

WOUNDED WARRIORS
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Today is Veteran's Sunday, and so today, this sermon will be dedicated to all of those who have sworn to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

But before I get too far along, I wanted to call your attention to the Prisoner of War-Missing in Action Table by the lectern. This table holds a special place in the heart of all who have served because in every military galley or mess hall, you will find the POW-MIA table there. This table represents our enduring commitment to a cornerstone of the warrior ethos: to leave no man behind - while at the same time recognizing that some, through the hazards of war, do in fact get left behind. On the back of your bulletin you will find a write up about this table, which I encourage you to read; but after the service I welcome you to take a closer look.

I would also encourage you to look around this sanctuary, to see if you can spot a veteran or two. These are people who have tasted the sweet smell of tear gas while reciting their rank and name, they've had someone point their entire hand at their face while yelling at them, they've had to stand watch over something that could've just as easily been locked up, they've had to wait in a line to find out what line to wait in next to get to the line they were supposed to be in, they've been shot at, they've felt the shockwave of an explosion, they've missed important holidays and family gatherings and weddings and funerals, they've had to bury a brother or sister in arms, they've left their spouses and children on piers and airport terminals, they've had to cancel their vacation plans, they've had to cancel planning in general, they've done 50 solid push-ups only to be told they haven't even done 1 yet, they've been promised by their superiors that they'd get "hooked up on the back end" but never were, they've had to follow orders that don't make any sense, they've had to take orders from people they don't respect, they've had to shut up and get the job done, they've gone days or weeks at a time without seeing the Sun, they've done all these things and so much more that you would never ever see on a recruiting poster, and they'd do it again if given the chance. Yes, these are our veterans, our 1%. Please stand and be recognized.

Every veteran has a story about when they finally realized there was no backing out. For many it is that final bus ride into basic training. You're still technically a "civilian" because you still have your blue jeans on and they haven't cut your hair yet. But as soon as you step off that bus, that's it. Your mama is not there to take care of you any more. For me, that moment did not occur in boot camp, nor in my follow-up training to become a submariner, but rather on my first day out to sea - or more accurately my first day under water. I had a momentary existential crisis. After all, ships are designed to float, not sink.

I think the reason why I didn't feel any anxiety before that was because for the most part I was safe, I was part of a class, I had supervisors looking out for me; but when I got the boat, I knew things were for real. If you messed up, you couldn't go back and try again, you had

to do things right the first time. And it was the pressure to put the mission ahead of myself, both literal and figurative, that molded me.

What helped a great deal is that everything you were supposed to do that required any degree of technical precision had a procedure for you to follow. This even included going to the bathroom. Yes, there was a procedure for flushing the toilet. Open this valve, open that valve; flush and close the valves. The reason why we had procedures for everything is because everything was connected to everything for the most part. I mean, you didn't want to accidentally drain nuclear coolant into the potable water tank, for example. That would be bad. Likewise if you were dealing with flooding, you would want to pump water off the boat, not into it.

It is for these reasons that submariners have an expression: "every procedure is written in blood," because in the history of submarine warfare there have been accidents and errors that have contributed to the loss of all hands. The same can be said for soldiers going out on a patrol: the one rule is that you should always expect an ambush. Ignoring this rule leads to complacency, which can be fatal. Likewise, deviating from the established procedures, increases the amount of risk you incur. In the military, this procedural mindset extends beyond the operation of a single piece of equipment or weapon, to entire platforms, and even to full on operational plans, and our national strategy. Everything and everyone has a place on the battlefield.

But for all the procedures we have for winning wars, we have very few for our warriors themselves. If we're not feeling 100%, we still have to give a 100% to complete the mission. If we go to the Doc, he's going to prescribe the standard package: 1000mg of ibuprofen + 1000ml of water + a 1000 second nap.

Now admittedly, the standard package can take the edge off and get you back to 100% most of the time, but there are some stressors that persist even if you're fully rested and hydrated.

One of those stressors, which the civilian world is getting a glimpse of with the pandemic, is that anxiety that comes from being unable to plan anything. Sure, none of know what tomorrow may bring, but a civilian has the luxury of at least being able to know where they're going to be and what they're going to be doing. On the flipside of that coin is the monotony that often sets in by doing the same thing over and over and over. On the submarine these stressors become a little bit more pronounced, because a majority of the crew operates on an 18-hour cycle. You are on-watch for 6 hours, and off-watch for 12 hours. In that 12 hours you're expected to get all of your cleaning and maintenance done, and to work on your professional development courses, and then try to get enough sleep before the cycle starts again. After a couple days of this, your body's circadian rhythm adjusts, and truth be told you lose track of time altogether because you don't see the sun or moon. The only thing that gives you any sense of time is what meal they're serving, but even those start to look the same after a while.

Simply put, the mode in which you begin living life while wearing the uniform is similar to that of Sisyphus: your job is to push a stone up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, so that

you can push it back up the hill again and again. Everyone has to deal with seasons of this every once in a while, but while you are serving in the armed forces it's every day, and that stone gets real heavy after a while and you start to feel the weight crushing you.

Basic training is designed to apply a small amount of this weight early on, so that people who don't belong in the military can wash out safely before the government has invested any more time and money into them. But as any body-builder will tell you, it's not the amount that matters, it's the repetition. Lifting 5-pounds once is pretty easy. Now, lifting 5-pounds a thousand times in a row... that's going to cause some damage. That's how a warrior becomes wounded - not just by an enemy bullet, but by the slow grind that comes in getting the mission accomplished. And everyone, no matter how tough they are, has a breaking point. Submariners call this "hull crush depth." It is the point at which hull integrity becomes compromised.

Such is the unfortunate reality for those who wear the uniform, and to make matters worse: not everyone is able to find a pathway to recovery in time. No doubt you have heard about the tragic deaths that occurred at Fort Hood this year. This has led many to ask what can be done in general to reverse a trend that seems very peculiar for the armed forces to have in the first place. Each branch does its best to instill core values and the warrior ethos into every one, and in the last two decades a greater emphasis has been placed on holistic well-being. So what gives?

While there is no single answer, I believe why many of our warriors wind up taking their own life is because they lost sight of their true identity and purpose, and have taken on burdens they were never meant to carry.

While the military does give you a sense of identity and purpose, it is caught up in the uniform itself, and places a heavy burden on your life. You begin comparing yourself to the ideal soldier, sailor, airmen, and marine - and find that you do not stack up. But despite your shortcomings, you want to appear as though you're always ready for the next mission, even if you're not. I can't tell you how many sick days or mental health days I should have taken but didn't, all because I wanted to meet this heavy burden of performance that admittedly I put on myself.

For a good year or so on the boat I was really bitter, because the Navy always seemed to take more of my energy without giving back any in return. And I was not alone in my bitterness. Misery loves company, right? Well, I got caught up in an echo chamber of people who were also angry and pent up with anxiety, and it's not like I could've escaped it because I was interacting with these people every day. An unhealthy self-preservation mechanism I developed was an increased sense of dark humor. For many others it was alcohol.

You just do what you can to keep the toxicity from getting to you, but eventually you become resentful towards the very thing you are supposed to be proud of. It sounds strange, but you resent the armed forces not because of what you're doing for it, but

because of what you think it is doing to you. If you're not careful, this resentment can rob you of your true identity and purpose, it can rob you of self-respect, and can rob you of joy.

And don't think I'm just talking about the armed forces at this point. Every friendship, every marriage, every team, every classroom, every work project, every homework assignment, every business meeting, every delivery, every time you have to put on a mask, every pregnancy, every election, every rehearsal, every practice, every family gathering, and dare I say every committee meeting... These are all activities that can crush you if the burden to constantly perform becomes too heavy, and if you feel like you're not getting back what you're giving - the resentment can set in real quick. If you keep burning out doing what you're doing, then eventually you're going to get burnt to a crisp. If you don't take the time to heal and recover from these wounds, it will only lead to unhealthy decisions, and more pain. So how can the healing begin?

Our New Testament reading gives us an important insight into the first step of the healing process. Matthew 8:5 -- ⁵ *When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help.*

That's the first step y'all. Ask for help. I know this verse hits hard for our veterans because just like the centurion, you don't want to be that guy who delays the mission, you don't want to be that guy who is missing equipment, you don't want to appear weak in front of your subordinates, and you definitely don't want to come across as incompetent. And in a warrior culture, asking for help can seem to be all of those things at once. It can be embarrassing, it may feel like you're being a burden, but what does Jesus say? "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."

Taking that first step to ask for help can seem like a long leap of faith. You don't know when things are going to get better, or what the process is going to look like, but having that hope can make all the difference in the world. Like the centurion, you may have a lot of people under your command, a lot of duties you need to perform, and you need to appear like you have it all together. But friends, who truly among us has it all together?

In Japan there is a form of pottery art called *kintsugi* which in translation means "golden joinery." The legend that surrounds the origin of this art form is that a Japanese shogun sent a damaged tea bowl back to China for repair, but it came back with metal staples and looked rather ugly. So instead, the shogun's craftsmen removed the staples and decided to piece the tea bowl back together using lacquer laced with gold. It is said that the shogun found the repaired tea bowl - with all of the fracture lines clearly visible - to be far more beautiful than it was when unbroken.

Friends that is what Jesus can do for your life if you let him into your heart. Jesus became wounded, so he can repair our wounds. He bore the weight of the cross, so that our yoke with him could be light. Instead of pushing a stone up a hill over and over, he rolled a stone from a tomb, so that we can have a new life in him.

I'm not for "altar calls" - that's a little too Southern Baptist. But in closing I'd like to share the Serenity Prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr. If you feel like life has wounded you, or you feel like your burdens are too heavy, then I would encourage you to gracefully listen, and take these words to heart.

Let us pray.

SERENITY PRAYER

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;
taking, as Jesus did,
this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
trusting that You will make all things right
if I surrender to Your will;
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with You forever in the next.