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While the focus of my talk this evening is Christian Just War doctrine and its bearing on moral injury, it seems appropriate to pause briefly first to reflect on the occasion for my being here—the imminent celebration (if “celebration” is the right word) of Veterans Day.

“Veteran”—the word comes from the Latin *vetus* (aged, old, literally old or just old before one’s time, experienced beyond one’s years, worn, worn out). Sobering words to describe men and women, many of whom today have not yet reached their thirties. Veterans Day, more widely, commemorates all those in our midst or in our memories who served in the military, but particularly those who served in combat. This often-assumed identification of “veterans” with “war veterans” is not surprising for several reasons. After all, war is the work of the military, a fact of which we sons and daughters of the 20th and 21st centuries need no convincing, especially in our present age, the age of what has been called “the forever war.” Then too, we may recall the fact that Veterans Day, until 1954, was known and observed as Armistice Day, marking the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, when at the 11th hour the armistice with Germany went into effect and the first great slaughter of “the American Century” came to an end.

Not everyone knew joy on that day, however, any more than our joy is unanimous or universal today as we welcome our veterans home. For one thing not every veteran comes home, intact, or at all. Few come back “good as new.” On the first Armistice or Veterans Day, even as joyous bells pealed throughout England, the parents of Wilfred Owen, Britain’s most distinguished war poet, received a telegram informing them of their son’s heroic death in combat a week earlier. We often speak of such deaths as his in

sacred terms, as “sacrifice,” the ultimate sacrifice. Owen, it seems, had a different take on the sacrificial character of war, his own war, and perhaps of any war:

Parable of the Old Man and the Young

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Owen’s mentor and friend, another great poet—2nd Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers—shared Owen’s dark assessment of the war that claimed thirty-seven million casualties. Sassoon, known to his men as “Mad Jack”—contrary to all his expectations and, arguably, his wishes—survived the war (unlike his younger brother), won the Military Cross, and had this to say about coming home:

They

The Bishop tells us: “When the boys come back
They will not be the same; for they’ll have fought
In a just cause: they lead the last attack
On Anti-Christ; their comrade’s blood has bought
New right to breed an honourable race.
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.”
“We’re none of us the same!” the boys reply.
“For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert’s gone syphilitic: you’ll not find
A chap who’s served that hasn’t found *some* change.”
And the Bishop said; “The ways of God are strange!”

It wasn't supposed to be this way. This was to be a short war, a bold and brief test of wills and national honor. For his part, the German Kaiser, Wilhelm, boasted in 1914 that he would have "Paris for lunch and St. Petersburg for dinner," and would bring the war to a victorious conclusion in five months, in time for all those involved to celebrate Christmas with their families. Six months into the war, Sigmund Freud offered a still more blind and blinding assurance to the troops and to all those who cared about them:

When the fierce struggle of this war will have reached a decision every victorious warrior will joyfully and without delay return home to his wife and children, undisturbed by thoughts of the enemy he has killed either at close quarters or with weapons operating at a distance.

What could he have been thinking? As Freud saw it, what would guarantee so untroubled a homecoming for veterans of the Great War was the happy fact that they, like all "civilized" men, had lost what he called their "ethical delicacy of feeling." Modern men, unlike their benighted predecessors knew better than to allow the past to haunt them. To their credit and to their agony, however, Freud underestimated the consciences of the men and women who returned from the trenches and the killing fields of the Great War and of every war since. What they saw and suffered and especially what they did in war came home with them and darkened the remainder of their days. The truth that escaped Freud and from which veterans are unable to escape is that the awful work of war, the cleavage of humanity into enemy camps and the slaughter that follows, diminish, distort, and darken us.

But are we any better, any the wiser? Do we—the over 99% of the American people who never see the face of war but nevertheless send the other less than 1%, our sons and daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands and wives, friends and strangers off to

fight our wars—do we have any better sense of what they do, what they endure, what they bring home with them and carry for the rest of their days? I think not. And how could we? America apparently doesn't "go to war" any more. This, anyway, is the gist of a sign displayed for years at Virginia's MCB (Marine Corps Base) Quantico, known as the "Crossroads of the Marine Corps." The sign reads as follows:

America is not at war.
The Marine Corps is at war;
America is at the mall.

So what is it that we need to know? What is it that our veterans bring home with them from war? Are we prepared to know and to do what that knowledge requires of us? "America," writes former Army infantry Sergeant Brian Turner, "vast and laid out from one ocean to another, is not a large enough space to contain the war each soldier brings home. And even if it could, it doesn't want to." Speaking for himself as a seven-year veteran of two wars and for his fellow men and women in arms, he goes on to spell it out for us:

I know that, when I leave the tent, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of dead people will begin leaving the tent and following us home. And the wounded, and the maimed, and the traumatized, and the frightened, and the shattered, and the shivering, and the bruised, and the broken. The ruined world will call its home inside of me. And all of them will follow us to our planes and board with us. They'll walk through the streets of America, through my hometown, standing in my backyard late at night, sometimes, sitting at the foot of the bed to witness my wife and me curled together in a dream.

So what do we as a nation—a "grateful nation" as our leaders often label us—owe our veterans? Applause... parades... a handshake... a passing, appreciative "thank you for

your service”... a free drink? If we stop to think about it, simple, decent fairness would argue that we as a nation owe them as much as they gave us. When we look at it this way—and what other way is there?—we see the debt is beyond counting, particularly the debt to those who gave their lives, their legs, their arms, their youth, their hopes, their loves, their peace of mind, their sleep, their souls. Even if we were at the mall when they went to war, it is no less than shameful for us to be at the mall when they return. Surely there is a social contract, a sacred contract, between a nation and those whom it “sends into harm’s way” (as the saying goes), even between a nation and those whom it trains to go into harm’s way, because even the training is not without its personal toll, its often life-altering consequences.

So where do we start paying our debt, making good on our side of this contract? While we ponder what good we can do, I suggest we first do no harm, no *more* harm, that is. We can stop telling lies. We can stop making promises that we can’t and perhaps don’t even intend to keep, promises made in ignorance or malice or both. Wars often start with lies, with false promises, delusions. In 1861, on the brink of what was to be the bloodiest cleavage that our nation has ever endured, the South expected the North to mount at best a brief, futile resistance to their Secession, while the North anticipated a decisive victory at Bull Run, putting a rapid end to the rebellion. The truth was something very different. Between 1861 and 1865, these two armies, north and south, Americans all, killed each other to the tune of 620,000 dead, 2% of the country’s total population, which today would come to 6 million souls. American combatant fatalities in that defining conflict roughly equaled U.S. losses in all of our wars from the American Revolution through Korea.

More recently and closer to home, we may recall Donald Rumsfeld's confident prediction on February 2nd, 2003 that the war in Iraq "could last six days. I doubt six months," And then there was Richard Cheney's sunny estimate a month later on March 16th: "I think it will go relatively quickly... (in) weeks rather than months." Some would call these honest mistakes; for who can possibly predict the course or outcome of war? But that is precisely the point. No one in their right mind would or should pretend to know what will happen when people and nations, much less ideologies and religions, begin killing each other. "It is a common mistake in going to war," wrote Thucydides twenty-five centuries ago, "to begin at the wrong end, to act first, and wait for disaster to think the matter over." We ought instead to "consider the great part that the unpredictable plays in war... the longer the war goes on, the more things seem to be decided by chance... we can't see into them but have to wait in the dark to see how they turn out." The fog of war is nothing new, and we have no right to blame our folly on it. What we can't imagine *is* our fault. Among the darkest lies told about and for the sake of war, however, is that wars ever end well, or for that matter that they ever truly end at all.

I propose that here, tonight, in this Christian sanctuary, we consider an even darker, more invidious lie, one that must come home to roost here, in the Christian tradition. The lie or, if you like, false promise I have in mind is known as "Just War Theory" or simply "Just War." It is a core doctrine of the US military, taught in our service academies, invoked by presidents and politicians, preached by pastors and chaplains, held tight by those who go to war and by those who await their return. Father Daniel Berrigan, in his memoir *To Dwell in Peace*, called just war a "cornerstone of the Catholic edifice," while from well outside that edifice Dr. Jonathan Shay, author of

Achilles in Vietnam, adds that Just War Doctrine has become as American as apple pie. It spells out... ‘For God and Country’.”

Before I go any further in challenging the theory or doctrine of “just war” I need to clarify a few things, lest we get off on a false footing from which we are unlikely to recover in the course of the hour or so we have together here. Firstly, in calling just war a “lie” or “false promise” I am not denying that in countless instances it has been and remains for many a lie told, a promise made, in deeply good faith. Neither, however, can I deny that for the past fifteen centuries it has been used and abused repeatedly in loathsome bad faith, with immeasurable, catastrophic consequences.

Next, my concern to challenge and to the best of my ability refute “Just War Theory” or “Just War Doctrine” is not focused, first or foremost, on the multifarious standards of character and conduct invoked and more or less observed by warring parties and polities for millennia, from ancient India and China to the West, from classical Greece and Rome to the streets of Baghdad and the remote villages of the Korengal Valley. If we look to the origins of what we call today the “laws of armed conflict,” such as the Geneva Conventions or our military’s fluidly adaptable “rules of engagement,” we find that Western Christianity, or more specifically the Latin Fathers of late antiquity, are hardly their earliest or principle source. In fact, the three traditional categories of the western just war tradition—*ius ad bellum*, *ius in bello*, and *ius post bellum*—whose collective aim was and is to set somehow acceptable standards for or limits on the launching of wars, their conduct, and their aftermath, all of these had their counterparts long before and far beyond the Christian West and its wars. Civilized peoples and their

warriors (some not all, then as now) have for millennia concerned themselves with justifying their wars, fighting with honor, and crafting a generous peace.

Thucydides' account of the thirty-year war between Athens and Sparta and their respective coalitions chronicles in dramatic detail the rhetorical feats of the future combatants to convince themselves and others that, if war broke out, they would be the ones in the right, the aggrieved, not the aggressors. Centuries earlier, in the dynastic conflicts of rival kingdoms in north Indian, as recorded in the *Mahabharata*, we learn that warriors were bound by strict codes of fair, even magnanimous, conduct in battle, dictating, for example, that foot soldiers attack only foot soldiers, elephant warriors only those similarly mounted on elephants, that no combatant without armor, or whose weapon was lost or broken, or whose chariot was disabled, or who was in retreat could ever be attacked. Consider too the unwillingness of the Chinese Duke of Song who, in 638, facing a foe that far outnumbered his forces, refused to take advantage of the enemy's vulnerability while crossing a river. Even in defeat the Duke defended his actions in these words: "a junzi (gentleman) worthy of the name does not seek to overcome the enemy in misfortune. He does not beat his drum before the ranks are formed." Contrast these words with Sebastian Junger's succinct assessment of war as we know it today:

...much of modern military tactics is geared toward maneuvering the enemy into a position where they can essentially be massacred from safety. It sounds dishonorable only if you imagine that modern war is about honor; it's not. It's about winning, which means killing the enemy on the most unequal terms possible. Anything less simply results in the loss of more of your own men.

Finally, pre-imperial Roman just war theory and practice, a major source of later western just war doctrine, emphasized that the conduct of rulers in war should be guided by the

principle of *humanitas* which included the offer and implementation of a generous post-war peace, one that would not nourish the seeds of further enmity and conflict. The point I'm making here is that my calling radically into question western Christian Just War doctrine in no way amounts to or entails the abandonment of any and every humane limit, standard of decency, code of conduct, or measure of sanity and restraint that nations at war or men and women in arms might invoke and enforce.

If we are to trace the roots and understand the significance of Christian Just War Theory in the 4th century we would do well to realize that “war” was only one of its concerns. “War” is a euphemism, an abstraction, synonymous with struggle, confrontation, conflict. As such it is an evasion. War, after all, is about killing. “The soldier,” writes former Marine Capt. and Iraq war veteran Tyler Boudreau, “kills for a living—it is his reason for being. Killing is not a by-product or some shitty collateral duty like peeling potatoes or scrubbing the latrine. It is the institutional point.” LTC Pete Kilner, makes the same point in his West Point class on the morality of killing:

there is one absolutely unique and defining characteristic of our profession—we are organized, equipped and trained to kill people. As company-level leaders, we recruit patriotic young Americans to kill; equip them to kill; train them to kill; develop and issue orders for them to kill; issue fire commands for them to kill; and commend them for killing enemies of our country.

If war then is about killing, what is “just war” about? Like “war,” “just” is a misleading word to rely on when considering the early Christian abhorrence of and eventual accommodation with killing. “Just,” the Latin *ius*, is primarily a legal term connoting legitimacy, action in keeping with an oath taken, a pact made, or a law passed. Just killing, then, would be killing according to accepted rules, killing for which one cannot or should not be prosecuted, decriminalized killing. Just killing, then, is legalized killing,

killing within the law; and the law, as recognized by Plato long before the dawn of Christianity, mostly enshrines the self-interest of the powerful.

The “legality” of killing was largely beside the personal point for early Christians, convinced to their core that killing, in whatever cause or to whatever end (war, legal execution, self-defense, retribution or revenge), was never justified and always sinful. After all, for several centuries, in periods of state persecution, Christians had been killed wholesale, all quite legally. More to the point, at the very roots of the Christian tradition, we find a Christ unequivocally committed to non-violence. The Jesus that emerges from the proto-evangelical collection of the sayings (*logia*) of Jesus known as “Q”, short for “*Quelle*” or “Source”—our earliest source of an authentic Jesus tradition—is a teacher whose lessons are all about love of enemies, non-judgment, forgiveness, peace, and fearlessness in the face of death. The Jesus remembered in Q is, in a word, a pacifist. Later, in the Gospel narratives, when we witness the life, the deeds (*praxeis*), of Jesus, we find his essential pacifism confirmed, most convincingly on the night of his arrest, when he offered no resistance to his captors. Though he claimed to have legions of warrior angels at his command, Jesus went to his death as a lamb, not a lion.

The Christian Church of the first three centuries, East and West, reached consensus on this: Christians may not kill. Their calling—to imitate Christ and to heed his teachings—left no room for the taking of life or the exercise of violence, whether in battle or in courts of law. “No uniform, wrote Tertullian, “is lawful among us, if it stands for sinful action;” and the “sinful action” in question here was the act of taking human life—always sinful, always to be condemned and eschewed by Christians.

Yet all this changed, not overnight, but at a pace that even today seems rather startling. To begin to grasp this reality, I suggest that we consider these two quite bold declarations regarding Christians, military service, and killing:

[1] when God forbids us to kill, He not only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but He warns us against the commission of those things which are esteemed lawful among men. Thus it will be neither lawful for a just man to engage in warfare, since his warfare is justice itself, nor to accuse any one of a capital charge, because it makes no difference whether you put a man to death by word, or rather by the sword, since it is the act of putting to death itself which is prohibited. Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all; but that it is always unlawful to put to death a man, whom God willed to be a sacred animal.

[2] For they (“the passions”) are not evil of themselves, since God has reasonably implanted them in us; but inasmuch as they are plainly good by nature,—for they are given us for the protection of life,—they become evil by their evil use. And as bravery, if you fight in defense of your country, is a good, if against your country, is an evil, so the passions, if you employ them to good purposes, will be virtues, if to evil uses, they will be called vices.

In the first instance, the author makes it indelibly clear that God’s law forbids all killing and that God’s law trumps any other. Not only executioners or soldiers, but judges, magistrates, emperors and generals—anyone in the lethal chain leading to violent death—are equally guilty of murder. The author of the second statement, however, takes a more equivocal, accommodating position on righteous rage and battlefield courage. Regarding the right and wrong of killing, it all depends on what side you’re on, what cause you serve.

The author of the first view was the esteemed late 3rd–early 4th century North African philosopher Lucius Caecilius Lactantius, a Christian convert who managed to survive the savage and slaughterous anti-Christian persecutions under the emperor Diocletian. The author of the second view, also named Lactantius, enjoyed the friendship

and patronage of Emperor Constantine the Great, who eventually appointed him to the imperial court to tutor his son Crispus. In case you haven't guessed, the two authors I've cited are one and the same. Or at least one. Lactantius, it seems, underwent two conversions, one to the Christianity of the nonviolent Jesus and the other and later to an emergent imperial Christianity. For Lactantius and many if not most of his contemporaries, there was no contradiction here, only fulfillment; for they saw in the Christian conversion of Constantine the hand of their crucified and risen Savior and the dawn of his promised kingdom.

The Christian Church of the 4th century had turned a corner. Christians were no longer imperial outsiders, bystanders, much less scapegoats. No longer anticipating the imminent end of the *saeculum*, most Christians recognized life's necessities, a list led by security of life, freedom, and property. They were no longer prepared, if indeed they ever had been, to look to the lilies of the field and live without care. As Romans became Christians, Christianity became Roman. Far from an intimate circle of disciples, Christians by the 4th century numbered in the millions. The Church was no longer simply *in* the world; day by day it was more and more adamantly *of* the world. Those who dissented from this ever-deeper investment in the worldly order, with its incumbent necessities, responsibilities and anxieties, followed Antony and Pachomius into the desert, or rose and perched above it all like Simon Stylotes, while the majority played an ever greater and more central role in the governance and preservation of the empire in an increasingly more threatening world. In a word, Christians were now stakeholders.

Recalling the night and moment of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethemane when Jesus took the sword from the hand of Peter and put back the severed ear of the

high priest's servant, Tertullian had once asked his fellow Christians "How will a Christian go to war or for that matter how will he serve even in peace, without a sword that the Lord has taken away? ... In disarming Peter, the Lord disarmed every future soldier." This was a question to which for centuries the Church had no answer; but now it needed one.

If Christ disarmed all Christians, then Constantine rearmed them. In one stroke, the empire became holy and the Church became militant. A pacifist church was one thing, a pacifist empire was quite another. Baptism had for centuries precluded Christians from enlisting in the military; soon it became a prerequisite. The legions, who had for centuries worshipped the emperor and developed their own religious cults, now worshipped Christ and bore into battle his *labarum* or *chi-rho* on their shields. There is perhaps no more graphic or poignant illustration of the full legitimization of state violence in the Christian empire of Constantine, however, than the fact that when Constantine's mother, Saint Helena, brought back from the Holy Land a cache of most sacred relics, including several nails believed to have been the very ones used to affix Jesus to his cross, he had these melted down and incorporated into his battle helmet and into the bridle-bits for his war horse. Not surprisingly, it became unthinkable that service in the military, or for that matter in the courts and ministries of the state, involving as it did the exercise of lethal force, could be sinful. In the new world order, Christians had to step up and assume power, exercise lethal force, preserve civil order, and defend the borders.

However providential and confirming the new Christian world order might have seemed, it also brought with it a profound contradiction. After centuries of leaving the killing to others, Christians were reluctant to take up the sword; yet this was exactly what

the times and the Church “in its wisdom” called for. To answer the call, Christian conscience clearly required a reset, and this was work best suited to moral philosophers and theologians, men who deal in ideas, known for their piety and brilliance, not for their ruthless might, men like Lactantius, Ambrose, and the pre-eminent Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Augustine was a philosopher, theologian, and biblical exegete of unparalleled learning and genius, who, having served for a time in the imperial court, now gave himself and his talents unreservedly to the services of his God and his Church.

Augustine’s contribution to what became Christian Just War Theory and the Just War Tradition was admittedly preliminary and piecemeal. It was also foundational. I have no doubt that he would have been, or even is, appalled at what became of the seed that he planted. Even mere seeds, he surely knew, can have monumental consequences. We may recall here the parable of the mustard seed, in which the “smallest of all seeds” becomes a towering tree. The “seed” that Augustine planted, the core of his theory, was the idea that there are two morally distinct kinds of killing—murder and homicide, if you will—one sinful and the other not, one that violates God’s will and one that doesn’t. “Just War,” as we have already seen, evades the reality and issue here. War, we must remind ourselves, is all about killing. Otherwise, it would be called an argument, and neither Christ nor Christians had a moral problem with arguing. What clearly concerned Augustine and the Church was “just killing,” not only on the battlefield but also in the courts, and by “just” he meant sinless or innocent, not legitimate, defensible, urgent, inevitable or necessary. Augustine’s concerns, unlike the preoccupations of most later just war proponents, were theological and moral, not legal, much less psychological.

The challenge facing Augustine, in simplest terms, was to reconcile the Jesus Tradition, the words and deeds of the Son of God, with the needs of Christendom, which meant to transform a nonkilling tradition into a killing tradition. Not an easy task. It posed challenges. The first and most formidable of these was to find a way around or through the commandment of love, the center and sum of the Christian life. The next was to devise a way of reading the New Testament that would enable rather than derail the agenda of what was already on its way to becoming an imperial Church. And lastly, even if the act of killing were rendered morally harmless, there remained the likelihood of collateral moral damage. That is to say that even if killing were sinless, it could be the occasion of other kindred sins such as hatred, rage, vengeance, bloodlust, and a perverse delight in the pain of others. To this too he suggested a solution.

Augustine, in constructing his theory of justified killing, charted a course that cannot be detailed here. In short, he avoided whenever possible the New Testament, preferring the Old Testament, whose Lord of Hosts was more amenable to killing than was the Prince of Peace. And so, as might be expected, Moses and David figured far more prominently in Augustine's deliberations on war and killing than did Jesus. When there was no avoiding the Christian scriptures and their inevitable veto on violence, however, Augustine employed the subtle knife of allegory to neutralize their threat. Most decisively, Augustine reduced Christian love to an intention, a state of soul, explaining how killing and even torture can be conducted with love. "Once and for all, then, a precept is given to thee," wrote Augustine, "love and do what you will" (Augustine, *Ten Homilies*, 10.7.7). God looks to the heart not to the hands. If the killer's heart is pure and filled with love, then the blood on his hands can be washed away with soap. This revised

reading of the gospel of love provided all the license that Christendom needed to embark on its new, imperial course.

The first principle, the make-or-break claim, of Just War Theory—that it is possible to kill without sin, without stain, without guilt, without shame, without pollution, without being haunted by the souls of the dead, without (in today’s currency) “moral injury—has remained intact, unaltered, and only marginally challenged from the time of Augustine to the present day. But this was from the start never more than a theory, a promise—one that has troubled many Christians and compromised the Church from the 4th century to the present day, despite its wide, canonical acceptance in the West. To many, especially those who have known war up close, gotten their hands stained, had their hearts broken and their souls darkened, it has made no sense of what they have seen and done. “A walk across any battlefield shortly after the guns have fallen silent is convincing enough,” wrote WWII veteran J. Glenn Gray: “A sensitive person is sure to be oppressed by a spirit of evil there, a radical evil which suddenly makes the medieval images of hell and the thousand devils of that imagination believable.” The late Rev. Bill Mahedy, who as a Dominican monk volunteered to serve in Vietnam, came to the same conclusion. “I believe the essential failure of the chaplaincy in Vietnam,” explained Mahedy,

was its inability to name the reality for what it was. We should first have called it sin, admitted we were in a morally ambiguous and religiously tenuous situation, and then gone on to deal with the harsh reality of the soldier’s life.... In theological terms, war is sin. This has nothing to do with whether a particular war is justified or whether isolated incidents in a soldier’s war were right or wrong. The point is that war as a human enterprise is a matter of sin. It is a form of hatred for one’s fellow human beings. It produces alienation from others and nihilism, and it ultimately represents a turning away from God.

This has been, from the earliest Christian centuries, the position of Eastern Orthodoxy, a tradition that never embraced Augustinian and Thomistic Just War doctrine. “What the Orthodox Byzantines retained,” writes Orthodox theologian Stanley Harakas, “was an older Greek notion that war inevitably damages the soul. Even in a just cause, in self-defense or to protect innocents, participation in war still harms the soul in some measure.” “Killing has never been categorically accepted as ‘right and good,’ in any circumstance within the Eastern Christian Tradition,” confirms Army Capt. Sean Levine, an Orthodox chaplain serving with the 1st Cavalry. Unlike Augustine and the Catholic scholastic theologians and ethicists who nurtured the unfortunate seed Augustine had sown, Fr. Levine has formed and tested his convictions not on the sidelines but in the face of battle, as evidenced by the long list of military awards he has received, awards that include 2 Bronze Stars, 4 Army Commendation Medals, 5 Army Achievement Medals, 4 Overseas Service Ribbons, an Iraqi Campaign Medal with 2 Campaign Stars, and an Afghan Campaign Medal with 1 Campaign Star. “Given that killing can never be justified,” explains Capt. Levine:

I talk about killing with my Command teams as always wrong and always harmful to the killer, no matter what “side” he or she serves. I can be honest with my Commander about the danger, not only physically, but spiritually, that each mission represents to each warrior on that mission. We often think about the fact that people might receive wounds or die physically, but we rarely ponder the spiritual wounds and spiritual death that might afflict our warriors in the aftermath of violent confrontation... In my service as a chaplain, I see myself as the care-taker of that which is sacred: the souls of the warriors who live and work in my sphere of influence... I always approach veterans as those who have broken themselves upon the anvil of this nation's defense, often for causes way beneath the dignity of the sacrifice warriors are willing to make. They are tainted with death and rage, and they often know they have “done wrong.” When I affirm this, you should see the relief that comes to them when

they find a place to share the burden of their “sin.” I don't have to tell them they have transgressed, they know it and it brings peace to the soul just to hear someone accept it.

The sin or transgression that lies at the dark center of war is, of course, the killing of a fellow human being, acknowledged by LTC Pete Kilner to be “the biggest moral decision one can make and the biggest moral taboo one can break.” In the words of J. Glenn Gray, “there is a line that a man dare not cross, deeds he dare not commit, regardless of orders and the hopelessness of the situation, for such deeds would destroy something in him that he values more than life itself.”

Convincing would-be warriors to cross that line has never been a simple day's work. You can lead a horse to water... as the saying goes. Well, the same has proven true of soldiers. You can lead them to war, but you can't make them kill, not without breaking down their innate resistance to taking human life. “The last veil of human civility,” explains Army LTC. Steve Russell, “is the threshold of taking human life.” The truth is that it has taken the military many years and several wars to learn how to flick what has been called the “kill switch” in a majority of its recruits, whether drafted or enlisted. Shocked by the extensive and admittedly controversial World War II post-battle surveys conducted by Army Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall in both the Pacific and European theaters and his consequent report that on average and under fire only 15 to 20% of infantry riflemen fired their weapons directly at the enemy, the military initiated and developed across decades a complex program of desensitization, operant conditioning, and denial defense mechanisms aimed at making the act of killing an automatic response to received command or perceived threat. By its own measures, this program has been a smashing success, raising the fire rate to 55% in Korea, 90–95% in Vietnam, and

presumably closer to 100% in Iraq and Afghanistan. So much, it would seem, for the profound innate resistance of the great majority of human beings to killing one another, no matter the cause served or the threat posed by the other.

War journalist Phil Zabriskie, author of *The Kill Switch*, has described how the military turns what General Marshall concluded were natural pacifists into professional killers, making it seem—even before they hit the ground in combat—as if they had done it before, done it so many times in fact that it (killing) comes almost naturally:

Recruits learn to handle their weapons, then to shoot them, then to shoot them well and quickly. They progress to increasingly lifelike scenarios—moving from the abstract towards the actual. They shoot at paper targets, then targets shaped like people, then targets that have faces. Rifles loaded with blanks or paintball pellets, they run simulated battles in extreme heat or cold, exhausted and under duress, exercises that have come to include special effects, actors playing insurgents, even instant replay reviews.

And so, in the words of Marine Col. Patrick Malay “the kill switch gets thrown on,” war games turn real, and the dead don’t get up. Referring to the moral barrier, the “civility” that must be transgressed to take human life, Col. Malay has this to say: “I tell you, it’s pretty thin. It’s a very light veneer that is easily scratched past when the men get into killing each other, especially when that enemy’s on the other side trying to do that to him.” In short, with proper training, the military has managed to all but erase a line that until the 20th century most Americans and presumably the majority of their fellow human beings found it all but unthinkable to cross. Problem solved, or so it seemed.

What has taken the military and the country off guard, however, is the moral and psychological damage done, the inner wound inflicted, by de-problematizing the act of killing or, put more candidly, by temporarily dehumanizing the killer. The word to watch

here is “temporarily.” The mother of Noah Pierce, a young Iraq war veteran who killed himself in 2007, put the problem this way: “The United States Army turned my son into a killer. They trained him to kill to protect others. They forgot to un-train him, to take that urge to kill away from him.” Put differently, desensitizing soldiers to taking life is one thing; desensitizing them to having taken life is another. Contrary to Freud’s prediction, men and women are haunted by the lives they have taken, by the destruction they have wrought, by the violence they have brought down on others. “What happens when our boys kill?” writes ex-Marine Capt. Tyler Boudreau: “No matter how well we desensitize them, no matter how just the cause, the violence they inflict in battle will seep into their souls and cause pain. Even in self-defense, killing hurts the killer, too.” Enter “moral injury,” a festering lesion in the souls of innumerable veterans and a puzzle to an even greater number of their fellow citizens who have no experience of war and often little interest in understanding moral injury.

I assume that all of us in this house of God, however, are honestly interested, even deeply concerned, and so would do well to listen closely to these words of Michael Yandell, an Army explosive ordnance disposal specialist who admits he didn’t sleep much when he returned from Iraq:

For me, moral injury describes my disillusionment, the erosion of my sense of place in the world. The spiritual and emotional foundations of the world disappeared and made it impossible for me to sleep the sleep of the just.... What began to erode for me in Iraq in 2004 was my perception of good and evil. What I lost was a world that makes moral sense.... I was 19 when I left for war. I did not know I was leaving a world that made sense—a world where people respected one another’s lives and dignity, a world where violence and murder were understood to be wrong and punished by laws—and entering a world where all bets were off. I was a willing participant in this war.

The moral injury that Michael Yandell has described is not to be confused with PTSD. Although moral injury may well share several signature symptoms with PTSD (such as anger, depression, anxiety, insomnia, and nightmares) and often provokes some of the same futile and self-destructive responses, the similarity stops there.

PTSD is born of vulnerability and victimization, powerlessness and suffering. The trauma, the wound, may belong to a climactic moment or represent a painfully prolonged state. Narrow escape from sudden death, relentless exposure to imminent, lethal threat, the catastrophic loss of beloved comrades—all these and more come down to powerlessness, the experience of being prey to deadly forces beyond supplication. The “footprint” of such profound suffering is deep and some say permanent, a breach in one’s walls, a crack in one’s foundation that defies any quick fix.

Moral injury is another matter altogether. It is the offspring of overweening power and its abuse, its infliction on others. It is the legacy, the “karma” if you will, of deeds, not sufferings. And war is its most fertile breeding ground, inevitably so. War—all about killing and destroying—is a contest of arms and deadly will in which nothing is sacred in the original sense of that word: set apart, safe from violation. It is about dominance, dominance over other humans (men, women, children), and the accompanying widespread destruction of nature. No matter how “just” or necessary the cause, high-minded the intention, or hate-free the hearts of those who wage war, there is a moral price to be paid by all involved, however imminent or distant from the act of war. We learn this from our veterans, if we listen long and hard to what they have to tell and teach us.

In the Book of Genesis, long before Moses or Jesus or Mohammed, long before religion, we witness two primordial violations. The first is a sin against the Creator,

resulting in alienation from the divine. The second sin is against the human other: hateful murder. Augustine, in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* suggests that the inescapable meaning of this act—Cain’s killing of Abel—is that every act of killing is an act of fratricide and thus akin to suicide; for every act of killing kills something in the killer. In that act, one brother goes dark in death and the other goes dark in life. This is how so many veterans have described their inner condition—as an impenetrable darkness. In the Christian tradition we call this a state of sin. In the Catholic tradition, we call this level of sin “mortal” or lethal. Moral injury is a trauma, a wound, an assault on the human soul, the human core. Virtually every warrior tradition recorded in myth and history has recognized this, except for those that have in their arrogance issued spiritual waivers, immunity charms, indulgences and pre-emptive dispensations— declaring some wars to be good, even holy. These are so many delusions, spiritual snake oil. They serve only those without blood on their hands, as if there were any such thing in war.

I understand that any discussion of the soul and of the soul’s death may seem forced or simply false, a ghost of the past, but not to veterans today nor to those committed to helping them. To the war-torn, Augustine’s account of the death of the soul—its symptoms and its source—often has the painful ring of truth. I have listened to the stories of many veterans from the wars in Vietnam, El Salvador, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as former combatants in South Africa and Northern Ireland, and the most spiritually wounded among them describe their state in words that might well have been ripped from Augustine’s *City of God*, where he discusses “second death” or soul death, the death not of the *spiritus vivificans* (the breath of Life in us) but rather the death of the *anima viveus* (the breath of Love in us). “Soul death”—what Augustine describes

as a “living death” or as “death in life”—has nothing to do with mortality. In fact, to those so afflicted, mortality can be a consolation.

What does any of what I have said so far, however, have to do with us—the over 99% of U.S. citizens, who are neither warriors nor war victims? The all-volunteer, professional military, signed into law in 1973, promised a firewall between the war zone and the home front, between soldiers and civilians, between the haunted and the oblivious. And it may seem to have kept that promise. But is it a promise that can be kept? Just War Theory promised the possibility of war without sin, without criminality, war in which men and women would imperil their lives but not their souls or their humanity. It issued moral waivers to warriors, licenses to kill without moral injury, without guilt or shame. Convenient lies, nothing more. The truth is that there is no such thing as righteous killing. Nor is there any such thing as civilian impunity. War darkens souls—the souls of warriors and the soul of the nation that sends them off to do its violent bidding. Like it or not, an entire nation goes to war when it deploys its sons and daughters. We are a nation of warriors, a warlike people. Committed and resigned to institutionalized violence in the national interest, war has long been our default position. We have made our peace with war. Whether in response to risk, threat, or attack, we take for granted that the only alternative to war is doing nothing. Our minds fall blank when we try to imagine anything else. Moral injury is the signature wound not only of our military but of our society as well. Most of us sleep soundly at night, but we shouldn't.

I do not expect such troubling words to find a warm welcome. I feel their sting as much as anyone. Of more concern to me, however, is whether I have spoken in good faith and whether there has been any truth worth telling in what I have shared with you. “The

truth,” wrote Heraclitus so many centuries ago, “likes to hide.” And we can never be certain we have unmasked it. What I have sought to do is to plow under what I see as a bitter harvest, to turn over the soil, in the hope that we might together imagine sowing more hopeful seeds. “Will there never be any peace in our lifetime?” wrote Thomas Merton in his journal:

Will they never do anything but kill, and then kill some more?
Apparently, they are caught: the system is completely violent
and involved in violence, and there is no way out but violence,
and that leads only to more violence. Really—what is ahead but
the apocalypse?

This is where we as a nation find ourselves—caught and confused in a tunneled maze of violence with no way out. Reluctantly, we suspect that Euripides got it right when he put these words into the mouth of war-weary Hecuba, queen mother of Troy: “No more can be hoped for, by anyone in any life, than to elude ruin one day at a time.” This may be true so long as we live and act from fear, fear of the worst that could happen, fear of ruin. There is, however, an alternative.

“A prince,” wrote Machiavelli, “should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but the art of war.” We the people, however, should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as our art but the art of peace. Unrealistic? On the contrary, nothing, I would argue, is less realistic than war. It doesn’t work and never has. We are a wounded nation and will never find healing unless we, as individuals and as a nation, reset our moral compass, rediscover our moral imagination, and relearn the arts of peace, one day at a time.

And in the meantime? What then? What now? As we dare to imagine and to work towards a world without war, our world remains a dangerous, even murderous, place. I

believe we all know by now that the dream of waging a war to end all war is just that, a dream, a nightmare in fact. We can never kill enough to bring killing to an end, and yet there may be darkly cursed moments when we can no longer live with ourselves if we don't die trying to stop the slaughter of innocent lives. The first step, I suggest—and this is all I have been suggesting tonight—is to acknowledge the sacred bond between all human beings and to recognize the criminality of all killing, which is to say that the line Augustine and others have drawn between killing and murder is an illusion. This is the same truth reached and expressed by Marine Maj. Brian Chontosh, the focus of a documentary entitled “Breaking Point: Company of Heroes.” Assessing the enemy lives he took in Iraq, he has had this to say: “It’s murder with a reason, but still, what it comes down to, it’s just straight-up murder.” “Yea,” he goes on:

Whether justified, whether legal, whether for a greater good,
whether whatever, I’ve just done some terrible things to other
human beings. Yeah, if there’s a hell, I’m going to hell for all the
terrible things I’ve done. But I’m okay with that.

I, for one, don't believe there is such a hell, at least not after death. If there were, I fear we would all be there soon enough for having sent him and so many like him into moral harm's way. I do believe, however, that he has lived and expressed a dark truth that we need to take in and to allow to chasten and convince us, in the words of Thomas Merton, to “set everything aside to work for the abolition of war.” In the meantime, like Camus, I don't expect, at my age, to live in a world without war, but I truly hope to live in a world where war is no longer justified.

ROBERT EMMET MEAGHER