

"No Greater Love Than This"

MY SERMON THIS MORNING is very personal. In a stream-of-consciousness sort of way, it contains ideas, past experiences, and feelings, which come to a preacher, as that preacher considers some aspect of his/her own personal faith.

In my sermon this morning I will, in a sense, be talking to myself out loud, but I invite you to listen in.

Some time ago, a friend gave me a CD which contained a very brief video from the Internet. I played that video, and was amazed to discover how deeply it touched me. As the video progressed I found tears welling up in my eyes. In fact, I've watched that video on YouTube many times since, and it always stirs such deep feelings within me.

Perhaps when you get home, after you hear this sermon, you'll want to watch that video yourself? That video and its theme song bear the title: "A Pittance of Time." That video and song were created by a Canadian artist named Terry Kelly.<sup>1</sup>

That video and song are based on a disturbing experience Kelly once had, while he was shopping in a store in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

Of course, it's probably better for you to see that video yourself, but I'll try to describe it in words this morning, so you can imagine it.

THE VIDEO is taken in a grocery store which is filled with shoppers. A large clock on a wall, is just about to reach 11:00 o'clock in the morning. Can you imagine that large grocery store clock?

Suddenly a voice comes over the store's loud speaker. The voice says:

*"Good morning, shoppers. At 11 o'clock on this 11<sup>th</sup> day of November we'd like to invite you to share with us two minutes of silence in honor of our veterans."*

This video focuses on the observance of Remembrance Day in Canada. Remembrance Day is similar to our Veteran's Day in the US. But, it could just as well have focused on the observance of Memorial Day in our country.

As the clock reaches the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, we see people in that grocery store, both shoppers and clerks. They stop what they are doing, and quietly bow their heads out of respect.

At the same time, a young father with a basket full of food items in his hand, arrives at one of the store's cash registers. He has his young daughter, about age 10, in tow.

With wide brown eyes this young girl looks up at all the people in the store who are bowing their heads in silence around her. She also watches as her father begins to argue with the young woman who's the clerk at the cash register he's checking out at.

Apparently, this young girl's father has no interest in bowing his head out of respect for military veterans. Rather, he wants his basket of groceries checked out right away.

This father continues to argue with the clerk, waving his arms at her. But, the clerk just stands there in silence, with a look of astonishment on her face.

As we take in this scene, Terry Kelly, with guitar in hand, begins to sing a spirited song. His song focuses directly on this arguing father, his young daughter, and the small drama which is now unfolding in that grocery store.

Kelly sings of his nation's veterans, saying:

*They fought and some died, for their homeland,  
They fought and some died -- now it's our land,  
Look at his little child, there's no fear in her eyes,*

*Could he not show respect for other Dads who have died?*

*Take two minutes, would you mind -- it's a pittance of time,*

*For the boys and the girls who went over;*

*In peace may they rest, May we never forget,*

*Why they died -- It's a pittance of time.*

As the music plays, the father at the register gets increasingly angry. He wants to be checked out. Though their heads are all bowed, other shoppers in the store can't help but glare disapprovingly at this father. A similar look also crosses the face of this father's young daughter.

All the while, the music keeps playing.

Suddenly, the young daughter turns and looks to the back of that grocery store. There she sees, as if in a dream, a group of veterans from Canada's various military units. They've suddenly appeared, materializing out of thin air.

Men and women from the past, those military veterans are all dressed in their uniforms. They stand tall and proud. Their medals and stripes bear testimony to their faithful service to their country.

Those veterans from the past, many aged, some younger, all march in step slowly, in single file and with great dignity, toward the front of that grocery store.

They finally make their way down the checkout aisle, and pass right behind the father, who is still waving his arms and arguing with the clerk. At this moment, the brown eyes of the father's daughter are wider than ever, as she watches with amazement as this solemn line of mysterious veterans from the past passes by, then disappears.

As this takes place, the guitarist continues his song. He sings:

*Read the letters and poems of the heroes at home,  
They have casualties, battles, and fears of their own;  
There's a price to be paid--if you go or you stay.  
Freedom's fought for and won in numerous ways.*

The video then shifts to a television set on a wall of that store. That television shows black and white images:

~ of soldiers on the battlefield writing letters home,  
~ of women working in a munitions factory,  
~ of a young child rushing to clasp the hand and say good bye  
to his uniformed father, who is now marching off to war  
with his military unit.

Finally, the father at the cash register turns. He catches a glimpse of that dream-like procession of veterans who pass by him slowly and silently, in all their dignity.

Seeing that procession, a look of realization and humbleness appears on that father's face. At last, he finally bows his head too, as the figures pass by him.

And a little smile appears on the face of his young daughter.

Terry Kelly continues to sing, saying:

*It takes courage to fight in your own war  
It takes courage to fight in someone else's war  
Our peacekeepers tell of their own living hell  
They bring hope to foreign lands that hate mongers can't  
kill.*

*Take two minutes, would you mind -- It's a pittance of  
time,  
For the boys and the girls who go over;  
In peacetime our best, still don battle dress,  
And lay their lives on the line,  
It's a pittance of time.*

*In peace may they rest,  
Lest we forget why they died.  
Take a pittance of time.*

There is more to that song and video, but that's the gist of it.

After watching it numerous times, I've wondered to myself, why is it that I am so deeply touched by it.

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THINKING BACK, I remember that I grew up in a military area. In New London, Connecticut, where I was raised, the Coast Guard Academy was not too far from my house. And, then, there was the submarine base across the river in Groton.

Living in New London during the Cold War, we school children figured that if a nuclear war came, we would be among the first in America to get the missiles. After all, our nuclear submarines were docked just up the river from us. Still, when there were air raid drills, we all hid under our school desks, as our teachers told us to.

My maternal grandfather, whom I never knew because he died young, was a Southerner, who settled in New London, so he could serve on U.S. submarines.

My father was a mid-Westerner, who also settled in New London, so he could work at the Underwater Sound Laboratory, and help design sonar systems for our nation's submarines.

As a graduating senior in high school, I was accepted into the Coast Guard Academy, and was well on the way to receiving a Senator's appointment to one of our nation's other service academies, namely West Point.

But then I came home from school one day and made a sudden, life-changing decision. I decided that my future really lay in the liberal arts field, and possibly in Christian ministry. So I dropped all thought of entering the military, and went off to Bowdoin College.

While in college in the late 1960's, I watched as the Vietnam War escalated and there were riots and sit-ins against the war on student campuses.

I found it difficult then to talk to many older people, and even to my own mother, about that war. As some of you may remember, at the time, people's feelings were so intense and so divided over the issues.

And, slogans, like "Love it or leave it" were often hurled at anyone who exercised their right in our free society, to disagree with decisions made by our politicians.

I remember watching the Vietnam draft lottery held on December 1 in the year 1969. It was broadcast on national television.<sup>2</sup> Some of you may remember watching that lottery, too.

366 capsules containing all the possible birth dates in a leap year, were randomly pulled out of a large glass container. Even years afterwards, people in my age group often asked one another, "What was your number?"

As it turned out, my February birth date was picked on the 236<sup>th</sup> try. As it happened, people whose birth dates were among the first 195 ones picked, in that particular lottery, were called to report for possible induction.

The following September, I was a seminary student, with military service deferred. As I recall: seminary students and clergy were generally deferred at that time by the government. They were deferred from the draft, not for any theological reasons, but because they were deemed to be needed in their professional roles, in our society during wartime.

WHY HAVE I been so touched by that video and its message? I've thought about that a lot. My answer is this. I think it has a lot to do with me being a Christian.

The fact is, that our entire Christian religion revolves around a divine-human person, who unselfishly gave up his own life, for others.

And, the symbol of a cross, which hangs in a prominent place in our church's sanctuary, as well as in Christian

sanctuaries across our world, is a constant reminder to us Christians, of that great sacrifice.

OVER THE YEARS, my Christian faith has taught me many things. And, one of the things it has taught me, is that there is a sacredness in sacrificing one's self, for the well-being of others.

Such sacrifices are never without meaning. And they should always be respected, for the God-like acts of love that they are.

As we heard in our second scripture reading this morning, from the *Gospel According to John*, Jesus spoke to his disciples before his arrest, saying,

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.* John 15:12-13

IN OUR DAY TO DAY WORLD, we see so much self-seeking, and even brazen selfishness in action. And, it is hard, if not impossible sometimes, to get caught up in such behavior ourselves.

- ~ Drivers compete with one another on our roadways.
- ~ Parents ignore principles of fairness and push their own children ahead of other children.
- ~ Corporate executives greedily steal from their own companies.
- ~ Store shoppers, and particularly on Black Friday, shove, push, and even trample over others to claim a bargain for themselves.

Our morning newspapers are full of such accounts.

Yet, in the midst of it all, one sometimes encounters real acts of goodness and selflessness, acts in which, people have really put themselves on the line, in one way or another for someone else.

And, encountering that, encountering such God-like love for

one's fellow human beings, I cannot help but feel humbled and thankful. And with those deep feelings stirring within me, tears sometimes come to the surface.

I feel that way:

- about firemen who rush into burning buildings to save human lives;
- about the passengers on Flight 93 which crashed in Pennsylvania--those passengers who ultimately sacrificed themselves, to prevent their jet from hurting others, on that tragic morning of 9/11; and,
- about our military personnel, who risk great danger, and sometimes lose their lives, so that the freedoms I, and all of us, are blessed to know, love, and enjoy in our country, are preserved.

The fact, is, as a modern American, I am deeply indebted to many who have gone on before me--many who have made that ultimate sacrifice of their own lives, for our free way of life.

AS I THINK ABOUT this video, another thought crosses my mind. As a Christian, I have to acknowledge that there is a seeming inconsistency in our faith, which I sometimes struggle with internally. That inconsistency goes back deep to the roots of our religion.

As you heard in our Old Testament scripture reading this morning, from *I Chronicles*, God chose David to be the great King of Israel. Yet, when it came to building God's great temple in Jerusalem, God would not allow David to build it. Why not?

As that scripture passage says, David could not do it, because he was a warrior and he had shed blood.

PEOPLE SOMETIMES DEFINE Christian discipleship as "doing what Jesus would do." Some years back, many Christian young people were wearing bracelets with the letters WWJD on them. Those letters stood for the key question: "What Would Jesus Do?"

By and large, I define my own Christian discipleship, as trying to do what Jesus would do. To mention a few points: in my life I try to follow the example of Jesus, by being loving, forgiving, honest, and not vengeful in my relationships with others.

But, here's where the internal struggle comes. In my understanding of the historical Jesus, he was not willing to use violence to accomplish his ends. Also, even though many people wanted Jesus to bring political freedom to Israel, by forcing the Roman occupiers out, that was not a goal Jesus supported.

And, when Good Friday came, and Pilate was willing to release one prisoner, whom did the crowd support? The crowd did not support the release of Jesus--who said "turn the other cheek."

Rather, the crowd supported the release of Barabbas, who likely was in prison, because he had fought for the freedom for his homeland, Israel. [Mark 15:7]

As a Christian, the following questions occur to me: What would Jesus do today?

- ~ Would he join our Armed Forces?
- ~ Would he join even a police force?
- ~ Would he enter the struggle of keeping our great nation free?

TO BE FRANK, I sometimes find that my Christian discipleship has to move beyond the basic question of, "What Would Jesus Do." I have to move beyond it, to consider a larger picture. And, that larger picture is this.

The earliest generations of Jesus' followers seem to have been essentially pacifistic. Those followers seem to have been trying to emulate completely, Jesus' personal example of love and non-violence.

In that early period, Jesus and his followers were always subjects of the state, not citizens. They were subjects of the state, who had little power and little responsibility

for the well-being of the state.

But then, in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. there was a great reversal. The Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity a legalized religion in the Roman Empire. With that change, Christians became citizens for the first time.

And, for the first time, Christians began to bear the responsibility for maintaining the well-being of all the people who lived in the Empire.

With this dramatic reversal in their life situation, many Christians came to believe, that although it wasn't what Jesus might have done, the use of armed force and wars, though unfortunate, was sometimes absolutely necessary, in order to preserve: the state, its people, its cherished values such as freedom, and its honored institutions, including the Christian Church itself.

This change in thinking was so dramatic, that a century after Constantine, the Roman army was filled with Christians. In fact, at that time, one had to be a Christian, in order to enter the Roman army.

From that point on, and as the centuries passed, most Christians came to believe, that armed force and even wars, are sometimes necessary. Yet, even in accepting that belief, Christians also sought to express their loyalty to Christ, by setting some limits on the violence they would use.

A major example of such limit-setting, is that Christians created, what we today call, the "just war theory."

YES, AS I THINK ABOUT THIS VIDEO, I have to acknowledge that there is this inconsistency in our faith, which I sometimes struggle with. I think of this inconsistency, and I am reminded, that sometimes, the role of being a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, is not always as clear cut as one might wish it to be.

This video also reminds me, that equally sincere Christians can disagree strongly, as to which wars are just and which wars are absolutely necessary for our nation to fight.

Being in a war, can create a lot of division in a free society--such as our nation experienced during the Vietnam War.

Yet, in the midst of all the possible divisions and different views Christians have about war itself, or about a particular war, I find myself always coming back to one essential teaching of Jesus.

It's a teaching which I think I, and all Christians, should always respect and honor, even despite our differences. And that one essential teaching is this. As Jesus said:

*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES as a child, is going out to New London's town cemetery on Memorial Day with my mother. We went there to solemnly place a pot or two of bright red geraniums in front of the white military gravestone of my maternal grandfather.

My grandfather didn't fight in a war. But, it was my mother's way of paying respect to him, and to his military colleagues, who sometimes risked great danger, and sometimes lost their lives, so that the freedoms we all enjoy in our country, are preserved.

In the words of the guitarist in that video:

*In peace may they rest, May we never forget,  
Why they died -- It's a pittance of time.*

#### ENDNOTES

1. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kX\\_3y3u5Uo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kX_3y3u5Uo)
2. <https://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/lotter1>  
<https://www.sss.gov/Portals/0/PDFs/1970.pdf>