

# *A Soldier's Faith*

A Sermon Preached by  
Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor  
Second Presbyterian Church,  
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

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*When [Jesus] entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him, and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." The 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. For 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." When 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. ... And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour.*

*Matthew 8:5-10, 13*

Jesus had a heart for soldiers—and presumably sailors and marines and airmen and others in military service—at least their ancient equivalents. This story tells us that when he saw them he didn't see their rank or uniform or their weapons. He didn't even seem to care what country they were fighting for. When a person stood before Jesus – rich or poor, gentile or Jew, soldier or civilian, he or she was simply a person – a child of God with sins that needed forgiving, wounds that needed tending, and hopes that needed fulfilling. That's why, when the centurion in our story came to Jesus for healing, Jesus didn't lecture him on foreign policy, military strategy, or human rights. He saw the hurting man beneath the impressive uniform and responded to his need.

The soldier in our story came to Jesus looking for physical healing, not for himself, but for a trusted servant. Sometimes it's not so easy to see what a soldier needs, *spiritually* at least. Not every battle scar is visible.

Combat veterans have spiritual needs that run very deep and they need our help.

Imagine what soldiers\* in the field might be feeling.

Beneath the body armor and camouflage, behind the massive weaponry, below the façade of pride and confidence, hidden from easy view by any but their closest friends there's often **fear**: fear of getting injured and fear of dying; these are just the obvious fears. There's also the fear of not being able to live up to one's own high expectations, "Will I have the courage I need at the right time? Will I do the right thing?"

**Grief** is an ever present companion in a war zone. Again there is grief over the obvious and horrific losses – of buddies, of one's own health. And then there is grief over less tangible losses like a loss of innocence and even the loss of time spent with friends and family while their lives relentlessly move forward.

Many soldiers deal with **anger** on a regular basis. Anger at an enemy that seems to have no respect for life or law; anger at their own leaders when decisions are delayed or just wrong-headed and people die as a result; anger at war itself that brings out the best, but also the worst in people.

**Loneliness** is something many of you vets in our congregation surely remember from your days in the field. The sadness that creeps in when you realize you're missing a son's or daughter's birthday or wishing you could just hang-out with childhood friends from your church back home. What can take away that ache?

**Worry** is common, too. Thanks to the internet, soldiers in the field are acutely aware of what is going on back home, but unfortunately they can't do a whole lot about it. They end up worrying. They worry about their marriages (will I have one when I get back?), their kids (will they really remember me?), their finances (bills don't stop coming when a soldier gets deployed), and their futures (what will I do when this tour ends?).

**Guilt** is one more burden many soldiers bear – not only the common forms of guilt that we all experience because of sin, but a special kind. They feel badly about mistakes they've made that resulted in harm or injury to their buddies or to innocent civilians. Many of them talk about decisions

made in the fog of war that they will regret for the rest of the lives, decisions that haunt them in the middle of a sleepless night.

From my experience at the War College and conversations with several chaplains I'm learning that men and women serving in combat positions deal with all the stresses, questions, and issues that we face in life, only heightened to extreme levels, levels that sometimes must be nearly unbearable.

We ask soldiers -- many of them barely old enough to rent a car -- to do the impossible. Imagine what the survivors of the Fort Hood tragedy are going through right now as they try to sort out what happened there a few days ago and why. Many of them will soon be deployed to *Afghanistan*; they didn't expect *Texas* to be a battle zone. The soldiers and their husbands and wives and children and parents must be filled with fear and anger -- and maybe even guilt as they wonder why they survived and their friends didn't. Even as the survivors are wrestling with these questions we expect them to go about their daily routines with precision, energy, and customary excellence. But what are they supposed to do with their feelings? Where can they go when they ask, "Where is God in all of this?"

Consider the combat soldier's dilemma: "If I allow myself to feel bad each time I kill or hurt the enemy, then I am going to feel bad all the time and I can't do my job. But if I allow myself to feel *good* each time I kill or hurt another, then what kind of person am I becoming?" One solution, of course, is to not allow oneself to feel anything, to numb oneself in all the ways that soldiers can. Another solution is to turn to someone else for guidance and support.

That someone is often a trusted peer, a buddy in their unit. The next most likely place for someone to turn is to their unit's chaplain. Chaplains have served the American military since the Revolutionary War. Some of us learned this fall of the crucial role that volunteer chaplains from the United States Christian Commission played during the Civil War. In the aftermath of 9/11 this congregation supported the work of our Associate Pastor at the time, Julianne Whipple. A captain in the Air Force Reserve, Julianne spent months ministering to families and friends of fallen soldiers. And many of you know from your own experience in the armed services that a chaplain is often the one person a man or woman can turn to for confidential help without cost and without worry that it will somehow be held against them.

Chaplains serve soldiers of all faiths – and no faith. Just like Jesus, they don't see uniforms or ranks or denominational affiliations; they see brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, in need of strength, encouragement, and support.

Isn't it amazing that we don't hear *more* stories of soldiers collapsing under the enormous pressure we have placed on their shoulders. That's a tribute to their values and training, to their peers, and to the chaplains who support them. In fact, instead of losing their faith, many – though not all -- come home with their faith renewed and strengthened.

Some soldiers manage to remain gentle, kind, and loving even as they have been compelled to carry out some of the most difficult of all tasks. Consider the story behind this photo that's been flying around the internet:



A note goes with the e-mail. It tells us that the man in uniform is

John Gebhardt, a Chief Master Sergeant in the Air Force, he's an E-9, as high as you can go in the enlisted ranks.

John Gebhardt's wife, Mindy, said that this little girl's entire family was executed by [Iraqi] insurgents. They intended to execute the little girl also, and shot her in the head [if you look carefully you can see the wounds on her scalp]...but they failed to kill her. She was cared for in John's hospital and is healing up, but continues to cry and moan. The nurses said John is the only one who seems to calm her down, so John has spent the last four nights holding her while they both slept in that chair.

The note goes on

He is a real star of the war, and represents what America is trying to do. ...[W]hat we're doing over there is making a difference, even if it is just one little girl at a time.

Bill Hartman, a member of our Second Family, played softball with Gephardt when they served together in the Air Force in Osan, South Korea. Bill assured me that John is no internet hoax; he's the real deal, "the total package," said Bill.

This warrior has made it his mission to help this little girl sleep, which is ironic, because one of the things that Chaplain Dave Reese shared with me is that a lot of soldiers have trouble sleeping in combat zones. "They have trouble sleeping when they come home, too," Dave continued. "The thing that made sleeping possible in the field was that they knew they had a buddy watching their back. Who watches their back when they come home?"

That's a question for us, I think.

I think this congregation can be especially helpful by watching the backs of combat veterans when they finally come home. And someday they will all come home. Many of you have come home from war and know how hard that transition can be – at least for some. Years and even decades later the memories can come back – some of them fond, many of them disturbing.

We can help the service men and women who pass through this area in all kinds of ways. They need a safe and affirming community. Their families need support. They are on spiritual journeys and some are asking specifically spiritual questions.

The first thing we can do for them is pray -- for their faith, for their safety, for their families, for their decision-making (many of the students at the War College are in leadership capacities already and will soon be among the highest ranking officers in our military). And don't forget to include the War College's new chaplain, Jim Carter, in your prayers. Some of these students at the college have served three or four combat tours now and they are tired and worn. We can ask God to let their time in Carlisle be a time of healing and spiritual growth.

And we can get involved with ministries that help soldiers overseas and stateside. Operation Sweet Freedom is this congregation's effort to provide all kinds of comforts from home – including CD recordings of our worship services to our combat forces. Bill Hartman and Lois Gleim also lead great programs that help vets through the VFW and the AmVets Ladies Auxiliary.

When soldiers come home they need help in reintegrating to civilian life or even life on a stateside base like the Barracks. Their marriages may need renewal. Their kids may need tutoring. They may be searching for direction and meaning as they begin to imagine a civilian life after military service. They are likely to turn to a chaplain on post for such help. But they might prefer to seek it out in a place like this among a people like us. People who see souls, not just soldiers.

One army chaplain reflected on his calling this way.

*Any* difficult time is a war zone—a divorce, the loss of a child, an illness. The emotional violence is the same. In Iraq I once quoted from Hebrews in my journal, ‘What is faith? It is the confidence assurance that what we hope for is going to happen.’ But maybe that’s not quite it. Maybe it’s the confident assurance that, even if you don’t always get what you’re hoping for, you won’t be alone.

Roger Benimoff, *Faith Under Fire*

God may have situated this congregation in precisely this time and place to reassure students at the War College, as best we are able, that no matter what is happening in their lives during their stay in Carlisle, *God* is with them because *we* are with them. Amen.

\*I’m referring to veterans from all branches as “soldiers” this morning for the sake of simplicity. Marines, airmen, sailors, and members of the Guards please forgive me.

*Dear Friend,*

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*Jeff Gibelius, Pastor*

***Second Presbyterian Church***

*528 Garland Dr.*

*Carlisle, PA 17013*

[www.GrowWithSecond.org](http://www.GrowWithSecond.org)

*717-243-4571*

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