

“Fight the good fight of the faith;
take hold of the eternal life,
to which you were called.”

I Timothy 6:12a

A week ago, I attended a conference for area clergy at the Navy Great Lakes Training Center entitled “Becoming a Military Friendly Ministry.”

Their main focus was that churches were at the front line of outreach for veterans and that they should be military friendly.

But what caught my attention was the emphasis on PTSD, post traumatic stress disorder. This is actually nothing new to human experience—traumatic stress goes hand in hand with human life on this earth.

However, with regard to war veterans, it is the trauma of being on or near a battlefield and the repercussions of both causing death and destruction; and experiencing death and destruction.

These people go through something that touches the deepest moral and spiritual fiber of a human person— as

the 23rd Psalm puts it, they “walk through the shadow of death.”

When it came time to talk about what needs to be done for veterans who suffer from PTSD, it became even more apparent to me that a church is the natural place to find refuge.

Recovering from trauma—especially for war veterans, as outlined in this conference, involved these four steps:

First, to find a non-critical and supportive environment.

Second, to work at forgiveness—for self and others.

Third, to deal with reality—the real world.

Fourth, to reconcile faith issues.

As I heard these steps, I realized that all are found in the promises of our own Episcopal Baptismal Covenant.

The non-critical and supportive environment is part of “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself.” We, at our best, are not preachy and judgmental in the witness to our

faith. We believe that the first component of love is an acceptance that allows others to be themselves—not as we would want them; and for us to be ourselves—not as others would want us.

The work of forgiveness is found in the second promise, "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"

We don't believe forgiveness is a one-shot deal. It is a life-long struggle. As human beings with memory—there is no such thing as forgiving and forgetting; it is an act of perseverance and work. Therefore, in our worship, we all say the confession together and know we'll do it every time we worship—because forgiveness is a work of faith.

As for coming home to the real world, there is the fifth promise, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people; and respect the dignity of every human being?" Sermons in the Episcopal Church are almost always about such issues in one way or another. You rarely hear any statements that being a Christian

is a matter of being better than others. Being a Christian means accepting our place in the family of God along with all other human beings with a sense of justice and peace.

Finally, reconciling faith issues. Here we look to the first promise of the Baptismal covenant. "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?"

Contrary to those who think faith is simply a matter of suddenly accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior which settles the faith need forever; we believe that faith is a struggle which demands constant attention, communal support, sacramental assurance, and a life-long posture of prayer.

I joined the Army at 17 happily between serious military conflict--1955-1958. Yet, in basic training, I was taught to kill. We rammed our bayonets--fixed on our rifles, into stuffed manikins; we fired at targets that looked like people; and I wondered secretly if I would, should the occasion present itself, ever be able to kill another person. I am grateful that this never

presented itself to me. But it means that I can't imagine how people, who have done what they were commanded in true battle, ever find their way back to their earlier innocence.

The writer of Timothy says, "Fight the good fight of the faith, take hold of the eternal life of which you were called." Two things, life is struggle, but God provides the answer in Jesus Christ. It is a matter of our own focus.

Eternal life, doesn't only mean life after death, but the quality of life while we are alive. And this depends on our own efforts to seek the gifts of God in God's church: an accepting and loving community, a place to be forgiven and forgive, a place for sharing the truth with one another, and reconciling our faith issues.

In the end, I believe the whole salvation story is about God trying to rescue all of us from PTSD. Perhaps not as dramatic as warriors; but the reality of life is that nothing is perfect; no other human being is perfect; trauma happens. It may be as slight as

betrayal by a close family member or good friend; or as terrible as recovering from a major natural disaster; but it does come.

God wills that our life be good and abundant; we hear this over and over again in the gospels. But just as warriors need to struggle to overcome their most dramatic and awful stress; we need to fight to obtain our own piece of the abundant life—the eternal life—that Jesus the Christ brings by his own traumatic experience—death upon the Cross for our salvation. We find this in that which Our Lord promised, “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst.”

This, my brothers and sisters, is your Church, Sunday after Sunday, confession after confession, forgiveness after forgiveness, communion after communion, acceptance after acceptance, reality after reality, and serving others after serving others, knowing that no matter what we’ve been through in life—God’s love never ends—either here or in his promised family after our death.