

Remarks for Veteran's Day Service - The Church of the Covenant

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Let me first of all add my thanks to those of you who are veterans of military service to our country. My appreciation for your service comes from the fact that I see your service as a selfless act of citizenship. Citizenship in this country is something of great value—something that unfortunately is taken lightly by many people who do not understand its meaning or its worth. The preservation of rights, privileges, and responsibilities of the rightful citizens of the United States has been accomplished in large measure by the selflessness and sacrifices of citizens, like you, who have served and fought for the nation while in uniform. Today we recognize your service for its immense contribution to us all—a contribution that is a fundamental element of the “brick and mortar” citizenship of our nation and of the freedom we enjoy.

I also thank those of you who represent the uniformed community services that are vital to the well-being and success of our communities. You also are “brick and mortar” citizens who sustain the communities of our nation at the local level. You have our thanks and respect for the good work you do from which we all benefit. Thank you for being with us this morning. Today's scripture comes from the last chapter of John, the 21st chapter, verses 15-22. After his resurrection, Jesus has reappeared to his disciples on the beach, they have shared a breakfast, and Jesus gets Peter aside for some “one-on-one counseling.”

Read the scripture....

Short prayer:

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the many blessings we have from Your hand. We are grateful for the freedoms we enjoy—freedoms that include our freedom to worship and to serve You. We ask that you will make us ever mindful that with religious freedom comes the responsibility to worship You and tell others of our good fortune in being followers of your Son, Jesus. We also thank you for the efforts and sacrifices of those who have served our nation and our communities in uniform. Keep us mindful of the importance of their service to our nation, our communities and our freedom. As we worship this morning, please let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight.

“You follow Me.” This is the last thing Jesus is quoted as saying in the book of John. “You follow Me”—His last words to Peter are quite clearly...an order. Veterans Day seems to me to be a good opportunity to talk about orders and how they pertain to us as Christians. Veterans understand orders. We all should as well.

We don't like orders, do we? Orders have all sorts of implications that are slightly—distasteful—to us. An order implies that the person issuing the order has authority over us. They imply we might not know how to do something or that we are incapable of using our own

initiative to figure things out. Orders can be terse—we like “nice.” Orders imply immediacy—right now, soon. We prefer the convenience of our own timelines—at a time of our choosing. Finally, orders from others often remind us that we have neglected to do something that was our responsibility in the first place.

Not only do we not like orders, but we really don’t like to think of Jesus—of all people—giving orders. We prefer the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who asks us to do something. And we like to respond to Him in a manner WE think is best, in our own sweet time, on our own terms. Personally, I can’t imagine that the Lord did not have a sharp edge to Him. Here’s a man who grew up in an occupied territory, was poor, probably hungry sometimes; He spent three years walking on rough roads in sandals with a bunch of men who seemed pretty slow on the up-take most of the time and he had to depend on others to provide shelter and food. He was nailed to a cross and bore the sins of mankind through hell itself. Jesus was not a soft touch, but we don’t like to think of him in that light or consider his words as orders. But as the scripture we just read indicates, Jesus gives orders that he expects his followers to obey them. “You follow me!”

Now, if you would ask these veterans and uniformed civil servants, they’d likely tell you there are some key characteristics of orders that they have learned during their service that are useful for all of use to understand.

First of all, people who give orders have been given the authority to do so and they generally issue orders to others because they have good reasons for doing so. The ship captain who orders his ship to “General Quarters” or the Fire Chief who orders roads to be blocked around the scene of the fire know that those orders direct actions that must be taken for mission success and safety of the groups under their authority. The groups under their authority know that the order is given for a good reason because they know the captain or the chief are in authority. They respond appropriately.

Jesus has been given the authority to give orders. We read in Matthew 28, verse 18 that Jesus Himself said “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” So when he then says in verse 19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” we know that he not only has the authority to give the order, but He also has good reason for doing so. And since we profess to be under His authority, we probably should follow His orders—shouldn’t we?

The second thing to consider about orders is that they go hand in glove with a commitment we make. When we commit ourselves to an authority, organization, cause, belief, or person, we directly or indirectly agree to follow the orders that emanate from the authority, organization, belief, cause, or person. When these veterans enlisted into their respective services they took an oath before God that said they would “...support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic...” In that oath they also swore to “obey the orders of the President of the United States and the officers appointed over me...” All veterans

during their service commitments followed lots of orders from officers appointed over them. Many orders caused them to have to do tasks that were dangerous, or tedious, or repetitive, distasteful, even absurd. But they followed those orders because it was expected and because they had agreed to do so when they made their commitment to the military service.

The same principle applies in our relationship to Christ. Because of our choice—our choice—to commit our lives to Him, Jesus expects us to do as he says. When He said, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” that is what he meant for us to do. When He said to Peter, “You follow Me,” He was not only re-commissioning Peter as the leader of His church, but His words were an order that echoes through time to us. Those words in today’s scripture passage remind us that we have committed ourselves to Him through baptism, through confirmation, and when we stand at the altar of a church and join a congregation of other believers. That commitment we made means He expects us to follow His example—and His orders.

The third thing to consider about orders is that they are best if they are concise and clear. Concise, clear orders are easier to understand. They convey the intentions of the person issuing the order, allow those receiving the order to use initiative in complying with it, and don’t require a lot of individual interpretation. There is an old story about how four young Lieutenants—one from each of the services, Army, Navy, AF, and Marines were asked to prepare an order that would direct the erection of a flag pole. The soldier, and the sailor and the air force officer all broke out computers, slide rules, and technical manuals and busily applied themselves to the project. The Marine sat on a rock and watched them. Presently they were all asked to give their individual answer. The Soldier, Sailor and AF Officer all gave lengthy explanations—based on engineering, physics, and aerodynamics—of how they would oversee the erection of the flag pole. After they were done they said to the Marine, “Lt., how would you put up the flagpole. The Marine looked at them, shrugged, and said, “I would say, Sergeant, put up the flagpole.”

Jesus’s orders are concise and clear. Moreover, Jesus’ orders are simultaneously masterful in their simplicity and comprehensive in their scope—in other words, he covers a lot of ground in a few words. “Love your neighbor as yourself;” “Make disciples of all people and baptize them in My name;” “You follow Me.” When we don’t understand Jesus’ orders, we are either not trying very hard, or we are trying to find “wiggle room” to justify why we are not doing what he has asked.

Finally, veterans will tell you that orders must be obeyed because there may be more riding on the order than we can see in that particular moment. Those who have authority to give orders may not have the time or desire to tell us the whole story. But if we do what they say now, it will enable what comes later and we will eventually understand the reason for the order.

When we, as individual members of a group ignore an order, the group may suffer because the group’s mission cannot be carried out. Had Col Joshua Chamberlin decided that he did not

want to follow his order to hold Little Round Top on the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg, the Union Army lines would have collapsed and the outcome of the battle—and the Civil War—would have been significantly changed. Soldiers and Sailors landing in the first wave at Omaha Beach followed their orders despite knowing their chances of survival were slim. But they knew that a lot was riding on them doing as they were bid.

Similarly, there was a lot riding on what the Lord would expect of Peter in establishing His church. He only gave Peter a glimpse of the future, but Jesus' order to Peter on the beach that morning was enough to get things rolling. Peter had no real idea of what his failure to follow Jesus' order would have meant to the mission of taking the Gospel to "all nations." Fortunately he did as he was told and followed the Lord's direction. And as we have seen over the last two thousand years, there was a lot riding on Peter following the Lord's order to "Follow Me."

If you ask military veterans and uniformed community service providers, orders are a fact of everyday life. They make things work and they need to be followed for success. Following the orders of our Lord and Savior is also a fact of life in our Christian faith. He has the authority to give the orders; we have committed ourselves, as His followers, to comply with His orders; Christ's orders are clear and concise; and there is a lot riding on our response to Him even though we don't have all the details of where it is all headed—these are the elements of Christian order following. As the hymn we sang earlier reminds us, Jesus calls his orders to us over the tumult in our lives. His words are few but clear, his presence is continuous, and his expectations are high. Christian—follow Me.