

Greater Love
John 15:9-21

It was on this day of the year at this hour that the First World War ended in 1918, 100 years ago. That hour was supposed to mark the conclusion of what President Wilson called the “War to End War.” He also called it a “war to make the world safe for democracy.” Well, he wasn’t exactly right, was he? All the veterans who served in all the wars in the last century can attest to that fact.

No, Wilson wasn’t right because in spite of all his burning idealism, he forgot some basic, stubborn truths about sin and about the human race. In today’s passage, Jesus warned His disciples about some of those truths. He told them that the world, those who rejected Jesus, would reject His followers also. Jesus said that His followers and the world were diametrically opposed. Jesus said that while His disciples follow the law of love, the world only understands hate.

It is this tendency to hate, to focus on the self while attempting to harm others, to focus on the self while denying the sovereignty of God, that has, in one way or another, motivated all the wars since Armistice Day – indeed, all the killing and all the violence that have wracked this world through all of human history. It was hatred of Bolsheviks and Jews that motivated Hitler’s attempt to conquer Europe. It is hatred of the infidel that motivates modern Islamic radicals to blow themselves up in an attempt to kill their enemies. It is hatred of others, and all too often of the self that motivates so many of the mass murderers that are all too common in our headlines today.

No, if everyone lived according to the words of Jesus in today’s passage, if everyone saw the benefit of living according to love rather than according to hate, then of course all the representatives of all the people in the world could sit down in one League of Nations and work out their problems, just like Woodrow Wilson thought they should. But because we are all sinners, because we are all inclined to live according to hate and fear and selfishness, and because the unbelieving world remains stubbornly opposed to the Lordship of Christ, we continue to have wars, even 100 years after the “war to end war.” No, until Jesus comes back, churches like ours will be forced to continue to add names to their lists of veterans, honoring them for their service.

But why does the Church make a special effort to honor veterans? It’s obvious why the government does – after all, veterans fought in the service of their country. It makes sense for the Federal government to have two holidays each year – Memorial Day and Veterans Day – to remember the service of brave soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines.

But why does the Church honor veterans? I should think it would be difficult in some countries. For example, it would be hard for the Church in China or Cuba or the Sudan to honor the men who carry out the orders of tyrants who are depriving them of their religious liberties.

But however strongly all the cynical history professors may object, America and her servicemen are simply different. Throughout our history, we have been much more likely to use our military power for good than for evil.

And this hasn’t just involved wars. After all, when the communists surrounded West Berlin after World War II, threatening to starve its citizens, American planes flew 4500 tons of supplies a day to feed the 2 million people living there. Who couldn’t celebrate such a daring and selfless act?

More recently, how many times have we seen our Navy sent to foreign shores to help countries recover from earthquakes and tsunamis? After Saddam Hussein was toppled in Iraq, how many stories did we hear of our servicemen reaching out to the victims of his regime, helping people with medical needs, helping to rebuild infrastructure, trying to get the country back on its feet again?

In other words, so many of our American servicemen have been just that, servants of their fellowmen. They have been the hands and feet of America, allowing us as a nation to use our

tremendous might and wealth for the good of those in need. That is something that the Church can celebrate, for that is exactly the sort of thing Jesus commanded all of His followers to do, to go and bear fruit, fruit that will remain.

But there is a greater form of love than just works of charity. Jesus said that the greatest expression of love is to lay down one's life for one's friends. And the Church can celebrate our veterans because all of them have expressed their willingness to do just that. From the heroes of our own Revolutionary War, to those who fought for freedom in the War Between the States, American soldiers time and time again have put themselves in harm's way to protect their loved ones.

Yes, we have had our selfish moments. We went to war with Mexico to gain territory. We fought the Spanish-American War for mixed motives at best. No reasonably informed person can deny that we have some black marks on our record. But from the time of the First World War to the present, America has played a unique role on the world stage – a role that should be shocking to any honest student of world history.

President Wilson summed up our attitude in April of 1917, as our country prepared to enter the First World War: "We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion." The fact is that in 1917, for most Americans, the Germans and the Austrians and the Turks posed no direct personal threat to their lives or even their prosperity.

Nevertheless, American soldiers and sailors and Marines were willing to leave their farms and families, and travel across the submarine-infested waters of the Atlantic Ocean to fight. And 49,000 of them laid down their lives not for the spoils of conquest, but so that Frenchmen and Belgians could be free.

And the fact is that American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines did the same thing again some twenty years later. Ten times as many American soldiers died in that effort to destroy the murderous racist fantasies of power-crazed maniacs.

And yet in spite of the tremendous sacrifices in dollars and lives, not an inch of territory was added to the United States after either war. Even more amazingly, as soon as World War II was over we spent billions of dollars helping our former foes recover from the devastation that their own aggression had caused. Germany and Japan are free democracies today – and provide vigorous competition for American industry – because America simply refused to use her might for selfish ends.

But America's selflessness didn't end with World War II. I remember one time when Col. Kim came from South Korea to speak to the Chamberlain-Hunt cadets. On that occasion, he thanked the United States for the freedom that his country enjoys today. America, he said, should be proud of the way we have extended the blessings of freedom around the world.

Now, we Americans haven't always been wise, and we haven't always been successful. The people of Vietnam suffered for years from the chaos and the communism that ensued with the withdrawal of our troops. Only time will tell whether the people of Iraq and Afghanistan will learn the need for division of power and the rule of law - things that are critical for the flourishing of successful democracy.

But this one historical fact can't be denied: never in the history of the world has any one country held such unmatched power and at the same time been content to wield it so largely for the good of others. In contrast, we don't have to wonder what Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, Mohammed, Charles V, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Bismarck, Hitler or Stalin would have done if they had possessed such tremendous comparative advantages of wealth, technology, and firepower. They would have laid waste to the countries around them, building ever larger monuments to their own glory and might. That's simply the way of the world.

But we Americans are different, and that's why Christians can wholeheartedly celebrate the sacrifices of our veterans. In contrast to those great conquerors from other cultures, our veterans have demonstrated the selfless, self-sacrificial character of Christ in a very real way.

Yes, even though many of the veterans who served in this century fought not so much for the freedom of Americans as for the freedom of Englishmen and Frenchmen and Belgians and

Filipinos and Koreans and Vietnamese and Grenadans and Kosovars and Kuwaitis and Iraqis, they fought as bravely as they would have for their own people. They fought on behalf of those whose languages they didn't understand, and often on behalf of those whose faith they didn't share. Sometimes they fought in the service of those who seemed ungrateful at best or hostile at worst. They fought and bled and suffered on behalf of others, some even laying down their lives so that others might be free.

And isn't that the same sort of thing that Jesus did for us? For even as He spoke the beautiful words recorded in today's passage at the Last Supper, He knew, He predicted that the very disciples who were hanging on His every word would, before the night was over, turn their backs on Him, denying Him, betraying Him. He went to the cross alone, but still He laid down His life for sinners like them, for sinners like us.

That's why the Church celebrates and should celebrate its veterans – because they provide an object lesson for us, a concrete example of what it means to follow Christ. But if we would be faithful to their memory and if we would be faithful to our Lord, we must not stop there. No, we must follow their example of selfless service, if we are to follow the example that Christ set for them.

Does that mean that we should all rush off to enlist? No, but we can honor and encourage those who do. We can respect their bravery and support them and their families when they are deployed overseas. We can provide willing and sympathetic ears to listen to their stories and patient and generous hearts to help them bear their scars, both physical and psychological.

But how can we follow their example? Simply put, we can love one another as Christ has loved us.

Now, I know. We usually think of love as a gushy feeling, and I would guess that most servicemen would be uncomfortable being presented as examples of love. But when Jesus talked about love, He had something different in mind, something that could be as easily expressed in a foxhole as in a bedroom.

That's because for Jesus, love meant a relentless determination to bless His beloved, no matter the cost, no matter what sacrifice was required, no matter whether He was loved in return. For Jesus, love was thus as much an action as a feeling. And it is as they have put such selfless, determined love into action that our servicemen provide us with such a powerful example for our own lives.

And so, if we would follow the example of our veterans, if we would follow the example of our Lord, we can do in our own spheres of life the same thing they did and that they do: we can lay down our lives – our plans, our dreams, our pleasures, our goals, so that other people might have a better life.

This will not be easy – self-sacrifice never is. It may require some radical changes in our spending, in our time commitments, in our priorities. It may even require pain and suffering, for whenever we enter relationships with those who are hurting, we can't help but share in their hurts. We can't help but weep with those who weep.

But such selfless, determined love, building such steadfast relationships can also bring great joy. That's why Jesus said He gave us this command to love – so that His joy would be in us and so that our joy would be full.

What a joy it must be for our veterans to think of the freedom that so many people have come to know because of their labors. Just so, what a joy it would be for all of us to look back on lives well-spent in the service of others, lives self-consciously devoted to the service and the glory of Christ, lives that carried His light and truth and love into a dark and hate-filled world that continues to need Him so much. Will we live that life? Will we follow Jesus in that way?