

8 November, 2009; Proper 27b

Rev. Deborah

Meister

Ruth 1:1,4, 6, 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127

Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

This is a difficult weekend with which to begin our nation's observance of Veteran's Day. The events which unfolded Thursday at Fort Hood are a stark reminder of the price which the men and women of our military often pay for the service they render to our country: a cost which is marked not only in the flesh, but in scars which linger in their minds for the rest of their lives. It is not an easy thing to kill another human being. It is not an easy thing for an army doctor to heal people only in order to send them back to the front lines. These things do a real and genuine damage to our souls, even when the cause for which the war is being fought is good. In the last year, I visited with a veteran of the Second World War, a good and gentle man who was deeply troubled that this damage was being inflicted on yet another generation of Americans. "Wasn't what we suffered enough?" he asked. "Why do they keep doing this?"

"Wasn't what we suffered enough?" In each age, there is at least one group of people who can offer up this question, often those who are an embarrassment to their neighbors, people whose needs are so complex and unanswerable that we have responded by pushing them out of our sight. In Jesus' time (and in ours), poor women fell into one of those groups, particularly poor women without relatives. It is true that the laws of Israel made provision for these women, and yet, the provision was scant enough. They were allowed to be gleaners, to enter into the fields of landowners after the harvest and collect for themselves what was left standing in the field -- and the landowners were instructed, as a holy duty, to make sure that something *was* left. If the women had male relatives, even distant ones, those men were obligated to take them in -- although the women would still have been subject to the dubious treatment often accorded to poor relatives who are felt to be a burden. In all, to be female and poor was (and is) a heavy fate.

Ruth, the grandmother of King David, had felt it in full. A Moabite rather than a Hebrew, she had married a man of Israel when he came to her country seeking refuge during a time of famine. When he died, she chose to journey to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi, rather than to remain in her own homeland alone. And so she became an immigrant in a strange land, gleaning in the fields of an honest man who would, at least, protect her from the advances of the field-hands (Ruth 2:9). But still, her story has a happy ending only because she was beautiful -- beautiful enough to seduce and conquer the heart of her mother-in-law's rich kinsman. It was a fragile enough reed to cling to. She should have been able to claim his protection without all that, but, sometimes, we do not live into the fullest extent of our ideals.

Too often, what we see instead is the picture from today's Gospel reading, in which rich men come to the treasury of the Temple and drop in large gifts, and then one poor widow drops in a copper coin, giving "out of her poverty... everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mark 12:44) It is a magnificent gesture, a gift straight from the heart, a sign of trust in her God. It harkens all the way back to the widow of Zarephath who ministered to the prophet Elijah during a severe famine. Elijah came to the widow and asked her for food and drink. But she replied, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." (I Kings 17:12) Elijah commands her to feed him *first*, and then all will be well. The widow, with an act of faith that makes my breath catch, does -- or maybe she figures she's going to die anyway. In the event, Elijah sustains her and her son for years.

But if these stories and others like them reveal the moral courage of the poor widows, what do they reveal about the officials of the Temple who will accept such offerings? (The wealthy givers

are not the butt of the story; the Temple officials are.) Christ's response could hardly be more clear: "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." (Mark 12:38-40) Now, I always wince when I read this, not least because, every Sunday, I wear long robes and am given a conspicuously good seat in the church, but the sin here is not wearing robes as such, but the exploitation of the poor implied in such apparel. These scribes, who are supposed to be the spiritual leaders of their day, the ones to whom is entrusted the transmission of the word of God, are self-important talking heads, who enjoy all the trappings of power, but ignore the mercy enthroned at the heart of the Law they teach. They "devour widows' houses" -- consume the offerings of the poor -- in order to finance their own lavish lifestyle. They are the corrupt televangelists of their time!

And yet, it is too simple a thing to read this story and point fingers at others, for there is a real sense in which we all profit from the exploitation of other people. When we buy cheap goods made in countries with lower levels of worker protection than our own, when we eat food harvested by workers who were not protected from pesticide, even when we engage innocently in ordinary activities like investing in the stock market -- we become involuntary accomplices in the degradation of people we have never met, and whose faces we will never see. There is no way to avoid it. We do the best we can, patronizing companies with good human rights records, buying locally-farmed produce, but still, the complexities of modern life pretty much throw us into the stew, unless we retire to an isolated farm and grown all our own food and give up using gasoline. The best we can do, really, is to satisfy ourselves with what meets our needs, remember the costs others pay to help us, and then advocate for those others when we can. Such advocacy is our way to leave grain standing in the fields for those who need to glean it.

If there is any group which we too often treat like poor widows, perhaps it is, in fact, our veterans. In this endless non-war which we are fighting, this conflict about which so many of us feel deeply ambivalent, our veterans have become invisible people. We do not see them. We hear, every once in a while, about failures to help them -- poor conditions at Walter Reed, problems at the V.A., and there is an appropriate outcry until they are addressed.¹ In the town in which I live, there was a furor this year over a proposed housing complex for poor veterans; people didn't want them in the town -- and this at a time when our soldiers were giving their lives on a daily basis!

The problem, I think, is that seeing them would bring us into close contact with our own moral complicity. If we are pacifists, or if we oppose this war, it can be hard to regard their sacrifices without an obvious way to give them meaning. If we favor the war, then their disabled bodies or broken minds are the price they have paid to execute our chosen policies. Either way, the sacrifices they have willingly made expose our discomfort with remaining in safety and normalcy while such things are going on; this war has no real "home front."

The truth is, this near-decade of war has left scars in all our souls. We cannot be subjected, day after day, to stories and images about bombings, death, battles, and terror without absorbing a deep sadness, a pain which threatens to numb us out and tempts us to turn away, to ignore what is happening in favor of joyful things which might be subject to our control. We begin to wonder what human life is worth, or if people who do carry out things as suicide bombings are truly human in any way we can recognize. We stop talking about it; after the thousandth bombing, what more *is* there to say? And yet, hard as this is for us all, it is harder for those who are intimately part of it. Our

¹ Obviously, our nation does have systems in place to care for their physical needs. The psychological and spiritual needs tend to receive much less attention, at least in part because they can't really be addressed by a "system."

veterans are around us, if we would seek creative ways to welcome them, or at least try to understand what they have endured.

Edward Tick, who has counseled veterans since the 1970s, said, “My best understanding of what we call “ptsd” is that it is an identity disorder and soul wound that has its source in moral trauma. It is also a social disorder arising from the broken relationship between our society and its veterans.”² In highlighting “moral trauma,” he points toward the paradox involved in many of our modern conflicts, in which we end up killing people in order to achieve broadly humanitarian ends. It is a good thing to eliminate an evil and capricious dictator. It would be a good thing to break the power of the Taliban, whose treatment of their own countrymen and countrywomen has been unspeakable. And yet, the means we have chosen to use are, in themselves, a horror: God’s children killing one another.

Tick explains, “Almost all of us want to be agents of good. For many soldiers the motive for being a warrior is not to kill and destroy, but to preserve and protect. Then they find themselves in ...wars where they are forced to be agents of destruction. I was recently discussing this issue with army chaplains, and I asked what they did to counsel soldiers who have just come back from a firefight or have committed atrocities. One chaplain said, ‘I teach my soldiers that they have to renegotiate their covenant with God.’ The assumption that God’s going to forgive us for, say, killing a child just because we had no choice doesn’t wash with many soldiers.”

It doesn’t wash with many of us, either, but that does not absolve us of the responsibility to ensure that our soldiers get the help they need to re-enter civilian life. Tick reminds us that, in many traditional societies, this was understood to be a project, not just for the warriors, but for the whole community. Such cultures “expected that the invisible wounds of war would be deep, penetrating, and transformative.” In response, they developed highly-structured procedures for re-entry into normal life. Tick continues, “among the Papago people of the American Southwest, after a warrior had his first experience of combat, they held a nineteen-day ceremony of return. He might have been in battle for fifteen minutes, and for that he’d get almost three weeks of ritual healing and community support. He’d be put in isolation and not allowed to touch food or feed himself, because he’d been poisoned by the war experience. He couldn’t see his family, and he certainly couldn’t have sex with his wife, or else he would bring the war pollution back into the community. Elders and medicine people used purification techniques to cleanse him, and also storytelling techniques.” In other words, they acknowledged the spiritual cost that had been paid; took seriously the danger that the spiritual wounds of war, if left untreated, would constitute a danger to the whole community (in ways we all know too well); gave the warrior rituals which helped him to mourn his lost innocence and make sense of his experience; and created spaces in which they could hear his story, taking upon themselves the burden of his experience so that he would not have to bear it alone.

We do so little of this, here in the United States. We do not often talk about the war, even among ourselves, choosing to remain alone with our grief. We do not often portray dead or wounded soldiers in our media. We do not often have forums in which returning veterans can tell their stories -- and, if we do, we expect them to exhibit stoic self-control. Our idea is that the good warrior is silent upon his return, slipping seamlessly back into his former life as if nothing had happened, and yet, that silence, which protects our comfort, continues to inflict the burden on the soldier alone.

In July of 1917, at the height of the First World War, a highly-decorated British army officer named Siegfried Sassoon published in the *Times* a denunciation of the war and of the way it was being executed. When the British Army responded by pulling him home and committing him to

² “Like Wandering Ghosts”, *The Sun*, June 2008; David Kupfer interviewing Edward Tick. Other quotes from Tick are also from this article.

mental hospital, he chose to return to the front-lines. In spite of his pacifist principles, Sassoon felt the pull of his shared experience with his fellow-soldiers, and of their common humanity. He wrote,

When I'm asleep, dreaming and drowsed and warm,
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.
While the dim charging breakers of the storm
Rumble and drone and bellow overhead,
Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.
They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine.

'Why are you here with all your watches ended?
'From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the line.'
In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
I think of the Battalion in the mud.
'When are you going back to them again?
'Are they not still your brothers through our blood?'

When Jesus saw the poor widow drop in her coins, he did not stop her, even though he knew she was offering all she had. He did not prevent her from offering herself to God, even though some of God's agents were less than they should be. It was not *then* that he whipped the money-changers out of the Temple. But he *did* notice; he saw what she had given, and he saw *her*. Surely we can do at least as much for those who are offering themselves for our country; they are, after all, our brothers and sisters through Christ's blood, which binds us to all human beings, enemies and strangers and victims and perpetrators alike, and even those who seem to be both. He summons us to a compassionate reverence, a gentle sharing of one another's burdens, until our broken bodies rise from the dust and healing is needed no more. For that day we pray, in Christ our Lord. Amen.