

## **WHEN JOHNNY COMES MARCHING HOME: A PASTOR'S GUIDE TO MINISTRY WITH VETERANS**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The pastor of First Baptist Church sat across from me at the local diner. His eyes were heavy, reflecting the pain in his heart. His concern was for his youth director, a Marine Veteran who had served in the war on terrorism and was now attending a local Bible College, courtesy of the G.I. Bill. The pastor explained to me that his church ran a combined youth group with the Congregational Church in the New England town where he served. The previous Wednesday evening the youth director had brought a gun to the youth group meeting in the Congregational Church. The community was in an uproar. The Congregational pastor wanted the youth director fired immediately. The Baptist pastor sitting across from me was less reactive.

“What’s going on with this young man? Why would he do such a thing?” he asked. Would you be willing, as a retired Navy Chaplain, to meet with this young man and talk with him? Could you help me understand his motives in taking a weapon into church?”

I agreed to meet with the young man, the pastor made a phone call, and four hours later I was sitting in the same diner across from the youth director. “Why would you take a gun into a church?” I asked. “Guns are not even allowed in military chapels. The church is intended to be a sanctuary, a safe place for all, and the presence of a gun threatens that sense of safety.”

“I have my Second Amendment Rights,” the Marine replied. “They are violating my Second Amendment Rights by not allowing me to bring my gun into the church.”

“The Second Amendment is part of the Constitution,” I replied. “There is no Second Amendment Right in the Bible.”

The young men looked at me, unable to respond to my Biblical claim. “You’re right,” he said with downcast eyes.

“I think I understand why you brought the gun to church. You are a Marine. While you were in Afghanistan your rifle was your security. You don’t go anywhere while you are in theater without your rifle.”

My words were a paraphrase of the *Rifleman’s Creed*, which every Marine learns by heart in bootcamp:

*This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.*

*My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life.*

*My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will.*

*My rifle and myself know that what counts in this war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count. We will hit.*

*My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel. I will ever guard it against the ravages of weather and damage as I will ever guard my legs, my arms, my eyes and my heart against damage. I will keep my rifle clean and ready. We will become part of each other. We will.*

*God, I swear this creed. My rifle and myself are the defenders of my country.*

*We are the masters of our enemy. We are the saviors of my life.*

*So be it, until victory is America's and there is no enemy, but peace!*

This Marine was experiencing an intense spiritual struggle. Notice the religious language here. Marines have their own *Creed*. The Rifle is a Christ figure: “My rifle is my best friend. It is my life.” “Without my rifle, I am useless.” “We will become part of each other.” “We are the saviors of my life.” This is certainly not theological orthodoxy. But it is military orthodoxy. It is the way to survive in battle.

My youth director friend is no longer in Afghanistan. He is in New England, a much different environment. But his experiences in battle have marked him. They are written on his very soul. A warrior identity has been drilled into him. He’s been literally brainwashed in bootcamp to believe that his salvation is found in his rifle. Now as he attends a Holy Place in New Hampshire, he brings his savior with him. In his confused thinking, the Second Amendment to the Constitution is a Bible that allows, even instructs him to do so.

The Baptist pastor was right, he did not know how to minister to this returning veteran. He is in good company. Few pastors today know how to minister to the veterans of our nation’s wars. It is unlikely that they are veterans themselves. They have no idea what it means to be trained to kill, go off to battle, and return with experiences they don’t feel comfortable talking about with anyone other than fellow veterans. They don’t understand the spiritual struggles that

go on in the souls of military veterans. If they did, they would be better equipped to help this population deal with the intense spiritual struggles that they face on a daily basis.

My Baptist friend didn't know how to minister to this Marine veteran, but unlike his Congregational colleague he had a heart to do so. Both he and the Congregational pastor more than likely had the skills necessary to minister to their troubled youth director, they just didn't know how to employ them. I believe the average parish pastor with a Seminary education is well equipped to minister effectively with the many veterans struggling spiritually in our country.

Veterans desperately need the ministry local parish pastors can offer. The statistic is well-known: Twenty-two veterans take their own lives every day in America. This behavior is a symptom of a deeper, spiritual problem. A struggle in the veteran's soul. Historically the work of the pastor has included the care of souls, *cura animarum*. Ministers are uniquely qualified to help veterans who are engaged in this kind of soul struggle.

There is no doubt this work is desperately needed. The Veterans Administration (VA) offers a great deal of help to treat veteran's physical wounds. They prescribe prostheses to replace lost limbs. They write prescriptions for medicine that alleviates a great deal of pain, both physical and emotional. The VA also provides excellent counseling and therapy to those who have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). But, with the exception of providing chaplains in their hospitals and in some of their clinics, the Veterans Administration is not treating the deepest wounds caused by war, the wounds that scar the soul of returning veterans. This requires the "care of the soul," and is the work of church as a whole and her leaders.

But both the church and her leaders, for reasons that will become clear throughout this book, have too often failed our veterans. Ever since the Vietnam conflict, many of the mainline churches have viewed the military with suspicion if not outright hostility. Evangelical churches

(especially in the South) have been more supportive of military service, but tend to be quick to judge combat-wounded veterans who do not fit the mold of a “good Christian.” The church needs to be humble and confess that she has fallen far short of the model of her Leader, who was known as a friend of tax collectors (who did the dirty work of the government) and sinners (Matthew 11:19). The church needs to understand that servicemen and women have become a part of a different culture than civilians, and they must be understood as such. Ministry to those who have served in military by civilians is cross-cultural ministry.

Unfortunately, many veterans do not feel welcome and comfortable in our churches, and begin to seek help elsewhere. Instead of reuniting with the God’s people around the Word and Sacrament, they unite at the American Legion around stories and alcohol. Even as a Chaplain, I have to confess that I have often felt more accepted among my fellow veterans than I have among fellow believers.

I believe we can do better. I write as a pastor who has served in both the parish as a pastor and in the military as a chaplain. My goal is to help equip pastors and their congregations to reach out with a greater level of understanding to veterans, whether they are Vietnam War veterans that have been in their midst for over 50 years now or the young veterans of the War on Terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our veterans need the hope and healing that comes from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. They deserve no less.