Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The basis for today’s Ministry to the Armed Forces Sunday is recorded in John 15:13: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

What powerful words of Jesus. As the Lord is moving closer to Calvary’s cross, He indicates what form this great love will soon be. Soon, Jesus demonstrates this love by pouring out His life for us all.

The words of Jesus in John 15:13 stand as a powerful reminder of today in our worship service. Today, we honor those who serve or have served our country. We, the Christian church, have a deep, rich practice of honoring veterans, those who are currently serving in the military and their families. It is grounded and deeply rooted in Holy Scripture. In the Gospel of Matthew, there is an encounter of Jesus with a centurion. This veteran commander has a servant near death. Upon hearing of this, Jesus is compelled to go to the home of this powerful leader and heal his beloved servant. What happens next is at the core of why we, as a church, love our veterans and their families. The dialogue picks up here in Matthew 8:8–10:

But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too 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 servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.”

The servant is healed. So, what’s going on? Of the 37 miracles conducted by Jesus, the centurion encounter shows us the love of Jesus extending out to the military and embracing them. Second, the Roman commander displayed great humility and concern for others, while at the same time showing unbridled confidence in the Lord. Even though the centurion is perceived by many in Jesus’ day as the enemy — an evil occupier of their land and a conqueror of God’s chosen people — Jesus was looking into his heart and saw great faith. Jesus loves those who put on the uniform and those who serve their country. This is why the church loves its veterans and their families.

Keeping this in mind, let me extend a warm welcome to our friends and visitors this morning, especially to our veterans and the families of those who served our great nation. For all those who wore the uniform of our country, there are many who stand behind you. We are so grateful to the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and children of those who served. As you served and protected our country, those who love you prayed for you, wrote to you while in harm’s way, dreamed of you at night and are so proud of your honorable service. So again, thank you. Thank you for your dedication and loyalty to protecting our country and keeping us safe.

Our text is recorded in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus had just entered Jerusalem. He predicted His death, washed the disciples’ feet, and spoke of His betrayal and Peter’s denial. Then, He comforts the disciples with the reassuring words of John 14:1–6:

[Jesus said,] “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The Lord knows what’s going to happen. Soon comes the betrayal in Gethsemane. Soon comes the cruel traveling back and forth between Pontus Pilate’s residence at Fortress Antonia and Herod’s Jerusalem palace. Then the scourging. Then the journey to the cross. Followed by crucifixion and death.

In the center of His dying on the cross rests the heart and epicenter of Jesus’ mission and purpose. Look at the living and dying embodiment of love hanging on those wooden beams. There is no greater love than that of Him who lays down His life for others. Some will ask, “Is not the love for enemies and dying for them greater?” With confidence we rest in the words of Hebrews 10:10, where we read, “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” It was a death based on love and self-sacrifice — a well-organized plan for Jesus as the substitution for our sins. Earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus makes this clear when He says to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”
In John 15, Jesus is speaking to the disciples, the followers of Christ. This is not time for comparisons, such as a love for enemies versus a love for friends. Jesus is in the midst of friends, and He is speaking to friends. For us, it’s clear: The one hanging on the center cross, wedged between two criminals, is no ordinary man. This is Jesus, the promised Messiah, the Second Adam, the Lord who willingly and lovingly gave up His life. This is the same Jesus who by His death crushed hell and the power of the devil. This is Jesus, who shattered death’s grip and whose fetters could not bind. This is the King of glory who rose victoriously from the grave. We now stand in the bright light of the resurrected Lord of all. Jesus is the personification of His words, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends”!

In a sermon Luther preached on the activity of Christ on the cross, the great reformer said:

Christ does not die for the attainment of a personal benefit, for He does not die for us in order thereby to gain a great profit and benefit from us for Himself. Nor does He die in order to satisfy the claims of justice, for He is obliged or bound to die either for us or for Himself. But He does die for the sake of our sins that He may help us. The great, unending love He bears us moves Him to die for us.

In Jesus’ loving, self-sacrificing death on the cross, we now stand as one forgiven by God and belonging to Him forever. His child, forgiven and loved. This is all God’s action and activity. So many people attempt to understand why Jesus would do such a thing as pour out His life for the likes of us. Many have asked, “Why would anyone want to die for me?” Some have asked, “What was God thinking when demonstrating His love by dying such a horrible death on a cross?” Consider the words and actions of Jesus. If you want to get a glimpse of who God is and how He relates to humanity, consider the place of execution on the hill of Golgotha. In Jesus’ suffering and agony on the cross, we sinful, awful, rebellious, often-straying people encounter the eternal God. It is on that windswept, lonely hill that the Lord God discloses who we are and who He is. There are no pearly gates, no purity of white glory, no high-above-the-heavens encounter. Through His Son, Jesus, we encounter the eternal God pouring out His life among the smell of death, the sound of wailing, the cursing of a dying thief and the dust of humiliation. God accomplishes His magnificent work out of a deep, deep sense of love for you and all humanity. In the words of the hymn “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You” (Lutheran Service Book 334) by Paul Gerhardt, we hear a beautiful expression of thanks for our salvation based on the loving plan of our Savior:

Love caused Your incarnation;
Love brought You down to me.
Your thirst for my salvation
Procured my liberty.
Oh, love beyond all telling,
That led You to embrace
In love, all love excelling.
Our lost and fallen race. (v. 4)

It is said that those who serve in the military understand on a deeper level the words of Jesus regarding the laying down of one’s life for a friend. These words resonate with those who have seen self-sacrifice in duty to their country. Some people here are tied to loved ones who gave the last full measure and died for our freedoms. On this day, we, as a Christian community, acknowledge those who serve. We know by name those who wear the uniform. They are our sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles. The military ranks are not filled by automatons but by those we love and know from school plays, worship services, confirmation classes and around the table at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Those who serve our country are good citizens of what Martin Luther understood to be “the two kingdoms” — the kingdom of God and the civil government. Luther believed military service was the fulfillment of vocation. This divine plan of God is recorded in Romans 13:3–4:

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.

This Ministry to the Armed Forces Sunday, we are thankful for those who served in the military as well as for their families who supported them. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” It is your time of service that helps us understand more fully the work accomplished exclusively by Jesus on the cross. You are special and deserving of our appreciation. We thank you for your time of service. We love you as Christ loved the centurion and healed his servant. Those who serve in the military are offered the same gift of life given to the centurion who encountered Jesus in Matthew 8. Salvation is for all, including those who serve in the military. The atonement of Christ on the cross extends to all. In Jesus’ holy and precious name. Amen.

Provided by Chaplain (Army Lt. Col.) Steven C. Hokana
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