

TITLE: "Taps"

TEXT: Matthew 8:5-13 (NT p. 8)

⁵When [Jesus] entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." ⁷And [Jesus] said to him, "I will come and cure him." ⁸The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ¹⁰When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." ¹³And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour.

Introduction – Those who died in service (Filed under "Memorial Day")

One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed little Alex standing in the foyer of the church staring up at a large plaque. It was covered with names and small American flags were mounted on either side of it.

The six-year-old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside the boy, and said quietly, "Good morning, Alex."

"Good morning," he replied, still focused on the plaque.

"Pastor, what is this?" he asked.

"Well son, it's a memorial to all the men and women who died in the service."

Soberly, they just stood together, staring at the large plaque. Finally, little Alex's voice (barely audible and trembling with fear) asked, "WHICH service, the 8:30 or the 11:00?"

This is Memorial Day Sunday I will be preaching about service. NOT church service, but military service.

1. This centurion cared about others

Let's look at the text. ⁵When [Jesus] entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." ⁷And [Jesus] said to [the centurion], "I will come and cure him."

What is a centurion? In the Roman army, a centurion was the commanding officer of 100 foot soldiers. Most were career soldiers and they were the most experienced and best-informed men in the army. Centurions were paid very well and the centurion in the text was wealthy. From the account in Luke, we read that he loved the Jewish nation and built the synagogue in which they worshiped.

This centurion came to Jesus because one of his servants had been stricken with paralysis. One COULD imagine that he wanted his servant to get better so that he could get back to work, but that is not the sense of the text. This centurion told Jesus that his slave was "in terrible distress" which indicates that he was primarily concerned about relieving the man's suffering.

2. This centurion understood God's authority

The centurion knew about authority. Anyone who has been in the military knows about authority. After two weeks of basic training, Private Bret Mathews called home. "You wouldn't BELIEVE how strict they are," he complained. "They even give demerits for things like not hanging your towel straight or not tightening the cap of your toothpaste tube!" ... "Well dear," his mother replied, "don't think of it as basic training. Think of it as a mother's revenge" (*Reader's Digest* 9/88 – "Mother's Day")

As we see in the text, the centurion understood authority. He said to Jesus: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."

The centurion obviously knew a lot about Jesus before he went to him. In fact, he seems to have known more, at that point, than the DISCIPLES. The centurion knew that Jesus had the power of God. He also knew that evil spirits and various illnesses and medical conditions were under the authority of Jesus, so that when Jesus told the paralysis to go, his slave was healed.

Whether you know it or not, you ARE under the authority of God. So am I. Sometimes it takes a crisis for a person to realize God's authority ("Memorial Day").

Slava Borisov was a high-ranking Russian general during the war between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan when his helicopter was shot down. A Communist and avowed atheist, the general cried out to God to spare his life. The eleven others on board with him—his entire staff—were killed.

"I pledged to serve [God] and I dedicated my life to Him from that moment on," Borisov said. He now heads Russia's new military chaplaincy and has helped to distribute more than 300,000 New Testaments to personnel on military bases. His goal is to give Bibles to all of Russia's 2.5 million soldiers

You and I are under the authority of God and we are accountable TO God. The centurion understood this and the text says: For, ¹⁰When Jesus heard [what the centurion said], he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith."

3. This centurion was humble

This centurion was humble. He was the officer who represented the Roman Empire. His army had completely vanquished the whole of the Middle East. At his command, a person could be scourged or crucified. He could have COMMANDED Jesus to heal his servant and there was absolutely NO reason he had to defer to Jesus. Yet this Roman officer addressed Jesus as "Lord," and declared himself unworthy to have Jesus come to his house. This was an exceptionally humble centurion.

You can't have faith without humility. That is why humility, before God, is ESSENTIAL. That is why Jesus says, "It is the MEEK who will inherit the earth." Only those who are meek, who are humble, before God will be happy in the kingdom of heaven.

⁹[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

You can’t have faith without humility. That is why God says: “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that God may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on [God], because [God] cares for you” (I Peter 5:6,7).

4. What is Jesus DIDN’T say

What amazes ME is what Jesus DIDN’T say. Jesus did NOT say: ‘The Roman Army is the iron hand that is oppressing our people and if you want God’s help in your life, you must resign your commission and get out of the Army.’

I mention this because many of my colleagues in ministry believe that people should not serve in the military. While I respect their right to believe what they wish, I do NOT share their beliefs. ...Don’t get me wrong. I hate war. I hate the loss of military and civilian lives; the physical and emotional casualties of military personnel and civilians; and the destruction of property. Some of my colleagues point this out and say, “David, how can you believe war can possibly be worth it?”

And I say, “To me, WWII put an end to Nazism, and to me Nazism was evil. I am not saying that every soldier who wore a Nazi uniform was evil. I am saying the belief system and those immersed in it who tortured and killed millions of people were evil. And my dad and many uncles and many I know here in town fought in WWII. And they can tell you better than I if it was worth it. But to me, yes it was. And it still is.

Although the Korean War and the Vietnam War did not put an end to Communism, it was part of the process that brought many oppressive, Godless Communist regimes to an end. I can’t help thinking that the end of the Soviet Union and the taking down of the Berlin wall were the direct result of those wars.

I am often asked, “What about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq?” I was against starting the War in Iraq. I was because I did not believe that the vast majority of Iraqis really wanted democracy. I have seen little to indicate that they do. But once the decision was made, I supported our government and our military. Carol and I prayed each day for those in our congregation who served there and, thank God, each returned safely.

Let me say that the wars are NOT against Moslems, the majority of whom are kind, loving and peaceful people. The wars are against radical militant Moslems who are attempting to destroy Christians, western culture and democracy by whatever means necessary. I am not sure that every decision made by our government and military leaders is right and I'm sure not all are wrong. I DO know that a world run by radical militant Moslems is NOT a world I want to live in.

So I support those who feel called to serve in the military. My grandfather served in WWI. My dad served in WWII. My nephew Philip is a Christian and he feels that God has called him to a military career. He graduated college and was commissioned a naval officer last week. His first deployment is to Hawaii. It's a BRUTAL assignment, but someone has to do it.

I respect those who died serving our country in the military as well as those men and women who were wounded, physically and emotionally, and those who were prisoners of war. I try to stick around on Memorial Day weekend, and Independence Day weekend and Veterans Day weekend so I can honor them.

Conclusion – “Taps”

I want to close with a story by Diane O. Sides (*Pulpit Helps* 7/01): ...We have all heard the haunting melody “Taps.” But do you know the story behind the song? ...Reportedly, it all began 1862 during the Civil War, when Union Army Captain Robert Ellicombe was with his men near Harrison's Landing in Virginia. The Confederate Army was on the other side of the narrow strip of land.

During the night, Captain Ellicombe heard the moans of a soldier who lay severely wounded on the field. Not knowing if it was a Union or Confederate soldier, the captain decided to risk his life and bring the stricken man back for medical attention. Crawling on his stomach, the captain reached the stricken soldier and began pulling him toward his encampment.

When the captain finally reached his own lines, he discovered that it was actually a Confederate soldier, but the soldier was dead. The captain lit a lantern and suddenly caught his breath and went numb with shock. In the dim light, he had seen the face of the soldier and saw that it was his own son. The boy had been studying music in the South when the war broke out. Without telling his father, the boy enlisted in the Confederate Army.

The following morning, heartbroken, the father asked permission of his superiors to give his son a full military funeral ...and asked if he could have a group of army band members play a funeral dirge. The request was turned down since the soldier was a Confederate. But, out of respect for the father, they did say he could have one musician.

The captain chose a bugler. He asked him to play a series of musical notes he had found on a piece of paper in the pocket of his son’s uniform. This wish was granted. The haunting melody we know as “Taps,” used at military funerals, was born.

Here are the words:

*Day is done, Gone the sun
From the lakes, From the hills
From the sky, All is well,
Safely rest, God is nigh.*

*Fading light, Dims the sight
And a star, Gems the sky,
Gleaming bright, From afar,
Drawing nigh, Falls the night.*

*Thanks and Praise, For our days,
“Neath the sun, “Neath the stars,
“Neath the sky, As we go,
This we know, God is nigh.*

Those able, please stand.

Scott plays Taps.

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Amen.