

Making space for veterans

If soldiers make it home, the war comes with them. Every day, about 18 of them implode in suicide.

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As a combat veteran, I find it tragic that election day always falls just before Veterans Day. Every couple years, the nation waits breathlessly to see who will sit in Washington for them. Nobody seems to have any energy left a week later to remember those who sat in foxholes for them. Despite all the cheap jokes about how sleazy politicians are, Americans seem more concerned with these politicians than with the “Next Greatest Generation.”

Maybe you think Americans pay enough attention to our troops. But how many Americans know that [veterans have a suicide rate more than twice that of non-veterans?](#) Or that suicide is the [leading cause of death](#) in the Army?

These facts often catch people by surprise, even though they’ve been the case for at least seven of the 12 years we’ve been at war. I hear from pastors and laypeople every year around this time (as well as around Memorial Day). They describe worship services and Bible studies that echo assumptions and expectations about war and soldiering—assumptions and expectations formed not by the Bible or our traditions, but by popular culture and the media. Veterans and service members are often asked to stand and be recognized in worship. Preaching on soldiers seems to stick to the familiar passages about centurions, passages that do not reflect soldiers’ experiences in war.

Take it from me, part of “[the other one percent](#)” who have served: the culture gets it wrong.

Our culture too often thinks in binaries: good and evil, us and them, hero and villain. But war isn't like this. War builds soldiers up and breaks them in half, and sometimes they can't tell which one is happening to them.

A year ago, a West Point ethicist told students and faculty at Duke Divinity School that "[there is both beauty and tragedy in war](#)," that charity and monstrosity exist side by side. One day a soldier might see a friend abuse a detainee; the next the same friend jumps on a grenade. Is he a sadistic monster or a chivalrous hero?

And what do you call having to run over a child because she failed to get out of the way during a tense convoy in hostile territory? Evil, for taking the life of a child? Good, for protecting one's friends from enemy opportunism? God only knows. God alone gets it right.

Soldiers certainly do not. If they make it home, the war comes with them. Every day, about 18 of them implode in suicide. [A smaller number explode](#) in violence against others. Both are manifestations of the deep moral, psychological and spiritual tumult set in motion by military service. Christians must take notice, must be deliberate in responding to the moral pain reflected in these hidden wounds of war. An [emerging field of study](#) calls this moral injury: a psycho-social ailment induced by, according to Veterans Affairs clinicians, "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations."

Veterans Day offers the world the chance to honor the service of those few who have accepted the great burden of soldiering. After all, soldiers stand ready to show what John's Gospel calls the greatest love that can be shown: the readiness to lay down one's life.

But the day also offers the church an opportunity to reflect on its own veterans: the [centurion of great faith](#), [Cornelius](#), Martin of Tours (patron saint of soldiers and chaplains, whose November 11 feast day predates Veterans Day by 15 centuries), Francis of Assisi (an Italian soldier and prisoner of war who turned his back on war in 1204), Ignatius of Loyola (a Spanish knight whose order, the Jesuits, are sometimes called "God's Marines").

The church gets it right: each of these soldiers passed through intense periods of reflection and repentance. Our veterans need space to grieve even the *necessary* evils they've done, witnessed, or failed to prevent. Churches can let them tell their own story—instead of having it told to them in simple terms of good and evil. In the

fog of war, it is hard to tell the two apart.