

Sermon: July 3, 2011

"A journey of love"

I have so many thoughts and feelings going through my "little brain."

I see ... in my heart ... the many "faces of America." Your face. My face. All "the faces" who grace this incredibly diverse country of ours. You know as well as I do ----- we live in tough and uncertain times. For many folks ... for many of you ----- the very foundation of our faith and patriotism have been tested.

We talked about this during worship this past Thursday evening ...

many of us are battling a kind-of "depression." Maybe you've "lost your way" ... your spirit and "heartsong" are a bit wrinkled and tired ... and we desperately want to GRAB ONTO SOMETHING that can hold us together and give us the strength to face another day.

I certainly can't speak for you ... but, as I get older ... and as the world seems to get a bit harsher and more unpredictable ----- I find myself "taking joy" in life's simpler moments. I just finished reading a book entitled --- "OKAY FOR NOW." The only reason I bought it is because of the cover ---- a kid with a bag over his head, wearing a baseball mitt, and giving a "thumbs-up" with his other hand. A story about the '60's in a small town. A kid who has "nothing" ----- no money, a grumpy dad, two bitter brothers... and a mom whose smile lights up the room and who finds joy in life's common intersections. A boy who grows-up to find miracles in ordinary "slices of life."

So ... Jude, Q, and I drive to Virginia to visit my brother and his family. Jim and Nan have two wonderful daughters, and they all live with such passion and grace. Jim looks a lot like me ----- a few tattoos, that Swedish "glow" ... ok: he's younger, better looking, and is a music professor. But he and Nan are never more "at home" than when they are riding their Harley Davidson motorcycles.

Jim is a part of a motor-cycle group ... with a very "sacred calling" ----- THE VIRGINIA PATRIOT GUARD RIDERS. The funerals of service men and women killed in action ... escorting a soldier's body home from the airport ... leading a soldier home, after returning from active duty ... being at the funeral of a soldier ...

Jim is so committed to this group ... and I know, for quite a while, was head of his local chapter.

When we arrived, Jim couldn't wait to tell this story. I apologize ... in advance ... for messing up some of the details ... but "the spirit is there."

Sargent Jesse A. Ault met his wife Betsy when their two units were combined for deployment to Iraq. They eventually married. When their first child – Adam – was 3 months old, Betsy had two years remaining in her tour of duty ... and her unit was called back to Iraq. So she could stay home with their son, Jesse took her place and went back to Iraq. He was able to come home briefly for the birth of their second child ... returned again to Iraq. In the last combat mission before he was to come home ... Jesse was killed.

For the past 3 years ... two fish have graced the aquarium at the Air Force Hospital in Iraq. "Pit Bull" and "Little Man" --- as they were named --- are a living memorial to Jesse's courage and memory. For three years wounded soldiers would pass by the fish tank ... and just seeing Pit Bull and Little Man ---- it somehow gave them a sense of peace and hope. And, of course, they could remember their comrade and friend ---- Jesse ... think about him, and pray for his wife Betsy and their young children.

When it was time for this unit to transition out of Iraq ... one of the soldiers began to think: what would it take to get these fish to where they belong?? ---- with Jesse's wife and 2 kids, back in Virginia.

They found out ----- IT WILL TAKE A LOT!!!! ... especially getting two fish, with a special tank and aerator ...

from Iraq to Virginia ----- ALIVE!!

Well ... it happened. On June 12 ... the Virginia Patriot Guard led a procession to Jesse's wife Betsy's home ... and presented her and her 2 young children with two very healthy fish. Pit Bull and Little Man were precisely where they belonged. And shortly after we left Virginia ... Jim and Nan and the Patriot Guard would once again go to Betsy's home ... and she would receive the flag flown over Joint Base Balad in Iraq ... on the 3rd anniversary of Sgt. Jesse Ault's death.

If these service men and women care that much about 2 fish and whom they represent ... can you imagine how much they care about us? ... their country? ... a comrad's family ... and what our country stands for?? I look at the uniforms you veterans wear today ... I think of what you represent ... your time, your service, your sacrifice. It's down-right inspiring.

And veteran or not ----- this is what we are all "called" to do.

The face of America is the face of life itself!@!!

Markham. Tinley Park. North side of Chicago.

Orland and Palos ... Robbins and Blue Island.

Bungalows with lawns the size of a kitchen table. Empty homes with long grass.

A trailer park on Kedzie ... a condo in Roscoe Village.

A small country church surrounded by crops ... the big stately church with people galore.

A young man with kids ... spending today in re-hab.

A grandma battling cancer in Harvey.

A young kid ... playing on his first traveling all-star team.

A teen-ager in circuit court ... hoping one big mistake won't ruin the rest of his life.

Jesse. Betsy. Base Balad in Iraq.

Soldiers who care. Motor-cycles ... carrying hope and goodness and memories and spirits.

In a way ... we are all "veterans" of something.

We are all "soldiers" with a cause.

As a nation ----- IT'S TIME TO COME TOGETHER.

Each of us goes through "stuff" ... we all have our struggles.

The most important UNIFORM we wear ... is the uniform of decency, goodness, and understanding.

I want to do a better job of wearing this ... beginning right now.

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