

SERMON NOTES-THE PROFESSION OF ARMS

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“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart; be acceptable in thy sight, o lord, my strength and my redeemer.” Amen

The lord god asked Isaiah, “**Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?**”^[1]

When I was 19 and a cadet at the Air Force Academy, I answered, “**Here am I, lord. Send me!**”

Later, I came across this scripture in an interesting way. When the Air Force promoted me to Brigadier General, I was selected to attend what we humorously called, “charm school.” This was a 3-week set of lectures and visits to major bases. Among the locations we visited was Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. This is where the Air Force conducts Basic Training for enlisted airmen. We were there over a weekend, and as I usually did, I attended protestant chapel. On the chapel wall, I saw a huge mural depicting a young airman with his wife and children, kneeling at the communion rail. The inscription above the mural was the quotation from Isaiah, it said,

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ Then said I, ‘Here am I. Send me!’”

Over the 233 years since the Declaration of Independence, millions of young men and women have answered, “Here am I, lord, send me!” Then they joined the profession of arms. On this 4th of July weekend, it is appropriate that we reflect on this calling --- and this response.

What is the Lord asking? What exactly is this “profession of arms”? Professor Samuel Huntington wrote at Harvard in his book, The Soldier and the State,^[ii] that the military is a **profession**, like law or medicine. All professions have three characteristics in common: **expertise, responsibility and corporateness.**

The first characteristic - **expertise** - is very diversified in today’s military. It encompasses almost all the skills in the civilian community. However, there is one expertise that is distinctive, and it sets the military profession apart from other professions. It has been labeled, “the management of violence.”^[iii] We fighter pilots simply call it, “**combat.**” Combat is the **core of the military profession.** I would also add, “command,” and for the navy, “command at sea.”

*Let me tell you **my story** about expertise. You know, we flag officers are taught to read everything and never make mistakes. . . . Don’t believe it! I am reminded of last Easter, when Father Edward asked the men’s group to prepare the breakfast. We were all scrambling to get started, and I began to prepare the cinnamon French toast. I picked up the recipe and started at the top. I was hussling bread, eggs, brown sugar and cinnamon. I put the sweet layer on the bottom, covered it with pieces of bread, and noticed the recipe said, “Cover the bread with **one half** of the eggs and cinnamon.” Then I spread a layer of cream cheese. I wondered about that other ½ of the egg mixture, but in a hurry, I began to work on the next batch of French toast.*

*It was not until Easter morning, that I reread the recipe and noticed that it said, down at the bottom, “now spread the **other half** of the eggs and cinnamon over the cream cheese”!!! Opps! The toast was already in the oven! I was truly humbled! **Now my confession is out.** Fortunately, in the Air Force, I was seldom responsible for French toast!^[iv]*

The second characteristic of the military profession is **responsibility**. We military people provide a service. We swear allegiance to the constitution, not to a political party or person -- not even to the president, even though he is our commander-on-chief. The weight of our responsibility is heavy because we are entrusted with a **monopoly on the use of force**. If we become irresponsible, we can no longer serve. We have a responsibility to our **God**, to our **country** and to our **fellow citizens**. We are granted authority, limited by responsibility.

And you know the centurion in our gospel reading for today knew about responsibility! He knew that Jesus had the authority. Notice the centurion's words, "for I **also** am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, 'go,' and he goeth; and to another, 'come,' and he cometh."^{lv} The centurion had the faith that Jesus did not need to be present. He knew the power of the chain of command. He knew that commanders give orders, and those orders are carried out. The centurion's military experience had taught him what many early followers of Jesus had yet to learn – that Christ was all powerful, and that **faith** in him could work miracles! Would that **we** could be like that centurion!

There is another trait of warriors and centurions. They are in a vocation, not an occupation! No one says, "Show me the money!" I started as a LT at about \$400 a month. When I was flying, I got an extra \$100, and when I was in combat, I got "combat pay" of \$55 a month! It is not a coincidence that cadets and midshipmen often think of themselves as "**monks**" – consigned to personal poverty and perpetual penance.

The military profession then becomes a moral unit, with values and ideals, instilled by god, which guide the members' actions.

How can military people do this? Morally, how can they take actions that may kill someone? They can act because they act in self defense. They act because they are peacemakers. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children

of God.”^[vii] But he also said, “He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one.”^[viii]”

Military professionals act because they are commissioned to act. The United States constitution says “Provide for the common defense.”^[viii] They act with the moral authority of Saint Thomas Aquinas. These military warriors act as our agents -- in defense of **all of us**. They are not free agents. When they act, we are there with them, and when they act badly, we share in their shame.

The **third** characteristic of the military profession is **corporateness**. Corporateness is not a lay term. It means an association, a unified body of individuals, a team. It is a legal entity; it has a charter. It is endowed by law with certain legal rights and liabilities. The members have a sense of shared, organic unity, a consciousness of themselves as a group apart from laymen. Why apart? . . . First, basic training is physically apart from society.

It is a highly disciplined and physically rigorous course of instruction. Our Coronado Naval Special Warfare Seals are probably the best example. The goal of Seal basic training – BUDS-- is to take young recruits, raised in our individualistic, selfish culture that tolerates and excuses almost every sort of human behavior, and train them to become experts in the use of force, responsibility, and teamwork.

Military service is also a **vocation!** Its current members are all volunteers. Members of a vocation hear a summons, a call to service. *Webster’s dictionary even says a vocation is a divine call to the religious life, an entry into the priesthood or religious order. [Father Edward, what do you think of that?] Maybe my cadets-as-monks analogy was not too far off. This feeling was certainly reinforced at the Air Force Academy where we had to attend mandatory chapel!! I think my Naval Academy colleagues did too.*

Corporateness is exemplified by the oath of allegiance and the officer's commission. It is reinforced by uniforms, insignia, hierarchy of rank, badges of skill, ribbons of service, and medals for bravery.

The distinctiveness of the military profession also rests in its **unlimited liability clause**. Almost no other institution requires an oath to service that includes the voluntary risk of sudden death. Police and firefighters also have an unlimited liability clause, but there is a difference. For the most part, civilian workers apply for a job, then live and work in the community of their choice. Not so, the military professional. . . . Military families are stationed in over 100 foreign countries. I've been assigned in 12. I moved 23 times.

*As I was trying to get into my uniform this morning, I looked into the mirror and wondered, "Where had that young fighter pilot gone?" Here I stand before you with white hair, glasses, and a beard But **inside**, I am still the young, vigorous fighter pilot who loved to fly. I crash landed my sky raider one day in Vietnam and flew again the next.*

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote of his time in the Civil War:

"We have shared the incommunicable experience of war;

We have felt – we still feel – the passion of life to its top.

In our youth, our hearts were **touched with fire**."^{fix}

You see, we who worship among you; we are not admirals or generals or captains or master chiefs. We are still young lieutenants, and we're strapped into our cockpits or on the bridge of a warship, we are fighting against injustice and tyranny, and fighting to preserve the American way.

We were soldiers once . . . And young!

I would like to close with a poignant verse from Walt Whitman, in his poem, *A Passage to India*,

"Bathe me, o God, in thee,"

“O, my brave soul!
O farther, **farther** sail!
O darling joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, **farther** sail!”^[xi]

And so, on this Independence Day weekend, let us pray and thank god that when the Lord asks, **“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”** That we still will have courageous, young Americans who will stand up and say, **“Here am I, lord, send me!”**

Amen

Bible Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8, 734 BCE

Matthew 8:5-13 (The Centurion)

Hymns: # 718, “God of our Fathers, Whole Almighty Hand”
Air Force Hymn (reprinted In the Bulletin)
608, The Navy hymn, “Eternal Father, Strong to Save”
717 “God Bless America”
599, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”

^[i] Isaiah 6: 8

^[ii] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 1957, p. 7.

^[iii] Harold Lasswell’s phrase

^[iv] Thanks to Dick Kulper for this observation.

^[v] Matthew 8: 9

^[vi] Matthew 5: 9

^[vii] Luke, 22: 36.

^[viii] Preface for the Constitution of the United States.

^[ix] Oliver Wendell Holmes, as read In the original soundtrack recording of the TV Series, *The Civil War*, produced by Ken burns and John Colby.

^[x] Walt Whitman, *Passage to India*, as set to music by Ralph Vaughn Williams, “A Sea Symphony.”

