

ADVENT TWO, YEAR A, DECEMBER 5, 2022

Today is known as the Sunday of Peace. When we think of peace we most often think of the absence of war. But peace is also about the curtailing of all kinds of conflict that might exist with family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers. As Christians we are asked to do everything in our power to promote peace. However, I think before we can promote any kind of peace, we must look at the one peace that is usually overlooked and that is finding peace within ourselves. We most often hear that expression when someone is dying – that they're at peace with God, or at peace with themselves and their dying.

Inner peace is not so easily achieved as we struggle to come to grips with so many internal conflicts within ourselves and with others around us. But it is achievable. It is about focusing on the things that bring you happiness, laughter and those things that keep you strong in the face of stress. It's also about placing one's spirit in God's hands and seeking God's strength and love to sustain us.

I want to tell you a true story this morning about a man, who I believe, because of his inner peace, was able to do what he did. Private Desmond Doss was a conscientious objector during World War II and his life was made into a movie several years ago called "Hacksaw Ridge". Desmond was born and raised in Lynchburg, Va and was a Seventh Day Adventist. He strongly took to heart the sixth commandment which says, "Thou shalt not kill." But he also felt just as strongly that he must serve God and country. Desmond could have gotten a deferment because he worked as a ship joiner at a shipyard in Newport News but as an able body man, he could not in good conscience stay home while others went to fight.

At first the army wanted to send Desmond to a conscientious objectors camp but he told them he still wanted to be in the military just without having to kill. He believed that the war was justified but that killing was nevertheless wrong. He even refused to hold a gun. Desmond wanted to be like Christ saving lives instead of taking life and that's the reason he wanted to serve in the medical Corp as a medic. For this reason, he told them he wasn't a conscientious objector but rather a conscientious cooperator. The army told him they would decide what his position would be and assigned him to a rifle company. The army figured peer pressure and intimidation might convince him to handle a weapon.

The soldiers ridiculed him, called him a coward, wouldn't associate with him, made fun of him, taunted him, threw things at him with one even telling him if he ever went into combat, he would shoot him. He hung in there regardless of what they said or what they did. His colonel even tried to have him transferred. Desmond also would not work on Saturday as that was his Sabbath and so fed up with his refusal to carry a gun and not work on Saturday, several officers tried to discharge him on a Section 8 for mental instability. However, Desmond said he would not accept a Section 8 just because of his religious beliefs. There was even an attempt to court martial him on grounds of disobeying a commander's orders when he tried to force Desmond to hold a gun. Eventually Desmond was allowed to complete his medic training and was shipped out with the 77th Battalion to the Pacific Theater.

Private Desmond Doss was part of the allied invasion of Okinawa where the movie specifically covers the assault on a jagged 350 foot cliff the military called Hacksaw Ridge because it was so deadly. Now the only way up and down this jagged cliff was by cargo

nets. The Japanese had been there for years and were hiding in caves, tunnels, holes and pillboxes ready to cut down any enemies who came up over that ridge. Everyday soldiers climbed up the nets and engaged the Japanese in battle. After facing heavy mortar, artillery and machine gun fire, the majority of Desmond's battalion retreated back down the cliff leaving dozens of casualties behind to face death or capture at the hands of the Japanese. But Desmond felt different. He couldn't leave these men. They were his buddies, some of the men had families and they trusted him and he didn't feel he should value his life above any of his buddies so he decided to stay with them and take care of as many of them as he could. He wasn't sure how but eventually he dragged them one by one to the edge of the cliff and lowered them down the cliff by rope that he fashioned into a sling with his bare hands. Despite heavy mortar and gunfire Desmond continually risked his life to find the wounded and lower them to safety. He said after each one he would pray, 'Lord, please help me get one more, one more. In all Desmond spent 12 hours up on the ridge and saved 75 lives.

The Colonel who had wanted to transfer Desmond said he was one of the bravest men alive and asked for his forgiveness for having doubted him. He then asked him for a favor. The following day would be Saturday and they were going to begin their final assault on the ridge. All the other medics in the battalion were dead. Would Desmond go? Desmond agreed on the condition that he be given time to read his Bible and pray. The delay was approved and when he finished his devotions, they started their assault and finally overtook Hacksaw Ridge for good.

But Desmond was wounded during a hand to hand combat when a grenade came close to the men he was treating and used his foot to push the grenade out of the way. The blast threw him and left 17 pieces of shrapnel imbedded in his body, mostly in his legs. The movie ends with Desmond being carried on a litter by his fellow soldiers to the cliff and being lowered down. But the real truth is as he was being carried out on a litter, he saw another wounded soldier and rolled off the stretcher and crawled over to patch the man up. He gave up his stretcher to the man and while waiting for help to come back, he was wounded again, this time by a sniper's bullet that shattered his left arm. He fashioned a splint out of a rifle stock and crawled the remaining 300 yards under fire, eventually reaching the safety of an aid station where he was finally lifted to safety. The director Mel Gibson did not include this in the movie because he didn't think anyone would believe this after everything Desmond had already done. In 1945 Private First Class Desmond Doss received the Medal of Honor from President Truman and he was the first conscientious objector to receive that honor.

Desmond was a lone wolf who refused to bow to the pressures that went against his beliefs. He faced death to save the lives of others and in doing so he became an example to all who met him, a man of immense integrity but most of all a man of deep abiding faith. His faith in God sustained him and was a path for others to witness. In some ways Desmond was a herald of peace and the only way he achieved that was by having a deep inner peace in his soul. With all the savagery of war that surrounded him he was a bearer of compassion trying to bring some comfort and peace to those he tended and saved. He even helped some wounded Japanese.

With all that Desmond did he never once saw himself as the hero rather he always pointed to God as the reason he survived and was able to save so many. In his own words Desmond said, "When you have explosions and bursts so close you can practically

feel it, and not get wounded up there when I should have been killed a number of times. I know who I owe my life to as well as my men. That's why I like to tell this story to the glory of God, because I know from the human standpoint, I should not be here."

Desmond also always carried a pocket Bible with him that he read from daily and was his source of strength throughout his service. When he was wounded he realized he lost it and the men from his company risked their lives and searched for it and found it and returned it to him. It was a simple gesture yet these men were so moved by Desmond's faith, inner peace and sacrifice it was the least they felt they could do to show him how thankful they were.

In the gospel this morning John the Baptist is also asking people to find that inner peace that would bring them into a closer relationship with God. Both John the Baptist and Desmond had strong beliefs of what God was calling them to do. They were both guided by their strong belief in a merciful, gracious and loving God who helped them push the normative and expected boundaries of society. Their actions called people to examine their own beliefs and expand their understanding of God and God's kingdom here and now.

As followers of Jesus we have a single responsibility and that is to try to build a world in which every person in the world has a better opportunity to live fully and to love wastefully and to be all that they can be in the infinite variety of our humanity. But it starts with finding peace in our own souls. And when we do that then the world will learn that the message of Christ's love and wholeness can do incredible things. That's what you and I as followers of Jesus must also be all about. So, this morning, find that inner peace so we too can join Desmond and John the Baptists voices in bringing God's kingdom closer to reality. Amen.