

“Earn This”

Veterans’ Day reflection 2023

On Thursday of this week,
I was at Sturges Ridge elderly housing, down on Mill Plain Road,
to lead a little worship service
in honor of our Veterans.

There were just a handful of us gathered,
and after sharing prayers together,
we fell into conversation.

I asked about the veterans in their families.
One woman raised her hand a little tentatively,
and said, “my father was a veteran of World War I.”
“Oh, my,” I said, “what he must have witnessed,
what he must have endured.”
“We don’t know,” she said.
“He never once spoke about it. Not once.”

And that was true, of course, for generations of veterans
returning home from what they could not and would not describe to their
families.

And then one among us remembered what happened in 1998,
when the movie “Saving Private Ryan” was released.
Maybe you remember.

The movie depicted in detail never before seen
the raw and anguished truth of World War II combat,
and all across the country, veterans of a war that had happened 50 years
earlier,

sat in darkened movie theaters and wept as they watched.

And then went home and began to speak.

Finally, began to speak.

Driving away from that conversation on Thursday,
I was reflecting more on ‘Saving Private Ryan,’
and the effect it had had on so many, not only veterans,
but all of us who’d seen it.

And I remembered the powerful ending of that movie.
And it’s that final scene that I’ve been turning over in my mind all this
Veterans’ Day weekend.

Let me share with you why.

The movie’s premise, if you’ve not seen it,
is that a small group of soldiers is given the task of finding and bringing
home one particular soldier, James Ryan.

His three brothers have already died in the war.
and it has been decided that his family should be spared losing their last
child.

Tom Hanks’ character, Captain Miller,
is the one charged with leading a band of soldiers across the fields of France
through the worst of the fighting to save Private Ryan.

They do, but at tremendous cost.

And at the end, Captain Miller lies dying,
one of many lives given so that Ryan’s life would be spared.

If you’ve seen the movie, then you remember what Captain Miller whispers
to James Ryan with his last breath.

“Earn this,” he says, “earn this.”

And the scene fades away
and then we fade back in, decades later,
to see an elderly James Ryan at the grave of Captain Miller
in a French field.

“Every day,” Ryan says at Miller’s grave, “every day I’ve tried to live the best
I could. I hope that was enough.”

Earn this.

I've been reflecting on this the past several days –
and yes, it was a movie, but art can convey powerful truths.
And that line, that line whispered by a dying captain,
that command –
is one that we should all carry with us, it seems to me.
Earn this.

All over this country, and right here in this church family,
are men and women who have given of themselves in ways often beyond
imagining, and beyond telling,
to serve this country – to serve us.
All of these veterans gave of themselves completely,
many times at great cost,
so that what we know and cherish could continue to be.
And each and every one of them
could say to each of *us* “Earn This. Earn this.”

We owe it to them, and to this country of ours,
to do our best to live as people of goodness and integrity,
of decency and compassion.
We owe it to our veterans to “earn” what has been fought for.
More than that, we owe it to the God who created us
to live as people of goodness and hope,
of justice and honor.
In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says to his followers
“to whom much has been given, much is required.”
Indeed.

And for those *for* whom much has been given, much is required.
Earn this.
Live as the people God created you to be.

Yesterday, on Veterans' Day, out in our Memorial Garden
on a clear and sunlit day,
a single bugle played Taps
as we gathered to say goodbye to Lee Craft,
a member of this church family, a veteran,
and a man who had chosen to live his many years with integrity.
A man who, like Private Ryan, chose to live each day of his long life "the best
he could."

What we try to do here at Greenfield Hill Church
is to be people who "earn this" –
who are worthy of what's been done for us
by those who have served us
and by the God who created us.

We remember that to whom much has been given --
for whom much has been given --
much is asked.

We are asked to be people of compassion and integrity,
goodness and kindness.

And that is hard, that is hard,
especially in an era of anger and conflict as we have never seen.
But it is who we are asked to be,
and it is who the world needs us to be.

It's what we teach our kids here, too.

On Friday, with the kids out of school, we gathered a couple dozen of them
over in the Memorial Room
for what we do every year in honor of Veterans' Day:
Every year, we gather kids together to learn about serving,
as we honor those who have served us.

I had four awesome high school freshmen with me from SPF to help me lead,
 and together we talked with the young ones
 about how we take care of each other in this community.
 We talked about what it's like to be a refugee family arriving here
 from another land,
 and our kids then put together baskets of things that would be helpful to a
 family moving into a new apartment.
 (Although it took some persuading for me to convince the kids
 that getting cleaning supplies really will be helpful to families—
 they were highly dubious that anyone would be excited to receive toilet bowl
 cleaner.)

And then we talked about how tough it is to be a family without much
 money as Thanksgiving comes closer.
 So our kids put together more baskets,
 this time with vegetables and cranberry sauce and stuffing,
 all for the food drive we've got underway.

And then finally, we wrote cards.
 Cards to send off to soldiers who will be far from home on Thanksgiving.
 Here are some of the ones they wrote --
 let me share just one of them with you.
(read Henry Clark's here).

All of this, all of this, to help our kids remember
 what **we** also are here to remember –
 that our responsibility to one another is *everything*,
 that we have been called to service
 as surely as the veterans we honor this weekend were.

To whom much has been given, much is expected.

Earn this.

For us, much has been given.

By those who have served us and this country.

And by the God who created us and loves us beyond measure.

May we who have been **so** loved
show the world what it means to love.

May we, too, be those who serve.

Amen.