

Sermon *Invisible Injuries*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 11.10.24

Every Sunday, our tradition is to offer birthday blessings. Today, we have a birthday to celebrate, the Marine Corps has turned 249 years old. Happy Birthday Marine Corps! That means tomorrow, Monday, is Veterans Day. On the 11th month on the 11th day, we remember the ending of the Great War and on this special day, we thank all those who have served in the Armed Forces. (Memorial Day is when we remember those who have died, Veterans Day is where we thank the living)

In 2005, I was a chaplain at the VA Hospital in Palo Alto. What was an excellent center for retired service members turning into an active duty military hospital. The war in Iraq overwhelmed Walter Reed so Palo Alto changed almost overnight. In addition to an excellent cardiac ward, the VA Hospital Campus in Palo Alto had the center for spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries and the newly created National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress. The spinal cord injury center quickly learned to deal with both the visible injury and invisible injury. When I was there, they worked first with the invisible injury – dealing with the fact that the service member will not walk again (in other words, dealing with suicidal thoughts) – and then the physical injury. The same goes with traumatic brain injuries – there are invisible injuries that the chaplaincy core can help with. And then, with post-traumatic stress; we dealt primarily with invisible, and quite real, injuries. Like a spinal cord injury, dealing with an invisible injury can alter the way each person acts. One can live, and live successfully, with either injury, but, they both require treatment.

There is a children's book titled *Why is Dad so Mad?* It is the story of a lion family. The daddy lion goes out on a long hunt. He comes back looking the same but acting differently. He doesn't sleep at night but prowls around. He can't stay awake during the day. He doesn't want to play anymore. Sounds scare him – like a bird rustling in a bush – that never scared him before. He is forgetful and distracted. And, the worst part, he is mad, all the time. The mama lion tells her cubs that it's not their fault that the daddy lion is mad. He had some bad experiences while out on the hunt. She tells them to open their ears and listen to his stories... even if they have heard them before. And, that while the daddy lion is getting help, they are to remember that he loves them more than anything.

This book was written for military families to address the invisible injuries that have happened to the mom or dad (or both). The lion cubs, with their big ears, hear the stories. And, that is one pathway to health and wholeness from invisible injuries. Chaplains are trained to listen to the stories, over and over and over again. It is in the telling and hearing of the stories that light enters and begins healing the inside. Some of you have mentioned that people who went through the hurricane season this year are starting to repeat their stories. Yes, that's normal and, although it may not feel like it, that is one way for the soul to heal.

Speaking of invisibility, many veterans feel invisible when they enter civilian life – which is why Veterans Day is so important. To thank a veteran, to see them, to hear them; it's vitally important for them and for our community. ... and don't just do it on one day a year.

One of the stories that chaplains tell service members is the story of the Widow of Zarephath. She thought she was invisible, but God saw her. In fact, not only did God see her, God sent to her the greatest prophet, Elijah. There was a terrible famine caused by a massive drought. Elijah didn't know what to do so God told him to go to this particular widow. (Incidentally, women were called widows back then because either their husband died or their husband left them for someone else – either way the relationship died so they are called widows) She was not an Israelite; which makes this story even more remarkable. Elijah arrived and the widow was collecting sticks to make the final amount of flour into bread then she and her son were going to die of starvation. Elijah implored her to make him bread and then she'll have enough for the next day. She continued to do this, day after day, until the drought was over. J

The point of this story to a veteran dealing with an invisible injury is that God can see what we don't see. Their injury is quite visible to God and that God sends people to help. The widow, however, had to trust and when she did, she was made whole again (after a long stretch of trusting). Using this story, one way to help someone dealing with an invisible injury is for them to get to the point where they say the following: today is the last day my injury will remain invisible. Once one opens up and shares the injury inside, it's no longer invisible which means it too can heal.

The lion cubs asked, "Why is Dad so mad?" It was the last day their invisible injuries – living with a mad parent. From then on, the injury was out in the open where they could discuss it, listen to what was wrong, and to love one another.

Jesus was sitting on the other side of the road of the treasury for the temple in Jerusalem. It was a festival-like atmosphere because it was the yearly bringing in of the offerings. It was a spectacle and a parade and a place to be seen and heard. Stories from outside the Bible tell us that some wealthy donors would make quite a show of it – with fancy clothes, a procession, and some reportedly had music performed when they made their offering. In amongst all this, Jesus sees a widow. She put in all that she had – two coins worth a penny. Jesus didn't comment, or get moved by, any of the fanfare, he was moved by the widow. He saw her, pointed out her gift to his followers, and today we remember her and her story. What was invisible – the poor widow – now has light shown and sets up for us a way of living and seeing one another.

The Church, this amazing mystery, was established by Jesus as a place where we see the invisible. We are present to hear one another's stories and for healing to begin. There are many places to go receive treatment for visible injuries; we are one of the few places to have invisible injuries to receive healing. Our service began this morning with these words from Jesus: Love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself. Loving God with our whole heart is like the widow who trusted the prophet Elijah – we are invited to open our heart to God and bring to God's light those places in us that are injured. We are invited to open our strength and our soul to God. When we do that, we are invited to open our hearts, even just a little bit, for our neighbors. Open our hearts to them, to their stories (even if you've heard them all before), and trust one another to share our stories so that they too can be heard. Let us be like the lion cubs, with their oversized furry ears, to open themselves to hear why Dad is so mad. Let us love one another as Christ saw, heard and healed us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.