

Wilton Presbyterian Church
November 11, 2018
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Feed My Sheep: Healing and Restoration of a Broken Soul

Jeremiah 31: 15-17
Matthew 26: 31-50
John 21: 1-17

Probably two of the most well known stories of betrayal in the Christian scriptures are the experiences of Judas and Peter that take place in the last day of Jesus's life. The words we are familiar with are "denial" for Peter's offense and "betrayal" for Judas's. However, I think they both betrayed Jesus. And, they both betrayed themselves. Their betrayals violated their own moral codes.

The scriptures give us a multi-dimensional portrayal of Peter during his discipleship but leave us to speculate about Judas on many accounts. Jesus tells Peter that he will deny (betray) him three times, just in the short span of the rooster crowing three times. Peter replies, astonished, that there is no way that he would **ever** do something like that. Peter felt convicted. His moral code of friendship, love, and devotion made this kind of betrayal unthinkable.

Later, Peter found himself in a compromising situation and he did the thing that he had thought was unthinkable.

Three times he denied knowing Jesus. This, coming from one who was closest to Jesus. One who had dropped everything to follow him. One who somewhat rashly had leaped out of a boat to go toward Jesus on the water. Come, Jesus had said, and Peter came. As soon as the cock crowed the third time, Peter's soul might as well have shattered into a million pieces.

And [Peter] went outside and wept bitterly (Luke 22:62).

Likewise, Judas put himself in a compromising situation and did the unthinkable.

Judas betrayed Jesus into the hands of the Jewish authorities. Judas, who was in Jesus's inner circle, a confidant. The one that the group had entrusted with keeping their money. He enjoyed a position of trust and confidence among the disciples. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

Peter is a saint of the church and Judas is not. So, what is the major difference in their stories? Jesus personally restores Peter into the community but not Judas.

We know that Judas felt remorse for what he had done.

Saying, "*I have sinned by betraying innocent blood,*"

he then gave the dirty money back to the Chief Priests and elders,
who used it to buy the Potter's Field.

This is the place, Scripture tells us, where Judas killed himself. This field became known to the people in Jerusalem by an Aramaic name, *Hakeldama*, field of blood. Judas's despair and anguish were so great that these feelings drove him to suicide. His soul was broken.

"I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."

Many military veterans feel a similar sense of shame and guilt from wartime experiences. Situations that placed them in positions where they felt forced to violate a personal moral code. These feelings are an age-old affliction — we see it in the person of Achilles in Homer's *Illiad* — but it is an affliction that has only very recently come to be recognized by modern clinicians, academics, military leaders, and clergy.

It is called moral injury.

An injury to the soul.

It is an invisible but deeply felt and profoundly affecting, wound.

This wound might occur after following an order that the person believes to be unjust. When a person kills a civilian, or, perhaps kills at all, even an enemy combatant in what is seen to be a "just" war. Humans were not made to kill other humans. There is something deeply, deeply cemented in our DNA, beyond God's commandment, that makes murder a perversion.

The US military saw this in World War Two with a post-war report that revealed that only a quarter of combat soldiers "fire[d] directly at the enemy, even when their own lives were at risk."¹ This means **that a full seventy-five percent** of soldiers did not shoot to kill, even when they were in mortal danger.

Obviously, this report alarmed military leaders! In the post-war years, they revamped military training. By the time of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, military training specifically conditioned soldiers to shoot on instinct, without thinking, without pausing to consult their moral compass. The Army called this "reflexive fire training" and it doubled the firing rates in Korea and raised them to **85 - 90 percent in Vietnam.**²

This data was good news for Army statisticians and strategists but bad news for the wholeness of the warfighter's soul.

Now, moral injury is not limited to service members but they are probably the most affected populace.

¹ Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury After War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 17.

² Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 18.

It is important to note that symptoms of moral injury differ from post traumatic stress, although they are sometimes conflated. The primary difference is that post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is partly physical. It is what is called “**fear-victim**” reaction to danger. It produces hormones that affect the brain’s controlled responses to fear and those that “regulate emotions and connect fear to memory.”³

Medical professionals evaluating veterans returning from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 17 years, worked their way through check boxes of PTSD symptoms and realized that the pain these men and women were experiencing did not exist on the checklist.

The primary markers of moral injury are **an overwhelming sense of shame and/or guilt. A sense that one is not a decent human being and that the world is no longer reliable or meaningful.**⁴

Reflecting on his time in war, US Army veteran Kevin Benderman writes, “[I found out] we were in the area of Iraq that was supposed to be the Garden of Eden, the cradle of civilization where mankind began. I had to ask myself, “Why am I carrying around an M16 in the Garden of Eden?”⁵

“I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.”

We can’t come together for worship this week, on this national holiday for honoring veterans, and not speak of the tragic news of the shooting of twelve people at the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California on Wednesday. The shooter was a Marine Corps veteran, 28 years old, who had deployed to Afghanistan and had been troubled since he returned home.

I am not going to armchair diagnose him but reports of his violent and erratic behavior in the years since his deployment indicate that he was troubled.

Other veterans were at the bar that night. Two of them had survived the mass shooting in Las Vegas last year.

Navy veteran, Telemachus Orfanos, 27, survived Las Vegas but died in this bar. Marine Corps veteran, Brendan Kelly, 22, also survived the shooting in Las Vegas and helped save lives at the concert and at the Borderline.

We have an incredibly tragic circumstance where one Marine Corps veteran took lives and another used his training to save them.

³ *ibid*, xiii.

⁴ *ibid*.

⁵ Keven Benderman in *Soldiers of Conscience*, cited in Brock and Lettini, before the table of contents.

Early reports say that this Marine veteran, Ian David Long, had not made use of the resources at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Again, I am not saying that this man suffered from moral injury. People who feel acute shame and guilt over having killed, are not usually inclined to murderous rampages. Sadly, those who feel the intense pain of an injured soul, are more likely to take their own lives.

The statistics of veterans committing suicide ranks significantly higher than the national average.⁶

One about every 80 minutes.

Twenty a day.

Six thousand people a year.

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There is an organization that is uniquely equipped to respond to the affliction of a broken soul: It's us! The church! The church is in the business of souls; specifically mending and healing them.

As it stands now, we, and I mean this as the church and broader society, do not do much to acknowledge the pains of returning warriors.

This has not always been the case.

In the early middle ages, returning fighters had to undergo rituals of penance before they could be re-integrated into the Christian worshipping body. In some cases, these penitents were prohibited from taking communion for forty days.⁷

To our ears, a penance might sound like a punishment but, in the medieval Church, the penance was meant to be a "symbolic expression of the kind of humble resignation" modeling the love of Jesus, who in his death took on humanity's guilt.⁸ In this process, as Bernard Verkamp says, "the penitents **might begin to repair some of the negative consequences of sin to themselves, their fellow human beings, and the world at large.**"⁹

We, the people of the church, have thousands of years of historical memory of reconciling people to the church. There are also other traditional practices of restoration we can draw on for inspiration on how we might accomplish this again.

⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "VA National Suicide Data Report 2005-2016" (Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, 2018), <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/OMHSP_National_Suicide_Data_Report_2005-2016_508.pdf>, accessed Nov. 10, 2018.

⁷ Bernard J. Verkamp, *The Moral Treatment of Returning Warriors in Early Medieval and Modern Times* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1993).

⁸ *ibid*, 112.

⁹ *ibid*.

The Navajo people have a ritual called “The Enemy Way”¹⁰ where spiritual leaders use prayers, talking circles, drumming and other traditional healing practices to reconcile the returning warrior with the community. One leader observed, “When soldiers go overseas, we give them warrior ceremonies to armor and protect them against the battle; when the soldier comes back, we have to remove that armor, to help him reconnect with his home.”

We see something similar in the Hebrew scriptures.

The book of Numbers gives specific instructions for purification for those who have killed in battle or touched the dead. They must stay outside the camp for seven days. All objects that they bring back with them must be purified, either by fire or water. (Numbers 31:19-24)

In his book, *What Have We Done?*, David Wood tells the story of a military chaplain in Iraq who facilitates a cleansing ritual for soldiers about to return home. The soldiers wrote their pains and what they wanted to leave behind, on index cards. One by one, they placed the cards in a stone baptismal font. The chaplain put his cards in last and set fire to them.

The chaplain had worried that he might be misusing the baptismal font, a font that had been recovered from the surrounding wilderness where members of ISIS had tossed it after converting the chapel to a mosque. He worried that he would be trampling on some theological doctrines and could be reprimanded by his ordaining body. Yet, his heart moved toward the invisible needs of these soldiers and he offered them purification by fire.

This ceremony was notable because of its rarity.

The church has outsourced therapeutic healing to counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists. Now, I am not diminishing their roles, which are extremely important resources for mental health. But the therapeutic community has a different approach to sin, guilt, moral pain, conscience, confession, contrition, and absolution.¹¹

We don't have to be experts in moral injury but we should be experts in loving on people. For a veteran, this might go beyond saying, “thank you for your service.” The church family could have a reconciliation ritual or ceremony for military members when they return from deployment. We could draw on resources like the “liturgies of reconciliation” that the Roman Catholic church used for service members returning from Vietnam.

Many of those serving in the military have no church or spiritual home so perhaps a well-publicized community outreach group might be a way to stretch beyond the walls of the church.

¹⁰ U.S. National Library of Medicine, Native Voices: Native Peoples' Concepts of Health and Illness website, “Native Heritage: Traditions, Preserved and Renewed: The Talkers' Code of Silence,” <<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/exhibition/healing-ways/native-heritage/navajo-code-talkers.html>>, accessed Nov. 10, 2018.

¹¹ VerKamp, cited in <<https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/the-worshiping-community-and-healing-from-moral-injury/>>

Jesus gives Peter something to do. Feed my sheep, he says. Community service and social justice opportunities give veterans something to do. Social engagement like this channels energy outward and can help absolve feelings of pain as the person works toward something good.

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Matthew tells the story of Judas's suicide. If his retelling is in any way a linear timeline of the events of that night, then Judas did not live long enough to hear of Jesus's torture and execution or, most importantly, the EMPTY TOMB and resurrection!

Peter had disappeared after the cold night in Caiphas's courtyard and, perhaps, he too had thoughts of taking his own life because living with knowledge of his denial would have been too much to bear.

What would have happened if Judas had waited, just a few days more, perhaps even a week? Would Jesus have restored him to the community of disciples? I would like to think that he would have. Can you imagine? A testimony of God's unbounded mercy that is even more powerful than what we see in Peter's redemption in the Gospel of John. A broken soul restored.

Feed my sheep.

Amen.