

"WHEN THE LAD GOES OFF FOR BASIC TRAINING"

(This sermon "When the lad goes off for basic training" was delivered at the Makiki Christian Church on Sunday, August 13, 1967, by Dr. Chester Terpstra. The Scripture Lesson for the day was I Samuel 8:10-17.)

Do you, who are in your 30s or over, recall where you were on the morning of December 7th, 1941? There are some of you, who then lived in the McCully district, on one of the Heights, or near Pearl City, who have shared your experiences of that morning. That particular Sunday found me as a student-minister with a group of co-workers huddled around an old cast-iron stove in a one-room school house which served as a sanctuary 30 miles west of Chicago. Some early parishioners brought the news that there had been an attack on Pearl Harbor. The name then, I confess, meant very little except that our congregation helped to support a Mr. & Mrs. R. C. Carbaugh then working in Honolulu.

Another memory of that era which comes to me with unusual vividness is the chapel service when the President of Wheaton College, Dr. Edman, announced to us 1200 students that our nation had given up its position of neutrality and had entered the war on the side of the Allies. I recall that he did not recite Tennyson's poem which speaks of the glory of war:

"Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell,
Rode the six hundred."

Tennyson had never seen a war. Dr. Edman, as a lad of 18, had marched off to basic training and then to a European theatre of World War I. Nor did Dr. Edman that morning read from Macaulay of war heroes:

"And how can man die better
Then facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his father,
And the temples of his Gods?"

Macaulay had never been near a war, while Dr. Edman had dug trenches in frozen soil. Nor did Dr. Edman quote Sir Walter Scott's exciting words:

"Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley on!
Were the last words of Marmion."

Scott had never experienced a charge at the front, while Dr. Edman had and, furthermore, he had three sons who would soon be 18 years of age. So with tears running down his face, with choked words, Dr. Edman spoke to lads and lassies of our country's becoming involved in World War II. He knew so well what it would mean for the brave sons and daughters free of the College he served.

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Make
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old material -
thought you/Barker
might be
interested.
Dad

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And soon they went off for basic training, off to boot camp: the campus prankster, the four-letter athlete, the fellow who played the piano at "lit" society, your own roommate. This seems rather far removed and long since past, World War II, doesn't it? Until you visit the memorial on Guam where your roommate was killed, or Punchbowl or some Veteran hospital, or feel the stiffness of your own back from which the shrapnel was removed.

And down through the years the account reads the same--the Korean conflict, the long struggle in Vietnam. The personnel has changed, 'tis true. It is no longer you and your contemporaries, but your son, your nephew, your cousin's boy, the kid who lives down the street. They are the ones who go off to basic training today.

When we stop to think about it, it is difficult to say goodbye to your children, no matter what their age or the cause for their leaving. Do you recall when your Barbara or Bill walked so independently down the street for kindergarten when they were five, and you were left standing there with a lump in your throat? Remember when Vivian, or was it Victor, left for the mainland for school? How cruel life seemed that one so dear to you should be so far away and you left by yourself! I have seen the tears stream down the faces of the mothers of brides and yes, of grooms, as I have pronounced the words of the marriage ceremony, "For this reason shall a man leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife." I can still see the look in my Mother's eyes as we bid her good-bye for the Mission field which put 8500 miles between us. Somehow she must have sensed that we would never again meet on this earth.

However, it is something more than the realization that your child is growing up, than the distance there will be between you, than the loneliness which an empty chair brings--when the lad goes off for basic training. For somehow you don't picture him as a medic at Tripler hospital, or a drill sergeant at Fort Ord, or a supply clerk at Clark Airforce base. Rather, during restless nights, you are startled awake with visions of the swamps of Vietnam. You recall the letter your second cousin who is in the marines wrote home: talk of mire, mosquitoes and day after day, into weeks, without a bath. You remember the woman who witnessed the shooting of her own son on a TV report of the war. You think of the number of island boys who have already paid the supreme price, and wonder who will be next. It is then that you begin to see the truth of what Walt Whitman said:

"They are hellish business, wars--all wars: Sherman said; War is hell: so it is: any honest man says so--hates war, fighting, bloodletting; I was in the midst of it all--saw war when war is worst--not in the battlefield, no, in the hospitals; there war is worst; there I mixed with it: and now I say, ... may God damm it all."

As someone has said, "That is not cursing; that is prayer."

Is there anyone of us who does not feel that war is the greatest violator of personality and therefore mankind's greatest evil? The lads sense it while they are still in high school. Their soul is not their own; the draft lays heavy over their head. They are not the determiners of their own future. They sense it also in the university. They realize with the revolution in learning that a B.A. is no longer enough. The draft will catch up with them sooner or later! Why not enlist? What about the reserves? Now do you file for conscientious objection? These are

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the questions they ask themselves because they lack freedom to pursue their life's goal.

What would happen if all would become conscientious objectors? This would mean that we would rule all war out as immoral. This appears to have been Einstein's view when he said, -if 2% of our population should take a personal, resolute stand against the sanction and support of another war, that would end war. There are a growing number of people who do take a total pacifistic stand. There are others who are not pacifists per se, but do hold that the war in Vietnam, specifically, is an immoral war. There are those in this congregation this morning who take one of these two stands. Your views should be respected; your right to object should never be taken from you.

I have tried to do some thinking on this subject during my weeks on the mainland I was forced to do so as I took the six hour bus trip to and from Fort Lewis to visit Mike, now numbered RA 18916681, B Co., etc. I don't take the position of "My Country, right or wrong." Some Germans tried to follow this course and the free world tried them as war criminals. There are times when the dictates of our conscience take precedent over the will of our leaders. Nuremberg proved this. Remember the words of the Apostles in Acts, "We must obey God rather than man."

The riots in Detroit are a current example of citizens rebelling against the community. Force-city and state police, national and US troops were used to restore order. Is it ever possible for this to develop on a national or international scale? It seems to me this is one of the questions we must answer in order to face the question of total pacifism. Again, should Israeli have reacted as they did when the Gulf of Akaba was closed by the Arabs whose expressed purpose is clear--to annihilate Israeli completely? To take another tack--What about the revolutionary war of our colonies? When inalienable rights are denied is a people justified in taking arms? Does ones freedom ever demand that one stand up and be counted? Is there something worse than death? You and I as citizens in a democracy do not wash our hands of responsibility when we elect officials to represent us, and when appointments are made to the State department. They are still our representatives, our voice, our conscience. What do we honestly think of the war in Vietnam? It is already one of the 4 or 5 most destructive wars in the history of the world. Following our present policy, conservative estimates say we will be there 10 or 15 more years. Have you and I so studied the issues involved that you are willing that your 8 year old when he grows up be a mercenary in that far land, and that I am willing to invest the lives of all three of our sons? When the Synagogue Council of America representing all of the Rabbi, the American R. C. Bishops, the Pope, and the World and National Council of Churches all join hands in appealing to our government for reconsideration of the present trends of the war, then all of us ought to sit up and take notice.

A study of early factors indicate that we sort of stumbled into the war. We have moved from giving technical advisors, to token military presence, to military forces, to bombing the north. Have you ever re-read some of Eisenhower's, Kennedy's and Johnson's early statements about non-involvement in a ground war in Asia. It

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appears that whenever we have not known what to do politically, we have responded by building up our military involvement. We definitely are opposing UN policy, the Geneva Convention, and other expressions of international policy and law.

It seems evident that our leaders know that they do not have public backing for involving endless men in a full-fighting war risking untold injuries and death, so we have relied on fire power. Already we have used more bombs there than we did in Germany during World War II. We have killed three or four times more Vietnamese than the Vietcong have, a goodly number of them, civilians. Our men are dumbfounded by the attitude of the Vietnamese soldier himself. He is not keen on the war. Can his lack of enthusiasm all be due to his ignorance?

I am encouraged by the doctors who are going to Vietnam, sponsored by the Agency for International Development, to probe the needs of the civilian wounded.

It appears to many that what keeps us from taking serious steps for negotiations for peace is saving face. It is hard for you and me to admit mistakes; it is more difficult for a church to admit mistakes; it is still more difficult for a nation to admit mistakes. Yet, military pride, the arrogance of power, is a great enemy of mankind. It would certainly be better for us to lose face, than to lose our soul.

The war in Vietnam is at the top of the list of many of you here this morning as your chief social concern. You have indicated the same. To label some "doves" and others "hawks" does not solve the issue. To label someone often excuses us from honestly considering their point of view.

To the young men in the audience, On the one hand, if your conscience forbids you to participate, you ought not feel ashamed to act upon these inner dictates. If, on the other hand, after serious consideration of the issues involved, you feel it your duty to serve your country in this war. You, too, are acting upon your best judgment. We must respect that.

To many of you my own position, you would feel, is too middle-roadish, or is it too far right or left? I respect what I have heard you say, and the letters some of you have written to me. I, too, like you have an investment of flesh and blood at basic training, at boot camp. I have struggled to come to some position which makes sense out of all of the facts at my disposal. Here I take my stand, not without some agony, until, perchance, some greater light breaks in upon my soul.