

“Thank You for Your Service”
Rev. Hannah Petrie
November 12, 2017

Call to Worship #435

READING

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the horrific church shooting that occurred just a week ago today in Sutherland, TX.

As you'll learn today, for a woman of my demographics, it's unusual for me to have a special concern for the men and women who serve in our military. But I do, and I think we all should. So while it's counter-intuitive to critique the military on today of all days, when we should be focused on honoring the work of our military personnel for Veterans' Day, I am morally obligated to bring the following to your attention about the connection between militarism, domestic violence, race, and mass shootings.

This was an interview that aired last Tuesday on *Democracy Now* with Amy Goodman, that I have adapted:

More than half the mass killings over the last 9 years are committed by people who engaged in domestic violence, that we know of. We see this pattern over and over again, which is one in which the incidence of domestic violence is minimized or trivialized in some way. It's not considered serious enough to merit sustained public attention or the allocation of resources so that we can really understand the dynamic better.

But there's absolutely no doubt that the practice of violence within a home, in an intimate setting, with people that theoretically the aggressor loves, opens the floodgates to public violence. We tend to minimize private violence and focus on the spectacular examples of public violence. But if we don't address that private violence, then we are going to continue to see public violence in the ways that we have.

The shooter last Sunday was discharged from the military for “bad conduct,” which honestly, it sounds as though a high school student misbehaved, right? And there are different categories of discharge based on the severity of the crime at hand or the behavior that led to the discharge. If you look at sexual violence in the military, perpetrators of sexual violence are discharged honorably far more often than victims of sexual violence.

And so, there is this bigger question of how we treat private violence, sexual violence, and gendered violence. The public-private divide that we're working with does us a real disservice, because we tend to aggregate this private, terroristic violence in a way that seems irrelevant publicly. If you think of the fact that there are **three women a day in the U.S. killed by an intimate partner**, and if that happened in one incident and we were talking about between 20 and 25 women a week being killed in one incident, people

might sit up and pay attention. But it's happening in this slow drip, drip, drip, that we never really hear about.

The military is an organization of hierarchy, authoritarianism, power and control. A lot of those dynamics are implicit in intimate partner violence. The military regulates violence. People have a place. They have a role. They have a reporting structure. And so, the structure of the military itself is kind of a very intense microcosm of a mindset that we see over and over again within homes, especially where there is violence that's being enacted in these ways.

The second thing is, the military is filled with people who have incredibly stressful jobs, who are traumatized themselves by violence. And **until we deal with what that means for those people themselves, we can't really focus in on why they're acting out in these ways when they leave the service.** And so, there are very high incidences of domestic violence, not only in the military, but also in our policing forces. **We can't separate those cultures of regulated violence from the unregulated violence that we see in the home.**

What happened in Sutherland, TX is immediately described as a mass killing, but we're also immediately told it's as a result of a domestic problem. And somehow, that's supposed to make it less terroristic to the people, to the general public and to the folks involved. Why?

Because one of the main tricks of white supremacy is that it invisibilizes both kinds of structures of violence and tries to focus mostly on individual forms of violence. So that when we see a situation where, for the most part, the people who are doing these mass killings are mostly young white men, the story gets told that that is a form of violence that's kind of an acceptable, normal form of violence.

When people of color and others commit forms of violence, we are told and taught to see that as somehow outside the norm of general kinds of violence, and we tend to catastrophize that. And then that also leads to certain kinds of policy responses that are intended to continue to oppress the groups that are very much already targeted and oppressed. **You can't look at these mass shootings without understanding also the ways in which violence is the glue that holds forms of oppression in place.** And one of those forms of oppression is white supremacist violence.

Last Sunday Shaun King of the Black Lives Matter movement tweeted, "Don't worry everybody. It was a white man who slaughtered half of the church in Texas. That means everything is just fine. No terrorism."

We get too caught up in trying to label forms of violence as terrorism. "Terrorism" is a state label that has a specific focus and an intent behind it. And so I'd really like us to just do the thing that we need to do, which is to **end violence against women, gender-nonconforming people and children at the root of these forms of gun violence and mass shootings,** which is itself a form of mass violence.

We're going to have to be more creative in the way that we address gun violence in today's political climate, such as disarming domestic abusers, which would mean we have to disarm a lot of people in the military and in the police structure, as well. We should also look at personal liability. We should look at the things that could happen at the state level.

And to end this reading, I quote Michael Moore, who tweeted last Monday that “. . . Columbine is no longer one of the 10 worst mass shootings in US history. 3 of the top 5 are all in the last year & a half.”

OFFERING

Homes For Families, and organization that builds housing exclusively for homeless veterans and their families. The “Habitat for Humanity- style” inter-faith build is February 24.

PRAYER #519

READING

So I'm a little strange. I don't know anyone similar to myself who is as interested in our veterans as much as I am – especially since we've had no active servicemen or women in my family since my grandparents' generation.

I always have a book going that has to do with veterans or war – in fact I collect such literature. I like most war movies (*The Thin Red Line* is my favorite). What this means is you can always count on me acknowledging Veterans & Memorial Day every year. One of the best books I read in the past year is “Tribe” by Sebastian Junger, who is a journalist that imbedded in very intense combat zones in Afghanistan. I love this book because it talks about how the tribal culture of Native Americans is similar in military units, where the objective of war is always eclipsed by the tribal culture to defend one's brothers at all costs.

The premise of the book is that since this tribal culture of the United States is nothing like it once was, before the white man came, veterans come home and their isolation and loneliness is compounded by this non-existence of tribal brotherhood in their everyday lives, and they miss it terribly.

In this passage we hear about how Native American traditions can help heal veterans, and help integrate them back into civilian life.

“Tribe” by Sebastian Junger pp 120 – 124

SERMON

I will probably always name this service, "Thank You for Your Service" because I want that on our marquis during the week, letting passerby vets know this service is about them.

So what is this thing I have for veterans, that if had my druthers, we would all have. So that, each year, like Sebastian Junger suggests in his book "Tribe", we would open our Town Halls (or buildings like this congregation) once a year and give vets the floor, to talk about their experiences of war. To communicate as civilians that their stories and their sacrifices mean something to us, too – not just to them and their buddies, not just to their military community.

There's a wonderful line the Bryan Cranston character says in the film, "Last Flag Flying," which I saw on Friday. Can't recommend it enough – great movie. He's an aging Vietnam vet, and he says, "We were something, once. Now we're something else."

Meaning, they aren't as "great" as they used to be. But if anything, our vets should come home feeling better about themselves than when they left for war, for their experiences and their re-entry should make them stronger leaders. Not broken boy soldiers.

I don't blame the vets for struggling when they return in this day and age. And **bear in mind most of them do not struggle – about 65% of today's returning vets manage to make the transition successfully to their civilian lives**, with or without the partnership of us non-military class civilians. But in 20 – 30 years, will today's returning vets be committing suicide at the rate of those who fought in Vietnam? I hope not. There's some debate about this number, but roughly 20 vets kill themselves every day in our country, which is about one every 65 minutes. Even if this stat is off by 50%, that is still ten a day.

I don't blame our vets for struggling when they return, because the biggest problem, beyond the horror of how endless wars are waged these days with IEDs and the like, is that their service is based on lies! How is a young man or woman fresh from combat, where he or she might have lost more than just one friend, supposed to square this with being sent out to a horrible desert for no good reason?

That was a big theme in Last Flag Flying – that Vietnam never posed an imminent threat as we were told, nor did Iraq. Afghanistan, at the start, was perhaps a different story, but not that much. In the name of fear and national security, we are the aggressors, and because we civilians don't have to fight, we go along with it.

I don't want to get too preachy up here and I know I'm starting to, but we need to understand that, we as civilians are all complicit in this. I know it often doesn't feel like it, but we are still a democracy, and we allow our boys to be put in harm's way, for no good reason. Just because we're not close to the military class community,

just because veterans may not be so much a part of our social enclaves, this doesn't make it okay.

If we hate war – and I do, I'm with the Papago Native American nation; I think war is a form of insanity – then we should make war harder to wage as a nation. We need to reverse the congressional vote of 2001 that has allowed our Commander in Chief to wage war anytime, anywhere in the name of countering terrorism.

What about the terror in our own homes? In our own cities? In our own churches? Let us not forget we Unitarians suffered a horrific shooting in one of our congregations in Tennessee not long ago, which also killed children.

What about bringing back the draft – I know that sounds insane, at face value – it means my boy could go to war in ten years. But look – we *all* have to feel that sense of patriotism and duty, just as much as the military class. No wonder vets tend to avoid civilians in *their* social enclaves and stick to their own military communities. I bet it's hard for them to respect us. We civilians are like mooches of the American dream! We earn our freedom, safety, and liberty with *nothing*, while the soldiers have to earn theirs in a much, much more dangerous way. First they have to survive war, then they have to adjust to a society that doesn't have much to say about Endless War, and what it means to get redeployed again and again when a soldier or a sergeant has really had enough.

At one point in the "Last Flag Flying" film, the character played by Steve Carell, who just lost his son in the Iraq war, asks, "Doesn't George W. Bush have two daughters? I wonder if he thinks this war is worth losing them, even just one of them?"

I'm talking about skin in the game here. That's the call to patriotic duty, my fellow Americans, my flock, that I express in lament this Veterans' Day Sunday. If we're not willing to send our own kids to war, then why is it okay to send the rural family's kid to war, or the inner-city poor family's kid to war. Why is this okay, especially when no imminent threat is apparent?

I don't see the draft happening any time soon, but if there was a draft, and my boy was between the ages of 18 – 25, I would feel it's my duty to see him off to war, especially if the war was worth fighting. It's my duty because my family has lived on this soil since the Revolutionary War, since the Civil War. Generations of my blood have reaped the benefits of this nation born of violence, born of blood. We've owned houses, we've had comfort, joy and success. Surely that is worth something. Surely that is worth risking the sacrifice.

So here I say on the one hand, that war is insane, but I'd send my boy to war if I had to. This is perhaps a good type of "double-think", when two opposing thoughts are nevertheless true. This stuff is complicated, and that's what I want – I want each of us to wrestle with this morning.

The draft would have the counter-intuitive effect of less wars, for once *congress* had skin in the game and had to send their own kids, that *laisser-faire* attitude of Endless War would go away. Now, some of you may think, "it may be a moot point, since war is quickly becoming more automated than ever." But then we're no better than the folks who say, "just light up the rag-heads! Just bomb the living crap out of anyone we don't like or understand." The objective here is fewer wars, not more wars with robots. There *has* to be a greater human cost involved, if we're ever going to wage less war.

The draft is a huge matter, so I want to leave us with some ideas of what we can do for our veterans in our day-to-day lives. We can volunteer – I hope many of you will sign up for the veteran family housing build February 24th in Santa Clarita, that we will do together as part of an interfaith community. If manual labor is not your thing, we have a member who is organizing a meal for veterans in December, and volunteers are needed.

A lot of vets are homeless, so volunteering in any capacity for the homeless is another safe bet. But you know what I'd really like to do? I'd like to open our sanctuary to veterans to share their stories. That is something we could easily do here. The trick is to get vets to trust the likes of us, we who stereotypically don't have much to say about the sacrifice of vets, as liberals. But we have to start somewhere, when it comes to bridging the gap between the civilian and military classes. We know how much this gap reflects the division of our nation. I see building relationships with veterans as a possible, creative solution, to this division, and to continuous violence. What if all houses of worship across America the Beautiful did the same thing, on the same day. It would be beautiful. If you're interested in bringing such an event to our congregation, let me know. Because I'm game.

I want to end by repeating the words of the song "No More" by Bob Seger, that we got to hear Anthony sing earlier. I love this song, because Bob Seger is my dad's contemporary, I grew up listening to him. Seger was anti-Vietnam War from the get-go. In the late 1960's, working-class guys like Bob were realizing that their friends and neighbors were getting drafted and killed while the rich suburban kids were getting a pass because they could afford to enroll in college. My dad was one of the college kids.

I was born in 1973 – perhaps only because my dad didn't have to go. Now I know this sounds weird, but I was mentioning to a friend recently my fixation with vets and how maybe strange it was, and she suggested, "Maybe in your last life, you were a soldier who died in Vietnam. Think about it. You were born just when the war ended."

Maybe so. I like the idea, actually. But what's probably more accurate is I've inherited my father's survivor guilt. His college roommate flunked out and ended up dead in Vietnam. Because he's a good man, deep down my dad knows it wasn't

fair, and as his good daughter, I know, it still isn't fair. It still isn't fair. Here's the Seger – it was released in 2006, so I'm pretty sure it was directed toward President George W.:

"No More"

Are you sorry when the lights begin to fade
Are you sorry for the promises you made
for the burden of the ones who had to fall
When you didn't see the writing on the wall

It was forty years ago and I was young
and the jungle not the desert heard the guns
Someone said they had a secret plan
and the rest of us were told to understand

Well I don't want this, no I don't want this
I have had enough no more

Tomorrow is the price for yesterday
A billion waves won't wash the truth away
Someday you'll be ordered to explain
No one gets to walk between the rain
And I don't want this, no I don't want this
I have had enough no more

We've all had enough. Now let's please rise in body or in spirit, to sing our closing hymn, "Blowin' in the Wind."