

Triumphant Living

One of my favorite journals is the Queens Quarterly, a Canadian review of fiction and non-fiction. In the most recent issue the magazine had a story about a young man from Mississippi by the name of Johnny who enlisted in the Army during World War II, became friends with a Roman Catholic priest by the name of Chaplain Dan, got sent to Europe, fought on the beach of Normandy on D-Day in 1944 and was killed by machine gun fire later that year, just days before Christmas. (1)

Johnny never made it home, but he was willing to give his life for a cause greater than him. He took inspiration from President Roosevelt's D-Day radio address. It was the first time a President went on radio to lead the nation in prayer. I urge everyone to go on the internet and read that prayer – it is heartfelt and deeply moving, reflective of a world-defining moment in history. The President prayed:

“Almighty God: Our sons, the pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity. Lead them straight

and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness to their faith. They will need Thy blessings. The road will be long and hard. ...They will be sore tried by night and by day, without rest until the victory is won. The darkness will be rent by noise and flame. Men's souls will be shaken with the violence of war. ...Some will never return. Embrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants into Thy kingdom. ...Thy will be done, Almighty God."

Yesterday was Veterans' Day when our nation honored all those veterans who have served our country with valor and distinction. Whatever we think about some of the wars in which our country was and is involved, we never should fail to give thanks for those who fought and died in them. Some like Johnny never made it home. Others who managed to survive and return home often did so with the loss of limbs or the loss of their mental or emotional faculties – PTSD syndrome or some other malady. Some have never been able to put their lives back together again, while others like President George Herbert Walker Bush or Senators John McCain and Tammy Duckworth have made important contributions to the nation.

It has been said that freedom is not free; there is always

a price to be paid. The men and women who have served in our Armed Forces have paid that price. I need not remind you that with all the problems our country is facing today, and they are considerable, we are still blessed to live in a vibrant democracy where every church has the freedom to worship God as it chooses; where people can practice their faith without fear of persecution; where the press can challenge the government's version of the truth without being censored; and where dissenters can speak their mind on any topic, even if their speech is offensive. These freedoms have not come lightly or without price. They are not enjoyed by the people of North Korea, or Iran, or China, or Russia, or in other parts of the world, but they are taken for granted by us in the United States. When I think of those who paid the price so that we can exercise our freedom, I am profoundly grateful.

When I was a chaplain in the United States Army Reserve in 1990, there were rumors that the nation might go to war. Iraq had invaded Kuwait, and there was a sense that a major conflict was at hand. As part of the preparation for deployment, the troops were gathered together and told to write or revise their wills in case any of us were killed.

As it turned out, Heather and I had just updated our will, but I kept asking myself, “What if I had less than a year to live?” How would I live my life if I knew the end was at hand? What changes would I make? Would I do anything different? How would I view the world knowing that there would come a time when I no longer would be here?

On this Veterans’ Day weekend, I think about those questions still. Many brave men and women in our Armed Forces have asked those questions, in light of the possibility of their own deaths. These are the people who fought, and in some cases died, in two world wars, on the Korean Peninsula, in Vietnam, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan; the Middle East and on the African continent.

You and I may not die in combat, but someday we will die. That thought should not fill us with dread. St. Paul says in today’s epistle that we do not grieve “as those who have no hope.” We believe that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise us as well. Death is not the end of life, God is.

Let me ask you a question: Are you living a hopeful life? By that I mean: are you living as if the best is yet to

come? Are you living confidently, courageously, that at the end of history life will defeat death, love will conquer hate, truth will prove mightier than the lie, and hope will overcome despair? Are you living in such a way that you truly believe, that amidst all the turmoil and upheavals in our world, God reigns?

More than 70 years ago, at the end of World War II, there was a cluster of remarkable leaders ready to show a demoralized international community broken by the carnage of war that there were still grounds for hope: America's Harry Truman, England's Ernest Bevin, Germany's Konrad Adenauer, and Italy's Alcide De Gasperi. Winston Churchill was still around to sound the trumpet-tones of his oratory. In the 1930s, as the fires of civilization were burning low; it was Churchill – the only giant in a generation of appeasers and tyrants – who spoke the authentic tones of democracy and decency.

In world of immense economic, political and social upheaval, we need leaders like that today – as well as ordinary men and women like you and me – to stand and work for the deepest human values and beliefs that make life worthwhile. So where do we begin?

You start by resolving to make this world a better place

by your living in it. For most people, life is a draw. They leave the world as they found it. They live, they work, they retire, and then they die. And the world is no better – or worse – for having them been here. They are nice people. It's just they have made no lasting impression – no lasting contribution.

When I was a priest in San Diego, I met a remarkable man at the Veterans' Hospital. As we were waiting for the elevator, we struck up a conversation. He told me he was a volunteer who had been coming to the hospital almost every week for 15 years, to visit the veterans. Since he wasn't an ordained minister, I asked how he got involved in such work. He said he responded to an ad in the newspaper asking for volunteers to visit the veterans. When I started to praise him for his commitment, he stopped me. "No, Father, these veterans give me far more than I give them. They served their country faithfully. I figure the least I can do is to offer them some companionship."

And then he went on to say, "The sad part about it is, as these men and women get older, fewer and fewer people come to visit them. They get lonely, feel forgotten. That's where I come in. I am here to tell them we still care about them and thank them for a job well

done in serving their country.”

Here was a man, an ordinary fellow like you and me, who was doing something quite extraordinary – caring about others by serving the ones who served their country. In the process, he was getting far more than he gave.

It happens, doesn't it? You save your life by giving it away. You think of others and not just yourself, and in the process, you make the world a better place for everyone.

So first, make this world a better place by your living in it. And second, leave this world a legacy of love.

There are some people who leave this world and nobody misses them. Why? Their main concern in life was themselves – their needs, their opportunities, their burdens. Only a few persons seem to get out of themselves and live for others.

Imagine being a person of Jewish descent living in Poland in the 1930s. Nazi forces are advancing across Europe. Jews are being rounded up and arrested. Their possessions are confiscated, their homes destroyed.

Most Jewish people are sent to concentration camps, where they face beatings, torture, forced labor, starvation and mass executions.

Many of these Jewish people coped with their losses by writing what has been called “ethical will.” Since they had nothing of material value to bequeathed to future generations, they wrote wills stating who they were, and what they valued most in life, and the values they wanted to pass on to their children and grandchildren.

(2)

What would you include if you were writing an ethical will for your children and grandchildren? I suspect that most of us would want to leave a legacy of kindness and compassion and decency and generosity. As we take our final breath, we would want to look back on our life and feel that we have made some worthwhile contribution in the world – that we are leaving this world a better place because of our passing through it.

We have all been blessed by God, every one of us. We live in the greatest country on earth, in one of the most beautiful states, and in the wealthiest part of Arizona. We enjoy freedom, prosperity, peace and security. We have excellent medical care and our quality of life is one

that most people in the world can only envy. We have family and friends and the church. Above all, we have a God who has blessed us to be a blessing to others, a God who in Jesus Christ has given us life without end so that we might be life-givers to the world.

So what kind of legacy will you leave this life? The Chinese missionary Father James Peyton answered, “It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.” We may not be able to light the whole world, but we can light our portion of it, in our own place and in our own way, according to the resources and abilities that God has given us. We can speak the truth, refuse the lie, express our love and never let hate take hold of our hearts.

I shall never forget my college buddy Conrad. He dropped out of college in his second year to serve in the Army. Just as he was about to deploy for Vietnam, he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. Conrad was an ordinary guy, but there was something heroic about his death. I once asked him, “Aren’t you angry about what’s happening to you? Don’t you feel cheated in life?” Gently, Conrad replied, “You see, Gary, it’s like this. I never let the cancer touch my heart.” At that moment, I knew that I was speaking with a person

who was ready to die.

Dear friends, no one knows how much time we have left on this earth, but sooner or later we will die. The brave men and women we remember this weekend served their country with courage and dedication, and some made the ultimate sacrifice with their lives. In life and in death they served their country. Who will we serve – and just as importantly, what are we prepared to live for and even die for? What commands our allegiance, demands our sacrifice, and warrants our best efforts?

So on this Veterans Day weekend, say a prayer for our veterans, give thanks for them, and remember their sacrifices. Then resolve to give your best efforts to make this world a more compassionate and decent place for all. Never forget that at the end of history God wins, Christ wins, love wins against all the forces of evil, chaos, and destruction. Live with the end in mind. Act courageously, faithfully and boldly, because God has blessed you to be a blessing to others.

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November 12, 2017

Text – I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Proper 27, A

- 1. Douglas Babington, “Bivouac Prayers” (The Queens Quarterly, Fall 2017) 333-347.**
- 2. Dick Capen in The Transparent Leader by Dwight L. Johnson (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2001), 161-163.**