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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

MINISTRY OF PRESENCE IN THE MILITARY

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“MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Thomas Merton, “Thoughts in Solitude”

Introduction and Background

In addition to the thousands of military service men and woman who serve and protect us, I would like to dedicate this presentation to my parents, Gabriele and Dorothy. My father was a member of the U.S. Army’s 4th Infantry Division, and a veteran of the Invasion of Normandy and Battle of the Bulge who, like many of his generation, put others before himself and was a faithful servant. My mother, who passed on to her new life with Christ August 9 of this year, was a beautiful woman whose faith, strength, and courage will inspire me for the rest of my life. Little did I know when I began this process, that I would be referring to Nouwen’s *In Memorium* (written for his deceased mother) as often as I would my primary reference, *The Wounded Healer*. I’m grateful God gave me the opportunity to be with my mother and father in their final days and to share the ministry of presence with them. I’d also like to acknowledge Chaplain (MAJ) Imhoff who introduced me to the work of Brother Lawrence, and whose intellectual and spiritual guidance has been invaluable.

Although I’ve held a variety of clinical and administrative positions which provided a level of professional satisfaction, there are three occasions in my career when I felt like I was really doing good work- doing God’s work. My first experience was as a case manager in the inner-city (Over the Rhine) of Cincinnati, followed by my work as a school social worker in rural east central Ohio, and finally in my current work with the military. In all of these situations, I worked with people whose circumstances I often could not change; whether it be addiction, deployment, or death. In a sense, I was powerless. In most cases there was no effective clinical intervention to support them in their time of need. All I could offer was my presence and the belief that God was with us as consolation. And more often than not, this *was* the most effective intervention.

These themes of powerlessness, shared suffering, and redemption will form the basis of my presentation today.

The Presence of God

The presence of God, according to Brother Lawrence, "...is the concentration of the soul's attention on God, remembering that he is always present" He further states, "...the heart is the beginning and the end of all our spiritual and bodily actions and, generally speaking, of everything we do in our lives. It is therefore, the heart whose attention we must carefully focus on God" (Wilder, 2008 p.86-87). St. Benedict, in explaining his Rule (the Rule of Benedict) echoes this concept of the heart when he says "...spirituality comes by listening to the Rule with the ear of the heart." He continues, "The person who prays for the presence of God *is already in the presence of God*" (Chittister, 1997 p.21)

One of my favorite spiritual stories about God's presence illustrates this point:

Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill. Each night they divided evenly the grain they had ground together during the day. Now as it happened, one of the brothers lived alone; the other had a wife and a large family. One day, the single brother thought to himself: "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has children to feed." So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary to see that he was never without. But the married brother said to himself the one day, "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he is old?" So every night he secretly took some of *his* grain to his brother's granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning. Then one night the brothers met each other halfway between their two houses, suddenly realized what had been happening and embraced each other in love. The story is that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, "This is a holy place- a place of love- and here it is that my temple will be built." And so it was. The holy place, where God is made known, is the place where human beings discover each other in love (DeMello, 1990 p.60).

Roles and Responsibilities

As clinical social workers and therapists, we are sometimes deceived into thinking that we are the healers rather than vehicles for healing. When I have problems in my work or life, it is often because I think or act in isolation to determine solutions for me or others. It is at these times I stray from one of my guiding principles so eloquently expressed in Step 11 of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: "*Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out*" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). Or as St. Benedict said: "They do not become elated over their good deeds; they judge it is the Lord's power, not their own, that brings about the good in them" (Tvedten, 2006 p.34). St. Benedict implores us to "use our spiritual resources" says Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB. She further states, "In failing to respond to God

everywhere God is around us, we may lose the power of God that is within us. Obedience (to the Rule) is the willingness to listen to the voice of God in life...which will wrench us out of the limitations of our own landscape and call us to something outside of ourselves, beyond ourselves” (1997, p. 20).

Shared Suffering and Spiritual Imperfection

This work is inherently spiritual; it is also inherently imperfect. Herein lays the key to success in work with the military or any individual or group faced with circumstances beyond their control. To be present to others who are suffering, we must enter into our own suffering. This does not mean that we over-identify with or personalize other’s experiences but, as Nouwen said:

One is called to recognize the sufferings of his time in his own heart and make that recognition the starting point of his service. Whether he strives to enter into a dislocated world, relate to a convulsive generation, or speak to a dying man (or woman), his service will not be perceived as authentic unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which he speaks. In our woundedness, we can become a source of life for others. (1979, p. xvi).

The theologian Meister Eckhart once said: “To get at the core of God at his greatest, one must first get into the core of himself at his least” (as cited in Kurtz and Ketcham, 2002 p.33).

As I mentioned, in this work we at times fail to achieve our intended goal or objective. However, it is often through these failures or “imperfections”, that profound and spiritual things occur. In fact, it may not be until these events happen that change or healing can take place. This premise is also a tenet of recovery. In this model, imperfection is seen as the “crack that lets God in” (Kurtz et al., 2002 p. 28). Jungian analyst, Marion Woodman in speaking of addiction once said: “Addiction keeps a person in touch with the god. At the very point of vulnerability is where the surrender takes place- that is where God enters. *The god comes through the wound*” (as cited in Kurtz et al., 1992 p. 29). I have found these concepts to be extremely helpful in working with soldiers and families who are suffering from the physical, psychological, and spiritual wounds of war.

Practicing Presence with the Military

For those in the military, the ministry of presence is helpful in developing a positive, trusting relationship. This practice or service is more unconditional than many traditional mental health services which at times are avoided by service members for fear of being stigmatized or impeding career advancement. Our role is not necessarily to evaluate or report, but to, as the Canadian Department of National Defence says “...be available for a comforting chat, develop a relationship with members of the unit, and participate in unit life.” (as cited in Rennick, 2005 p.1).

Military culture has distinct and unique qualities that can present challenges both personally and professionally. There are clearly defined roles and responsibilities or “lanes” that at times, may prohibit or restrict the ability of military personnel and families to address concerns. Understandably, military families are often cautious and guarded. Imagine what it would be like to not know where you might be assigned or live, to experience extended periods of separation, and ultimately, to be prepared for the loss of a “battle buddy” or loved one. This is why consistency and presence of the social worker/counselor/chaplain is so important. Our mere presence over a period of time sends an extremely important message: “I will not leave; you are not forgotten”. As an officer told one of my colleagues, “When we came back from Kosovo, no one was here. When we came back from Iraq and Afghanistan before, no one was here. Although we may never talk to you, we know you care because you are here.”

Despite these limitations, military families have remarkable resilience and capacity for compassion in the face of loss and suffering where, I believe, God is truly present. It is indeed a “holy place” as the story tells us. I recently experienced this compassion when attending a memorial service for several fallen soldiers from units with whom I was working. This was also at the time when my mother was very ill. Before I could offer my sympathies and support to affected family members, they asked how *I was* and told me they were all *praying for me and my family*. Bewildered I asked, “With all the stress and suffering you’ve experienced, how can you possibly be concerned with me?” The response was, “*because we understand*” (shared suffering).

Final Thoughts

Shortly before their deaths, Dr. Martin Luther King and Senator Edward Kennedy, whose families are linked in history, made the following statements regarding their spiritual imperfections: Senator Kennedy wrote the Pope seeking forgiveness. In his letter, according to his son Teddy, he stated: “I know I’ve fallen short in my life, but I’ve never stopped trying.” (CBS News, Sept. 13, 2009). Dr. King wrote: “I am a sinner, like all God’s children, but I want to be a good man and I want to hear a voice say to me one day, I take you in and I bless you, because you tried” (Ellsberg, 1997 p.153).

The message here is that we must never stop trying. Even if our actions fall short of our intentions, it is our willingness to continue and our “desire to please you (God)”, as Merton said, that is important. Brother Lawrence said: “All things are possible to him who believes; still more to him who hopes; still more to him who loves; and most of all to him who practices all three” (Wilder, 2008 p.81).

In the end, the ministry of presence may be based on what Bishop Ken Untener calls one of the “simplest truths”. That is, “the Father’s love is given to Jesus, and Jesus gives that love to us, and we give that love to others. It’s that simple. And it’s that deep” (Haven, 2009).

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