

From Where I Sit: Flesh and Blood

By Chaplain Van Dickens USN

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Chaplain Van Dickens, is a United Methodist minister serving as a chaplain in the United States Navy. Currently with the First Marine Division, Camp Pendleton, he works closely with Marines returning from Iraq who have sustained disabilities as a result of combat injuries. Below is the message Chaplain Dickens gave at the Disability Awareness Sunday service at Fallbrook (Calif.) United Methodist Church on October 22, 2006:

There is a passage from Isaiah in chapter 58, verses 6 and the following: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen; to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

I have always focused on the earlier words, but lately I have been aware of this last phrase, "your own flesh and blood." Such powerful words from a man who warned his people against evil and who reached out with the mercy of God for the suffering they had received from the war with Babylon. He now urges them to practice what they profess through acts of compassion.

I think of these words in the light of a certain band of brothers and sisters increasing in our midst, our disabled veterans. Before they were disabled, they heeded the call to serve in harm's way for a Godly cause, not to spread violence but to stop it, to "loose the chains of injustice" to quote the prophet.

They made the sacrifices that few others have had to do. Better than anyone else, they know what the cost of freedom and democracy is. They are the ones who best know the price that must be paid. They are the ones who are still alive to hear the words of Jesus and to come nearest to appreciating those words when he says, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends," inasmuch as many of them nearly did so.

When disabled veterans come home from war, they are faced with a double challenge. First, there is the challenge of adapting to the disability. Some disabilities are obvious, the loss of a limb or an eye. Others are less visible—mental complications from a concussion, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Gulf War Syndrome, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or a cancer that manifests years after exposure to harmful chemicals such as Agent Orange.

These veterans must adjust and learn to accept the hand that war has dealt them. There are efforts at easing the transition for them, such as the Wounded Warrior Centers that are adjacent to most of our military hospitals where they can be with others who are experiencing the same journey back to wholeness. Too ill to resume normal life but not so ill as to require hospitalization, they can share their burdens with others who know first-hand what it is like to be in war and to be wounded as well as the slow, painful process of healing in mind, body, and spirit.

Eventually, disabled veterans enter society as civilians who have vivid memories of a different world that few have seen or witnessed. No one, no one can imagine what war is like unless having been there. There are no words to adequately describe it. Dante's Inferno probably comes close to its description; it is hell on earth.

It is up to the veterans to somehow find a place inside their minds, inside their souls, where the war can be put to rest and peace be found. But the memories themselves are anything but peaceful. They come

at night to haunt the veterans, pursuing them like mad dogs that bite at their heels the faster the veterans try to run. Disabled veterans may turn to drinking or drugs in a desperate effort to find "wholeness" again.

Hopefully, prayerfully, some of these veterans will turn to God and, finding courage from above, will at last turn and face the dogs of war, acknowledge them, and share their burdens with others. Eventually they will place their burdens on the shoulders of the One who knows our griefs and shares our sorrows. They will make peace with their conditions, with themselves, and with God, by the grace of God. That is their first challenge.

The second challenge can be just as hard: facing the public. This week I watched a flock of pigeons land a few yards from me. In the flock was one pigeon who hopped instead of walked, and as I looked closer, I noticed that it had only one leg. It was interesting because I seemed much more aware of its disability than the other pigeons who simply saw it as one of them.

You and I are so attuned to the differences in each other that we sometimes fail to appreciate the fact that the disabled veteran, or anyone who is disabled, is essentially the same as you and I—someone who is just trying to make it through another day, hoping for the same opportunities and joys in life as we are.

Increasingly you and I will meet disabled veterans, not only from previous wars but those from this war. They are so young and full of life and dreams. My prayer is that when we meet them, we will treat them no differently than birds of a feather, or better still, as brothers and sisters.

Inspired by the prophet, Jesus said, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." I believe he could easily have added, "I was disabled, and you treated me as your own flesh and blood."

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