

Pastoral Presence with Veterans

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When I stop by for a visit, one veteran opens up about his experiences as an army medic in Korea, after weeks of not talking about anything personal. He hasn't joined the usual American Legion Hall or the VFW because he doesn't want to sit down at bars and rehash war stories. He hasn't talked much about his experience over the years, and only to a few people. He tells me about the sparse language veterans use when they talk about their war experience. It is as if he is giving me a grammar or lexicon to understand his buddies and himself. He says, "Veterans don't embellish what happened. We name things clear as we can. It doesn't take a lot of words. It's writers who've never lived through war that use a lot of words to describe it. You can tell the truth simply." Our conversation is punctuated by a lot of silence into which he speaks slowly and haltingly, almost as if to himself. Yet he looks into my eyes to make sure I know his bottom line: the meaning of his experiences can't be expressed fully or even in a lot of words.

Truth and simplicity are important to this veteran and to many others who told me their stories. Telling the truth, I think, allows one to inhabit more fully the truth of one's identity. It allows one to get more comfortably into the skin of who we are, who we have been, and who we are becoming. Telling the truth of ourselves often involves small talk here and simple talk there, to different people at various times and in diverse places. It is often too scary to reveal even little bits of our lived truth to just one person, let alone confess it to God. Sometimes we don't even have the words to hold experiences larger than ourselves.

What can contain, even embrace, our individual truth is the space of relationships that exist between you and me. This is the space that allows people to engage with the truth of who they are, with the yearning that is on the tips of their tongues, the yearning they want to share but haven't yet. This is the space into which people can pour out their

hearts. What does it look and feel like? How do I know when I am in that space with another person? How is that space created?

It is a space of silence created by mutual vulnerability. It is a space of uncertain ambiguity where strangers meet with fear and trembling. It is a heart space of love that has no height or depth. It is intimidating to initiate pastoral visits with people of uncommon experience, namely with those who have been in combat. It is just as scary for veterans to open up to people who represent the church, peace and reconciliation, and God knows what else. It is awareness of their vulnerability and my own that is the bridge of connection, the common ground of our meeting. I imagine this space of vulnerability in theological ways. The doctrine of the Trinity grounds my pastoral presence, holds and sustains the interplay of silence and speech, from which new life can spring.

The Trinitarian emphasis of God, who desires wholeness and abundant life for all of creation now, even in the face of limitations and death, is a generous God. Imagine each person of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each person is separate and distinct, yet related in their life together. Now imagine the space of their life together. First of all, it is a space that has spatial and temporal dimensions. It is a large roomy space, generous enough to contain the distinct uniqueness of separate yet connected lives. It is also large enough to hold the past, present, and future aspects of their common life together in abundant love.

Such attentiveness to the contours of the inner life of God is also tending to the trustworthy dimensions of our individual and communal lives. As Christians we confess we are made in the image and likeness of God. We are relational creatures who exist in time and space. We take up a certain amount of room in relation to one another, sometimes squished together so close we can't breathe, let alone be ourselves or feel the winds of the Spirit moving in and among us. At other times there is breathing space that provides us with enough distance and perspective to see the other persons clearly, to hear their voices distinctly, and maybe even discern the presence of God with us. The Trinitarian emphasis upon the radical particularity of each person within the Godhead is

the interpretive key to the “otherness” of veterans as well as the roomy space of encounter. I don’t collapse my experience into theirs. I allow a listening distance into which veterans can speak. I sit close enough to lean into their words.

The army medic finishes his story with a request. “Will you pray for me?” I pray for him. After weeks of praying together for the nation and world, this personal request is intimate and speaks volumes. His words and silence form my spoken words of prayer. The prayer space we inhabit together is large and deep, blessed with God’s loving presence.

¹These comments come from a particular place and time, role and responsibility. The context was the VA Medical Center in Minneapolis where I was a chaplain intern for a semester in 2009, having already graduated with a MDiv. degree from Luther Seminary. As the wife of a disabled veteran who also receives care at that facility, I arrived at that ministry setting with many experiences of having received good medical care there.