

Sermon: Going Tribal
Scripture: Luke 7:1-10
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: May 29, 2016

Did you know that half of our American military veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan struggle enough when they return home that they apply for permanent disability. Half of them. And of those, a third have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. And yet strangely enough only 10% of our armed forces in these wars have seen direct combat. What's more "decade after decade, war after war, American combat deaths have dropped steadily while trauma and disability claims have continued to rise." Such statistics led the journalist and documentarian Sabastian Junger to begin a serious exploration of these trends in our military and his conclusions are spelled out in a recent book and a Vanity Fair article from last year called "How PTSD became a problem far beyond the battlefield." Now that we are on Twitter, I tweeted the article there for you to access. He writes:

Decade after decade, war after war, American combat deaths have dropped steadily while trauma and disability claims have continued to rise. Soldiers in Vietnam suffered roughly one-quarter the casualty rate of troops in World War II, for example, but filed for disability at a rate that was nearly 50 percent higher, according to a 2013 report in the *Journal of Anxiety Disorders....* and those trends have continued.

He takes into account the outliers who on one side are merely taking advantage of the system and on the other those who are severely debilitated either physically or mentally and then goes on to say:

[Our veterans] return from wars that are safer than those their fathers and grandfathers fought, and yet far greater numbers of them wind up alienated and depressed. This is true even for

people who didn't experience combat. In other words, the problem doesn't seem to be trauma on the battlefield so much as re-entry into [our] society.

Junger suggests there is something fundamentally off about modern American society that makes returning from war and re-entering a traumatic thing in and of itself. In Junger's view, the issue lies in the tribal experience and identity that is present in war and the lack of community in our modern technologically advanced society. Without mincing words he writes:

A modern soldier returning from combat goes from the kind of close-knit situation that humans evolved for into a society where most people work outside the home, children are educated by strangers, families are isolated from wider communities, personal gain almost completely eclipses collective good, and people sleep alone or with a [single] partner. Even if he or she is in a family, that is not the same as belonging to a large, self-sufficient group that shares and experiences almost everything collectively.

Then he lays down the gauntlet and says

Whatever the technological advances of modern society—and they're nearly miraculous—the individual lifestyles that those technologies spawn may be deeply brutalizing to the human spirit.

Could it be that our advanced, post-modern, individualistic world with all the comforts and wealth that we have come to crave, work for and expect is “deeply brutalizing to the human spirit.” Have you ever suspected that? That despite the beauty, wealth, and opportunity around us, something deeper is missing or has been lost? Junger says it's the lack of community or tribe to call one's. It's revealed in the return of soldiers but it's true for most of us in our society.

Can we stop for a moment and consider then the great importance of what we are doing here? Here in the church in 21st century America. We are offering a place of potential deep community in a society of individualized, alienated people who might even be traumatized, some of them, by the paucity or privation of that most basic human need for community. And what we have here are the ancient words of wisdom from our Bible and the potent act of worshipping God that are critical tools for the formation and building of the right kind of community... and a caution against the wrong kind.

The Gospels share the story of Jesus building the right kind of community and he does it by crossing all sorts of illicit boundaries between groups, communities, tribes that in his day and age were NOT to be crossed. The Luke 7 passage is a perfect example. So there's Jesus and his ragtag tribe of followers surrounding him who he called together and said they were his new family – who is my family, those who do the will of the Father, that's who! - And they enter a town called Capernaum where he is engaged in this long-distance dialogue through friends and town-folk with a Centurion of the Roman Empire. The Centurion says something and it is relayed to Jesus and Jesus says something back and it is relayed to the Centurion and back and forth. Man, would they have had their minds blown by the ease of texting!

In any case, the Centurion was a commander of about 80 soldiers of the occupying Roman Empire stationed in various regions to keep control over the populus. Jesus could very well have received this request to help the Centurion's slave and refused as a sign of passive resistance to the evil of the Roman Empire. Surely there were

some of his disciples and other Jews who would have thought it to be the only appropriate response. But Jesus hears of the Centurion's need and begins walking to his house. Word gets back to the Centurion that Jesus is coming and the Centurion sends word back to Jesus saying "I am not worthy to have you under my roof but only say the word my servant will be healed..." embarrassed smiley face emoji!

Many of you who grew up as Catholic know this passage well in the Gospel of Luke, because it becomes in the Catholic tradition a critical and central moment in the mass celebration – that before one receives the Eucharist into the house of one's body you must say – "I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." It is said by all those gathered whether you are the CEO of a fortune 500 company and make 385 times that of your lowest worker or whether you are the lowest worker himself, the two of you are both saying together with head bowed to the God of your life – "I am not worthy to receive you." It is a beautiful and important confession and is essential for deep community, because we have to continually remind ourselves as Christians that there are not some more deserving and worthy than others. Our society not only fosters that notion but thrives off of it and confessing that we are not worthy is a counter-cultural response. We do not make ourselves worthy but we are worthy because God makes us. To the high, mighty, and privileged it knocks us down a peg, that we unworthy except by God. To the lowly and downtrodden it lifts them up to where they need to be – that they are made worthy by God. "I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but only say the word and my slave shall be healed."

And Jesus is amazed! The only time in all the Gospels that Jesus is amazed by another instead of everyone being amazed by him and it is a Roman warrior who he is amazed by. Amazed by his faith and his humility. And the Centurion's slave is made well.

Notice that Jesus doesn't tell the Centurion how wrong he is to have a slave or how evil the empire is that employs him to do his duty. Jesus goes right into the relationship with the Centurion and his slave and offers what is needed. I imagine that whole moment forever changes the Centurion and the slaves relationship, maybe the whole towns relationship with one another. Not only is the Centurion worthy and deserving of Jesus' attention despite the fact that many Jews of that town would have disagreed, but the slave is worthy and deserving of Jesus' healing power and attention. Even the slave. And Jesus walks out of Capernaum having broken down the walls and opened up the boundaries that separated people into different tribes and classes and races. And in the footsteps where he trod, communities blossomed. But these were communities not based upon human likenesses and similarities and privileges, but communities gathered in devotion to God. Not communities formed by an in-group over and against an out-group, which is the most common form of tribalism and problematic community, but rather a new tribe bound together by and through and for the purposes of God where the only outsiders are there for the loving and if anything to welcomed into the tribe.

It is so important that we get this right, so important that we allow God, I guess I should say, to get this right through us. The new tribe and deep community called the church should be a place where not only young and old, black and white, male and female (and

whoever's identity is somewhere in-between) come together, but also where soldier and pacifist, company owner and company worker, republican and democrat, free and incarcerated, abuser and abused come together under the roof of the one body of Christ. This was the original vision, that in Christ there would be neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free, but only one people, a community in Christ, not built over and against anyone else but built for the sake of God's purposes of love. We need to make sure as a church that we are not bound together merely under similarities of class and race and privilege but really clearly under Christ alone... then deep community will be forged and Christ's presence and power will be evident. And when soldiers or peacemakers or whomever return from their tours of duty across the world or in the office building down the road, brutalized from the dog eat dog world, they will have a community to envelope them and love them back to health and hope.

Sabastian Junger ends his article by suggesting that our society has been "spiritually cannabilizing itself for generations" by emphasizing individualism and autonomy at the expense of community. He concludes the article by saying "We keep wondering how we can save the veterans but the real question is how do we save ourselves. If we do that then veterans will be just fine. If we don't, it won't matter anyway." And I would suggest that it's not about saving ourselves but about allowing God to do the saving and the church is a wonderful place for that project. Let's work prayerfully together to make deep tribal community here where people can come from a dangerously dehumanizing culture and be enveloped and become more fully human in Jesus name, Amen.