

Veterans Day Sermon
10 November 2019
Gospel: Matthew 8: 5-13
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
Terry Arata-Maiers, PsyD

Call to Service

Over twenty-three years ago I drove up to Brooke Army Medical Center full of trepidation. Not unlike today in fact. I did not come from an overtly military family and since my father, grandfather, and uncles didn't talk much about their military experiences, my knowledge of military families at that time came from Pat Conroy novels – alcoholic, abusive fathers; alcoholic, depressed mothers; and wild, rebellious children. No wonder I was a bit intimidated at the start my fellowship.

I soon discovered that military personnel are not a monolith but have wildly divergent political views and join the military for many different reasons – for a job, an education, exciting missions, and, of course, patriotism. Only a few enjoy war because most know the reality of war personally. I also discovered that the bedrock of service is faith, a trust in authority such as was seen in the centurion in today's gospel.

Early on I needed to know more about military families. I was curious about how military kids might be different from civilian children, so I asked my peers – many of them had been in the military or the reserves or were part of a military family. I quickly discovered it was like asking a fish to describe water. Generally, all they could come up with was 'they move a lot' which is true, usually every three to four years. Now, admittedly this was in the mid-90s during peacetime.

So I started to research the military family and found out that in World War II we had a mostly bachelor army. There was a saying back then, 'If the Army wanted you to have a wife [or a family], it would have issued you one.' After World War II some of those bachelors remained in the military during the Cold War so that by the 1960s the military looked much like the civilian sector with a working father and a stay-at-home mom. The military was predominantly male, a patriarchy. On officer evaluations at the time, there was a section for rating the officer's wife on how well she was functioning as a military spouse. If a female service member did marry, she could request a military discharge; if she became pregnant, she had no choice – she had to be discharged. In 1973 the military became volunteer so that over the years the military has come to reflect the changes in broader society – significant numbers of female service members, single parent families, same sex spouses, and transgendered service members.

I found out that in terms of mental health military children were much like their civilian peers with a slightly higher tendency to have ADHD. During peacetime their parents on the other hand are actually mentally healthier than their civilian peers due at least in part to the mental health standards incoming service members must meet to join the military.

This is not to say that military kids don't experience military specific stressors, some of which civilian families also encounter – the children of police and other first responders have parents in dangerous occupations; the children of clergy and executives tolerate frequent moves, heavy workloads, and difficulties integrating into the community due to their parents' occupations; the children of athletes face parental absences and the uncertainties of early parental retirement. Unlike their civilian counterparts, military children deal with all these stressors. Military families serve too, and their faith sustains a lot of challenges.

Let me provide a few examples from peacetime and wartime. The challenges of moving for military children are illustrated in a scene from *The Great Santini* by Pat Conroy. The Meecham family is waiting on the tarmac for the father to return and mother has just broken the news that they are moving yet again. Younger daughter Karen begins complaining about not wanting to move and leave her friends behind. Her mother tells Karen she understands, but their father has orders, and they'll be back to visit. Karen reminds her that's what she said the last two times they moved, and they haven't been back to either place. Enter Mary Anne, Karen's older sister experienced in the ways of military children.

'You're absolutely right, Karen,' Mary Anne said to her sister matter-of-factly, 'you'll never see Belinda or Kate or Tina or Louise again. They're as good as dead.'

'Don't you start spreading dissension, Mary Anne. I want Dad's homecoming to be absolutely perfect.'

'Yes, ma'am,' Mary Anne said. Then in a whispered aside to Karen, she said, 'They're all dead, Karen. They're as good as dead. But don't worry, you'll make lots of new friends in this town we're moving to. Wonderful friends. Then Dad will get orders again and they'll all be dead too.'

With the advent of social media, keeping connected to friends who've moved is easier these days, but military kids do move more often and greater distances than their civilian peers. They often attend six to nine different schools before graduating from high school. In response to this fact of military life, many military children become adept at making friends and getting involved in their communities as they move from place to place.

After 9/11, we as a society became much more aware of the sacrifices and service of our military families. Originally children and adults alike thought that the most common effect of the wars would be loss of life. With advances in medicine, evacuation systems, and military protective gear, less than 9% of Americans injured in combat die. This is a significant improvement from the 16.5% in Viet Nam and the almost 23% in World War II who did not survive their injuries. It's very reassuring to children whose parents are deploying to put 100 pennies on the floor, tell them those 100 pennies stand for all the service members who've deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and ask them to pick up the number of pennies they think stands for Americans who've died. How many would you pick up? Most children scoop up a

handful. In reality, not even one penny is needed to represent the number of Americans who have died. Not that each death wasn't a tragic loss of life for the service member, their family, and community. The likelihood is far higher, though, that a parent will sustain physical or psychological injuries than die, although, it must be emphasized, most service members return from deployment uninjured, physically or mentally.

For children whose parents return with injuries, the adjustment to those injuries continues over their lifetimes as they move through different developmental stages. The six-year-old girl who loves bringing her father a cup of water to help him take his medicine will soon be the middle schooler who is embarrassed that she even has parents, let alone a parent who looks so different from other parents. And sometimes it is the changes to the child's life that are hardest to endure. The daughter of an injured Reservist from the Midwest had never lived on a military base or gone to a military school or spent Christmas without her extended family or gone an entire winter without playing in the snow, nor had she been bitten by a fire ant or hospitalized by a spider bite, all of which happened to her for the first time in Texas while her father was in treatment. She was very glad he recovered, but she was even happier to get out of Texas!

Sometimes the most difficult thing for young children is to make sense of their parent being injured and for a parent, to talk to the child about the injury. The mother of a three-year-old reported to me that after her husband's injury, her son suddenly developed a fascination with sharks and began to refuse to take baths. Dad's leg had been injured by an IED [an improvised explosive device]; mom thought their son would be scared to hear his father had been hit by a bomb, so she told him nothing other than that Dad's leg was hurt. She and I tried to make connections and sense out of her son's new behaviors. Mom said she thought he was afraid there were sharks in the bath water. Why sharks? Why sharks all of a sudden? Then she realized she must have repeated aloud her husband's words during their first phone call after he was injured; he had told her, 'It looks like a shark bit me'. In the absence of other information, her son made what sense he could out of what he overheard. Before the week was out, Mom found a way to tell her son what had actually happened to Dad's leg and taking baths was no longer a problem.

In 2009 I began to work for another organization within the military where I see soldiers and military families via tele-behavioral health, that is, through video-teleconferencing similar to Skype or FaceTime, but more secure. This technology allows us to provide treatment to remote, underserved locations where patients would otherwise have to spend extensive time and money to access treatment more than an hour away.

As a requirement of the new job I had to become a civil servant. To my surprise on my first day I had to swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic. I later learned that the oath I swore was word for word the same oath military officers take. I also discovered that while the federal civil service system was set up in 1871, some people trace the civil service back to the Constitution itself where Article 1, section 8 gives Congress the responsibility of supporting the Army and maintaining the Navy.

I came into civil service with some ambivalence. I had heard the phrase ‘good enough for government work’ enough to know that some people disparaged government workers. The phrase suggests products and work that are slipshod and mediocre at best. I discovered that this expression originated during World War II and at that time meant exactly the opposite of what it means today. It referred to the rigorous, exacting quality standards equipment had to pass in order to be used by the military in the Second World War. When I think about my peers working with service members and military families at such a critical time in their lives, and I see the people around me regularly work much longer than the forty hours for which they’re paid in order to serve their patients, I think they resemble the original meaning of ‘good enough for government work’.

In our gospel reading today Jesus is amazed during his interactions with the centurion. What is it that amazes Jesus? This centurion, whose title suggests that he has 100 soldiers under his command, behaves in a manner anyone with exposure to military personnel would recognize. It was the same back then as it is now. The command structure dictates that soldiers carry out the legitimate orders of those with authority over them. And a good military leader cares deeply for those serving under his command, as the centurion cares for his servant.

And Jesus was no stranger to the military. He lived in an occupied territory. With a closer look into the Gospels, we find soldiers being baptized by John, helping restore the temple, and later in Jesus’ life, arresting him in the Garden of Gethsemane and attending the High Priest and Pilate and Herod. Soldiers carry out the execution of Jesus and guard his tomb. So Jesus was not stranger to the military.

Perhaps what amazes Jesus about this soldier is that the centurion’s knowledge of the military enables him to realize something about Jesus that hasn’t even occurred to Jesus’ civilian followers – Jesus does not need to be present to work the miracle of healing his servant. The centurion knows how authority works and he believes strongly in the authority and leadership of Jesus. He trusts in Jesus and Jesus’ authority and so receives one of the most unexpected miracles of all.

Let me leave you with a few questions. The former teacher in me can’t resist. What do the lives of our veterans, service members, military family members, and civil servants have to teach us about faith, trust, and service? In whom do you place your faith? Whose authority do you recognize and trust? How does your faith lead you to serve?

Amen