take this the wrong way, but sometimes I feel guilty, or at least awkward for people thanking me for my service. It seems a bit much, a bit over the top. Almost an unwarranted form of adulation. I volunteered. It was my choice. It was my honor. It was what I wanted to do. Yes, I did take an oath. An oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic. To bear true faith and allegiance to the same. And I took that oath freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion. I did not do it for rock star status. And yes, our service men and women deserve acknowledgment but is this rock star status treatment becoming an expectation? I certainly hope not because that would not really be serving.

A point I do want to make is that just because I served in uniform does not make me any better than a person that did not serve in uniform. Likewise, just because I am a Christian does not make me any better a person than those who are not. I think that is worth repeating. Yes I wore the uniform, yes I served my country, yes I made sacrifices; but I am not one iota better than anyone who did not serve in uniform. Likewise; yes, we are Christians, yes we make sacrifices, yes we serve our faith; but we are not one iota better than people who are not Christians. It's interesting to reflect that Jesus did not spend his time with the leaders of the established church. No, he spent his time with the outcasts of society, the prostitutes and lepers and - gasp - tax collectors. I know that I can be pretty judgmental of people and I am certainly guilty as charged. But I need to learn to leave that judgement to God. What right have I got to judge another? Are we all not children of God? How can I pass judgement on one of God's creations? But what I can do, is serve. I can serve my fellow man (and woman). I can treat them the way I want to be treated. I can serve this thing I call the Christian church and in my faith, I will strive to serve all persons, regardless of their belief, for it is my belief that my creator will ultimately judge me. I pray that I will serve well. I pray that you will reflect on how you can serve this church, this community and this planet in such a way that we can say "it is well" ; "that felt good" ; "I am at peace" ; "God Bless You" - and when we say those words, they aren't contrived, they aren't contrite, they are sincere and true. We all have value, you, me, even that stranger we have not met yet. Each and every life is precious. And I believe that, when we serve, especially when we serve a complete stranger, we honor Christ's legacy, his sacrifice. We don't serve people just because we know them. We don't serve people just because we like them. We don't serve people just because they are a member of our church. We don't serve people because we are expecting something in return for that service. We serve people because they are children of God, they all have value and it is the right thing to do. Thank you and God Bless You.