

Chaplain John Kiser

“The Faith of a Soldier”

Isaiah 2:1-5, Luke 7:1-10

Second Presbyterian Church, Kansas City, Missouri

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Please pray with me. Lord, may the words of my mouth and all the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen, and amen.

What an honor and privilege and pleasure to be back at my home Church here at Second Presbyterian – here in the pulpit of my first spiritual mentor, Dr. Hage. I was very happy when Edward offered the opportunity to preach today and I realize this is third time that I have preached here at Second Pres. The first time was 25 years ago on Youth Sunday when I had a beard and long hair, or at least longer hair, or a little more hair. Ministers say it is hard to preach at your home church because *some* may have changed your diapers and *many* know all the crazy things you did when you were young. In the first service I actually had somebody come to me and say, “I did change your diapers when you were a baby.” See what I mean?

But seriously I will always be appreciative of Second Presbyterian for your support, not just in learning about Jesus, but also in my preparation for ministry, the place of my wedding to my wife of 14 years, and your serious support in the missions that I’ve been on: Either sending me on a mission trip to Latin America, or sending school supplies to children in Bosnia, Kosovo, even Iraq. I also appreciate all of your support and encouragement through letters and emails and especially prayers.

I am happy to be here today to talk about Soldiers and their faith and my ministry to them. I think its important that we do that today now that the war in Iraq and in Afghanistan have become what some say, “unpopular,” with many in our country; even comparing it to the unpopularity of the war in Vietnam. As a Chaplain, a Minister, a Christian, even as an old Soldier, I find the very idea of an “unpopular” war or a “popular” war somewhat disturbing, because the Soldiers that I have known that have had to go into combat would prefer not to go again, but they go because their buddies are there. They’re told to go, and they go there to help each other out.

My new assignment is as the Ethics Instructor for the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Notice I had to take a deep breath before that, WHINSEC, for short. This assignment allows me to see up close and *personal* the fury of the anti-war movement. I think it’s because this school’s predecessor was called The School of the Americas. At this school we train Latin Americans, Canadians, those from the Caribbean – even my beloved Jamaicans – to use ethics in their duties. I can assure you that torture is not taught at this school and I can assure you we do not have a “How to Be a Dictator 101” course despite what some people claim. WHINSEC however is a lightning rod for many people who are against U.S. Foreign Policy or part of the anti-war movement, and unfortunately as I see up close and personal, how some people simply do not like Soldiers.

Interestingly during the protest last November, I went and met with the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship protestors outside the gates of Fort Benning to include a nice discussion and dialog with our former moderator, Rick Ufford-Chase. And then in January as a consequence of the protests I telephoned and then met one of the protestors, Dr. Phil Gates and his wife, a Presbyterian Elder from Arizona who was sentenced for trespassing on Fort Benning as part of the protests. I was able to have him in my house to meet my family, and we broke bread together. I even gave him a tour of WHINSEC, showing him the school, answering his questions, and trying to correct some misconceptions that many people have about our school and our mission.

I’m also very good friends with many pastors and people from the surrounding Flint River presbytery area. They know and value the mission of WHINSEC, as frustrating as that is for the many of Presbyterian protestors who come from far away to protest. What’s the bottom line? It’s that our denomination has

sincere and deeply held beliefs about the methods of how to work towards peace, which I like to call *Shalom*, because it is more than the mere absence of warfare. However, I ultimately believe if our focus is on Christ and we are honest with each other, God can use our voices as shocking as that may seem to people on both sides of debates.

During this time of differing views in our country and our Church, I think it's interesting to hear what the Presbyterian General Assembly has to say about military service. This goes back to the days of 1969 during the Vietnam War: "The Presbyterian Church does not teach a single response to war which all members must accept for God alone is the Lord of conscience, not the state or the Church. God is the Lord of conscience of those who, *in good faith* and *sensitive spirit*, conclude that military power must sometimes be employed to establish the pre-conditions for *justice, order, and freedom*."

Please understand, as a Presbyterian Minister of the Word and Sacrament and an Army Chaplain I do not see myself as an advocate of war but as a missionary of the Gospel of Peace. As a Chaplain I am an advocate for Soldiers to God and God to Soldiers, even in the midst of warfare. I see war as a sign of the fallen, sinful world, but unfortunately necessary – even justified – at times. As a Christian leader I testify to the day when our Lord Jesus returns, and Paul tells us, "*every knee shall bow, every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord*," and as we heard today from Isaiah, that someday, on the Day of the Lord, "*all swords will be beaten into plowshares, every spear into a pruning hook, and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore*." Again, as an old Soldier whom God has called to put on a uniform to do my ministry, I cannot express to you how much I look forward to this future but certain reality.

Now this may be surprising to some, but the New Testament views Soldiers in a very positive light. Jesus, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul *all* had good interactions with Soldiers. I think it's important that *none* of them ever told the Soldiers that they met to leave military service. They could have, but instead they told the Soldiers they met to simply stay faithful to God and be kind to other people and be fair – something I think we all need to do.

In Acts, chapter 10, we see that God gave Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, the honor of becoming the first Gentile non-Jewish Christian. And I think that is very significant how we relate to Soldiers because in the passage today from Luke 7 we see a miracle of healing at the request of a Roman Centurion – a representative of an imperial occupation force, a Soldier – a fairly high-ranking military officer. But we see this professional Soldier with humility and compassion pleading for the life of one of his servants who is about to die. He asked the Jewish elders to intercede with Jesus on his behalf for his servant because he simply, and humbly, considered himself unworthy to directly approach Jesus.

Of interest, I think, in this situation is that the Jewish religious elders and leaders were in turn willing to intercede on behalf of this Soldier, who many even today would consider an unworthy person. But the faith and integrity of this Soldier was evident for all to see and even more interestingly, I think, is that Jesus was willing to intervene directly with this Soldier without any questions or qualifications. So I love to see the interaction of Jesus and this Centurion: The Centurion sees Jesus coming and is overwhelmed and says, "*I'm not worthy to have you do this but just say the word – just say the word – and my servant will be healed*." This Soldier recognized the spiritual power of Jesus had more authority than his earthly military power and he trusted the word of Jesus had supreme authority and a healing, life-saving power. If Jesus said it, it would be done. Jesus complimented the Roman officer for his extraordinary faith – "*greater faith than he had seen in all of Israel*."

John Calvin, you know I'm a good Presbyterian so I have to quote John Calvin using the commentaries that Second Pres gave me as an ordination gift upon graduation from Princeton – so here it is: John Calvin compliments on the simple sincere faith of this Soldier who believed that Jesus did not need to see the servant to heal him. Calvin says, "With the grace of healing, having been committed to Christ, the Centurion acknowledges that this is a heavenly power and does not look upon it as inseparable from the bodily presence of Jesus but is satisfied with the word from which he believes the power to proceed." And of course we know, Jesus spoke the word and the servant was healed.

The life of a Soldier is paradoxical: searching for peace even in the midst of warfare. Regardless of differing political or theological views, the Church as a whole knows that there are a lot of people in the Armed Forces, even Presbyterians believe it or not, who need to hear the Word of the Lord in the Armed Forces. That is why the Church sends Ministers to serve as Chaplains to Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. Chaplains seek to be an ethical, moral, and I believe a prophetic voice, in the midst of chaos and the confusion of combat.

Chaplains have a unique ministry that puts them on the ground with Soldiers in life and death situations where you know you need the full armor of God that Paul describes in Ephesians 6. Often this life is symbolized by our boots. Many times covered with dust and mud, sadly sometimes with blood. Soldiers, even though they consider themselves unworthy, want and I believe *deserve* a Minister who believes the words of Jesus and will bring them his words of peace – sometimes holding their hand and whispering in their ear as they go on to meet the Lord face to face.

As a Chaplain I minister to Soldiers and their families as any civilian pastor would to his or her congregation but if the Soldiers go to war we Chaplains go with them. We go into combat though, and I always have to correct this misconception, never carrying a weapon. As you can imagine, that can be pretty dangerous at times. In the Civil War, Chaplain U.P. Gardner of the 13th Kansas Infantry Regiment identified himself as a Chaplain and was promptly shot down dead by a too-young seventeen-year-old Quantrill's Raider, by the name of Jessie James. I guess he didn't like Jayhawkers. In World War II the Chaplain Corps had the third highest percentage of casualties behind the Infantry and the Army Air Forces. That is the dedication that Chaplains have to Soldiers.

In the Armed Forces probably more than any other place that I've seen in local communities or at national organizations, Ministers, but also Priests, Rabbis, and even Muslim Imams, work together to serve the spiritual needs of Soldiers and ensure the First Amendment Constitutional Right for the free exercise of religion.

In Iraq I was on a base camp with a Priest and a Rabbi. You know this is a good set up for a joke, right? I tell you, it was so much fun working with these guys as we dealt with the stress of combat. I probably laughed harder than anytime I ever had in my life, and anybody that knows me knows that I like to laugh hard. I remember one day we had to get on a helicopter and to fly to Tikrit to see the Chief of Chaplains in Tikrit, a Presbyterian, who wanted to gather all of his Chaplains together. I joked with my brother Chaplains and said, "I hope we don't get shot down today because if we do there's going to be a lot of chapels and parks named after us."

That goes back to a story in World War II when a troop ship going to Europe was torpedoed. Four Chaplains – a Rabbi, a Priest and two Ministers – helped hand out the life preservers until they realized that there were not enough life preservers for all the Soldiers. *Together* those chaplains without saying anything, took off their life preservers and gave them to Soldiers, and *together* those Chaplains locked arms, and *together* according to eyewitnesses went into the icy north Atlantic together singing songs and hymns *together*. And as you know, there are many chapels and parks named after the "Four Chaplains."

For that first year in Iraq I ministered in the combat support hospitals outside of Baghdad and Tikrit. As well as the Soldiers, I also saw many Iraqi combatants. Our nations called us enemies, but I felt I was doing what Jesus had commanded; not just to pray *for* my enemies but to also pray *with* my "enemies." We had Iraqi Soldiers and civilians, even some of Saddam's bodyguards and one of the Ba'ath party leaders, Tariq Aziz, laying in one of our hospital beds guarded by a Jewish MP. He was a Chaldean Christian, and after I identified myself as a Presbyterian Minister, a Christian Chaplain, we prayed together. Then he said, "You look too young to be a minister."

I don't know about that, but in those hospitals I saw up close how the wounds of war are not just physical but emotional, relational, spiritual, affecting the whole person. There is a sad reality to the words of Jesus – that *“those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.”* In Iraq I saw too many Soldiers die, too many Soldiers seriously wounded, those that I call “Purple Heart Heroes” – Soldiers who believed they gave their life, and were willing to go into combat, for what they saw as a worthy cause for the Iraqi people. Many of these Soldiers will carry, for the rest of their lives, the physical as well as emotional scars. Interestingly how we, as a Church, reach out to them will determine not petty things like how they view *Democrats* or *Republicans*, but how they will view *God* for the rest of their life and into eternity.

That means to me that we as a Church have a sacred mission to minister to these people – Soldiers and families. Probably the lesson I've learned most as a Chaplain is what Soldiers will actually do for other Soldiers. There's a fellow Chaplain, Baron Wester who rushed to the scene of some wounded Soldiers and was himself shot in the arm. As soon as his assistant saw that he was shot, he threw him on the ground and threw his own body over him and protected him from the sniper until they could Medevac him away.

On another day at our hospital, the Medevac helicopters brought in a group of wounded Paratroopers. Anybody who knows Paratroopers, will tell you what they are like. Many times I would meet the wounded as they were taken off the helicopter and wheeled into the emergency room. I would go cot to cot talking to every single one of those Soldiers encouraging them, praying for them, trying to help and reassure them that they were in good hands. And then I could see that there was a little ruckus going on in the corner because there was a Sergeant who was a squad leader for these Paratroopers. To say the least he was creating a little ruckus for the medics and nurses trying to treat him. So I went over there to see what was going on. As soon as he saw the cross on my uniform he grabbed my sleeve and he said, “Chaplain, find out if my Soldiers are ok and tell me before I let these people work on me.”

That is how much Soldiers love Soldiers and one of the ways God continually confirms my call to minister to Soldiers.

In John 15:13 Jesus says, *“No greater love than this than to lay down one's life for one's friends.”* The history of U.S. Medal of Honor recipients, the history of the Chaplain Corps, and the current struggle of our service members now serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, show that this statement of Jesus' truly reflects the faith of a Soldier.

So what can you do to show your love and support for a Soldier? Reach out and touch one. Usually they don't bite, despite their appearances. Find a reputable website that supports deployed or wounded Soldiers. Send letters and emails, Bibles. Mail cookies – my personal favorite. Even more don't forget the families back home: The empty seat at the dinner table where they pray everyday, almost every conscious hour that their loved ones will come back safe and sound.

And above all, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, pray for peace. Not just the peace in Jerusalem we heard earlier in Isaiah, but peace of mind, peace of spirit, the peace that Jesus offers that passes all understanding, even in the uncertainty of combat where a Soldier's faith in the Prince of Peace will see them through it all.

May that simple, humble, sincere faith like that of a Centurion, and our Soldiers currently serving in combat, lead our lives to be renewed, reformed, and recommitted to the one true Christ each and every day of our lives.

May God bless you all. Amen.