

Texts: Isaiah 9:6
Matthew 26: 47-52

Rev. David Lee Jones, Th.D
Southampton Presbyterian Church
Sunday November 22, 2015

The Ambiguity of War **(A sermon preached for the 375th Anniversary Celebration)**

In 1998, NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw authored his now famous book: *The Greatest Generation*, which extols the stories of *ordinary* men and women who accomplished *extraordinary* achievements during WWII. The book germinated from interviewing veterans during two trips to Normandy when Brokaw covered the 40th and 50th anniversaries of “D-Day.”

My father rightly belongs to that “Greatest Generation.” He was born in 1918 (just as WWI was winding down), in a predominantly poor, Welsh coal- mining town in North East Pennsylvania. He was the second of five children. His father was the only paid fireman in that depressed town, who earned an extra twenty-five cents a week by making my father clean the firehouse’s spittoon--a task my father abhorred.

My father’s family faithfully attended The Welsh Calvinistic Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, PA--now closed--where he learned that killing is wrong. But in that small, patriotic Pennsylvania town he also learned that one must serve his country. After high school, my father moved to New Jersey seeking work because he didn’t want to work in the coal mines.

In April 1941 he was drafted into the U. S. Army, dutifully obeying Uncle Sam’s call. He was assigned to an Anti-Aircraft Artillery company at Fort Shafter, (Wheeler Field) Hawaii. Being a natural leader, endowed with abiding character and integrity, he was quickly promoted to the rank of First Sergeant. On Sunday morning, December 7th, 1941 he got up early to play handball off base. As Japanese “Zeros” flew overhead, he and the others had no idea what they were about to experience: **“The date that would live in infamy.”** By the time he returned to Wheeler Field, every plane was destroyed before getting off the ground. Had he been at his post in the .50 caliber machine gun nest at the end of the runway, he surely would have died. My dad would not talk about what transpired the rest of that day--or the days that followed either. I suspect he couldn’t remember--refused to remember--or both. I have wondered through the years, what he saw, smelled, felt, and experienced that day and in the days to come. Like so many men of his generation--he just wouldn’t discuss it. I asked him to go back to Hawaii and show me where he was stationed but response was always the same: “No--I want to remember Hawaii the way it was before December 7th.” I suspect a return trip would have overwhelmed him.

A few years ago, I was visiting my parents in their up-state New York home for Christmas. Late one night I arose to get a drink of milk. My mother gave my dad a set of Time-Warner “Sounds of WWII” CD’s as a Christmas gift. As I walked by the living room where my dad was listening to the songs, he quickly turned his back so I could not see his face. The only lights were from the illumined Christmas tree. I suspected he was crying. As gently as I could, I intruded his delicate space, put my arms lovingly around his shoulders, and softly inquired: “Where are you right now dad?” With a distant yet reflective look in his eyes and a flat confessional voice he replied: “I’m in a pineapple field in Saipan listening to Tokyo Rose on a loudspeaker.”

As if Pearl Harbor were not enough, in June 1944 my father joined the invasion of Saipan--the second largest invasion of WWII--only Normandy was bigger.

Indeed, he was crying. That night he added some poignant missing pieces to a story he told intermittently through the years. Wiping moist eyes, he told the story of being on night patrol for Japanese snipers. He reiterated the maxim of a boot camp drill sergeant: “You will never forget the face of the first man you kill.” I now realized why his affect and voice were so flat--he was seeing that

man's face in his mind's eye. He was experiencing what Freud calls a "screen memory."

Japanese snipers were picking off American GI's on the beach and an officer ordered him to assemble a patrol and go get them. Being the First Sergeant, he dutifully led his patrol that fateful night. Suddenly, a Japanese soldier jumped up unexpectedly from behind some bushes and the entire patrol instinctively fired their Colt .45 automatics. It soon became uncomfortably evident, however, that the Japanese soldier was severely wounded, barely alive, and suffering. For the first time, my father confessed to me that it was his responsibility, as First Sergeant, to "finish him off" at point blank range. His bottom lip trembling, he said: "I can still see his face looking up at me." He could barely speak the words—and then he wept bitterly. He continued: "I have never been able to get his face out of my mind—that old soldier was right—you never forget."

I patted his back pastorally—fighting the impulse to offer some trite and shallow words like: "It's OK dad—you were just doing your job." I decided rather to take the road less traveled and "just be with him" silently in this rare moment of painful self-disclosure. I've learned that seldom, if ever, can you talk people out of their shame.

When he regained his composure he added more scandalous details. "When we searched him, he was unarmed. His clothes were khaki, but not an official Japanese uniform." With broken phrases he uttered: "I think . . . he was . . . a . . . civilian farmer . . ." Then my dad closed up. "I don't want to talk about this anymore," he said like a clam snapping shut. As quickly as the faucet of emotion held forth it shut off—yielding not one more drip of information.

I realized in that moment that my dad carried this unspeakable secret in his mind, heart, and soul for over a half century. Abject heaviness filled my chest. My father was a very decent and moral man, and I knew that his unspoken question: "Did I mistakenly kill an unarmed civilian farmer?" haunted him all his adult life—too dangerous to admit, process, or acknowledge publically. This secret was his "kryptonite" that he sealed in the lead pie of repression. It came out because it leaked out. It never occurred to me that my father's war experience had severely damaged him. Seeing him as a "victim of war" took some getting used to since I previously viewed him as only strong, proud, brave, noble, and courageous—"wounded" and "damaged" were unsettling words.

I know as both a pastor and therapist (and now as a son) that traumatic secrets ultimately leak out of even the most air-tight intra-psychic containers in which they have been carefully guarded. I now wonder how much that one horrible night damaged my father's faith, soul, and sense of self. How much did it change him? As a boy I used to wonder, while sitting next to my father in church, why his brow furrowed so ardently when he prayed. Or why there often seemed to be some secret debt with God he thought he could never pay. Or why he would leave the room when war movies came on. Or why taking Holy Communion often made him uncomfortable. The ambiguity of: "Thou shall not kill" and "Thou shall serve thy country" must have been constantly at war inside him.

Americans often glory in the fact that we "defeated evil" and "won the war." We too often focus exclusively on the damage done to our "enemies"—how decisively the enemy was defeated with superior strategy and power—employing superior "shock and awe." Seldom, however, do we take stock of the evil and spiritual damage that war does to ourselves—even when we "win" we lose. No matter how noble the cause—there is always spiritual damage. The cosmic spiritual computer records it all—there is always collateral damage.

How might my father have been different if that dreadful night never happened? I'm convinced that it did far more damage than my father could ever admit. I'm sure that serving in WWII was both "angel and demon" for my father. Unquestionably he matured and honed leadership skills and personal mettle that served him well his whole life. He returned home and faithfully worked in

the same company until he retired, but he secretly bore emotional and spiritual scars too painful ever to acknowledge or process openly or fully. The old adage: “*When you kill another--you also kill part of yourself*” still rings true.

Dad surprised me when he balked at both Gulf Wars. “I hate to think of what those young people are going to experience,” he often said. His comments all make more sense to me now.

While in a doctoral seminar at Emory University, a fellow Japanese student and friend named Yoshi and I had a joint epiphany one day. It dawned on us both that during WWII, both of our fathers were commissioned by their governments to kill each other. One of the greatest gifts my father ever gave our family is that he never disparaged the Japanese people. I never heard an ill word uttered toward the Japanese. I suspect few Pearl Harbor survivors can make that claim. He understood that Yoshi’s father was merely “doing his duty,” just as he was.

In 2004 I took my father to the Admiral Nimitz Pacific War Museum in Fredericksburg, TX where he was fascinated by both the Pearl Harbor and Saipan exhibits. On the way home I asked him about the story he told me that night. He snapped angrily at me: “How do you know about that? I’ve never told anyone about that!” My mother was in the car and he never told her. He had completely suppressed the memory of sharing his secret with me that night. But there is more ambiguity: Doing his civic duty meant he had to violate his Christian faith.

But maybe the ambiguity of war is no better illustrated than in the following true story. Several years back, New York State issued: “Pearl Harbor Survivor” license plates, which my brother ordered for my father. One day I noticed something for the first time and said to my father: “Dad, you are a walking paradox.” “Why is that?” he asked curiously.

“Dad, because you have to be the only vet in the whole country who has put Pearl Harbor Survivor license plates on a Toyota Camry!”

He pondered the paradox for a moment and said with a chuckle: “Yeah, I guess that’s right.”

An editor of the preaching journal, *The Living Pulpit*, invited me to write an article for the October-December 2005 special issue they were publishing on *War*. When I called to get my father’s permission to tell his story, I wasn’t sure how he would respond, since I would be publishing his secret. With my mom listening on another phone, we went over the story again just to make sure I got it right. Responding to the admission of killing the Saipan civilian, my mom commented: “But that’s just the way war is.”

Surprisingly, I sensed my dad actually wanted me to tell his story. Maybe the healing has begun, I thought, for there really is healing in telling our stories. My dad wanted “to sleep on it” but eventually agreed to let me publish his story.

One morning my mom asked my father if he had ever asked God to forgive him and he said: “No.” My mom called me and said she did not understand this. I explained that he had spent the last 50 years trying to deny that event ever happened. “If he asked for forgiveness,” I said, “he would have to admit he actually killed that man.”

But let me share with you how God works—how God can redeem even the most painful wounds and events. Not long after my article came out, my mother reported that my father came to breakfast one morning and said to her: “Last night, I finally asked the Lord to forgive me.” My mom reported that: “His countenance changed”—a great burden was lifted.

An Army chaplain in Germany who was working with soldiers who had killed in battle read my article and began using my dad’s story to help them not keep their experienced buried for 50 years. The chaplain emailed me that 100’s of soldiers were being helped and healed by my dad’s story. I called my dad to tell him about the chaplain’s email and he was absolutely stunned and began to

weep uncontrollably.

I was with my father when he died on December 2nd 2005—just 5 days shy of the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, and just two months after his story was published. As he neared death he had flashbacks of his war experience—barking out orders to privates and corporals.

I felt a mix of both sadness and peace when he died. I was broken-hearted because he was gone—but at peace because he got gotten the horrible secret off his chest and grateful that he had experienced forgiveness, grace, redemption, and healing right before he died.

As the Color Guard handed my mother the folded American flag in the cemetery I swear I heard an old tune playing in my head: “Ain’t gonna study war no more. Ain’t gonna study war no more. Ain’t gonna study . . . war . . . no more.”

And that song reminds us that when we too quickly rush to military solutions and violence to solve complex world problems there is always unspeakable damage—insidious collateral damage that endures for generations untold. Let us remember the words of Christ found in today’s Gospel text: “For those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.”

Amen.