“Outside the Wire”
Hebrews 13:12-14, John 17:14-15

A Sermon
Delivered by
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United States Naval Academy Chapel
Baccalaureate Sunday, 17 May 2015

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

Before reporting to the Naval Academy in the summer of 2012, I was deployed to Afghanistan where I
was assigned as chaplain to all the naval personnel embedded within Army units – IAs or individual
augmentees as they’re called. And there were lots of them in 2011 & 12… around 2,400. My job was simple,
at least in theory - to find these shipmates wherever they were in Afghanistan, and go to them by any means
available, ensuring their pastoral needs were being met and that we were taking care of them as a Navy family.
One of the things that struck me while there – and this still is the case – are the different vocabularies that the
Army and the Navy use to describe some of the same things:

Billeting / Berthing
Latrines / Heads
DFACS / Galleys or Mess Decks
Rumors / Scuttlebutt
Battle-buddy / Shipmate
Incoming / Brace for shock!
Hoo-uh / Hoo-RAH!

By the way, “Hoo-RAH” is Marine for “Amen!” Beyond these differences, there’s really a whole lexicon of
words and phrases that this war (15 years) has produced or at least imprinted upon us in such a way that they’ve
become household terms. These are the words and phrases that define this generation – your generation, Class
of 2015. For example…
FOB – forward operating base
RPG – rocket propelled grenade
IED – improvised explosive device
VBID – vehicle born improvised explosive device
UAV – unmanned aerial vehicle
TBI – traumatic brain injury

One phrase that this war has produced that you hear almost every day in Afghanistan or Iraq, and routinely on the nightly news is the phrase, “outside the wire.” Even if you’ve never served in the military, you instinctively know what it means. It means outside the relative safety of a base or FOB; outside the perimeter of walls, barriers, checkpoints, sand-bags and barbed wire. When two deployed Marines or soldiers are talking to one another about what they do, inevitably the question comes up as to where in relationship to “the wire,” they work – inside or outside. If a Marine’s job is inside the wire, it doesn’t mean there aren’t threats – there are. But they’re minimized. On the other hand, if a Marine’s job takes him or her outside the wire, you know in an instant what that means. It means the wild and unpredictable world of the Middle East. It means the possibility of enemy contact and hostile fire; IEDs and roadside bombs; traps and ambushes. It means convoys creeping along in the dark; foot-patrols in unknown areas; buddies putting themselves in harm’s way for one another; the prospect of being wounded; the prospect of sacrifice and young life ended. And this wire, this boundary is easy to see. Ask any Marine or Solider, Corpsman, SEAL or EOD, and they’ll tell you – the moment you leave that FOB and cross that barrier, the moment you step outside the wire, you know it, you feel it. You feel the danger and trepidation of being exposed. You feel the uncertainty of being “out there” in another world, moving towards whatever waits for you – good or bad. Your senses are heightened. It’s palpable

But you feel more than just danger and uncertainty. Many Marines and soldiers will tell you that stepping outside the wire also brings a sweeping sense of purpose and accomplishment. It can actually be exhilarating to walk through those barriers and onto that village road knowing that you’re there to make a difference, knowing that to your right and left are brothers who stand with you singular in focus and mission, knowing that history itself may turn on your actions that day. You see, outside the wire isn’t ONLY DANGER. It’s also the only place where any lasting good occurs. In Afghanistan or Iraq for example, if there is ever going to be any change in those countries, if violence and lawlessness are ever going to be confronted, if peace and governance are ever going to bloom in that wild rocky soil, someone (be it us or local troops), someone has got to go outside the wire. It’s outside the wire where enemies are dealt with; outside the wire where an old world
gets to hear about a new one, where relationships are forged and people are offered a new way of life. And this isn’t just the case with the wars we’re fighting today. It’s the case wherever men and women are sent into harm’s way. It’s one of the bedrock principles of troop involvement that it’s only outside the wire, amidst the populace, in the presence of friend and foe, engaging with people where any lasting good ever takes place.

I share this with you not so much to make a military observation. I'll leave that to commanders and strategists. Rather I want to make a spiritual point. If you and I want to make an enduring contribution to this world; if we want to be caught up in God’s great purposes for our lives and used in the advance of His kingdom, if we want to faithfully follow Jesus Christ as obedient sons and daughters of God, we’ve got to be willing to step outside the wire.

You see the wire is a metaphor. And it represents this boundary, this barrier between a life of faith and obedience on the one hand, and a safe, timid, walled-off existence on the other. It’s no secret to which side of the wire Jesus calls us. In Hebrews Chapter 13, verses 12-14, we’re told that “Jesus, in order to make us holy through his blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore, let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” It’s a reference to an image from the Old Testament. “Outside the camp” was where God commanded Moses and the people to take the sin offering to be burned. It was a place of haunts, jackals, and desolation. It was where lepers and the unclean were cast out to live, where scapegoats were sent off to wander and die. Outside the camp represented the naked world in all of its untamed, danger and consequence. It was the frontier not fit for God’s people, but for enemies and outcasts. It was here, we are told, where our Lord Jesus was sent to die - outside the gates of the city, outside the camp, numbered with transgressors, crucified with criminals. It was here where he accomplished his greatest work for humanity.

But this shouldn’t surprise us; after all, this is where Jesus spent most of his ministry...outside the wire. He traveled across seas to set free the demon-possessed. He crossed into forbidden lands to reach Samaritans. He went to lepers, despite their warning him, “unclean, unclean!” He dined with tax-collectors and sinners. He plunged himself into the great theological debates of his time; placing himself in the midst of traps, ambushes, and known danger. Jesus understood that the life of faith is not suburban; that risk and suffering and persecution are at the very heart of obedience; that to be faithful is BY DEFINITION to be heroic! Jesus lived outside the wire. He died outside the wire. And he summons us to join him there as well. Every once in a while we get a vivid glimpse of this.
When I was the ship’s chaplain to USS SAN JACINTO, a young Sailor named Petty Officer Coleto, came to see me, and in the process of our meeting a few times, he opened his life to Jesus Christ and made the decision to trust him as his Lord and Savior. Our ship was going to pull into Jebel Ali in a week, and so and I began thinking about how we could conduct a baptism there. If you’ve ever been to Jebel Ali, you know that just off the pier there is a building called the Sailor’s Center. The Sailor’s Center is a facility intended to give weary Sailors a bit of a reprieve. It has a restaurant, bar and lounge, and a very nice pool. The first day we were in port, I scouted it out and decided this would make a perfect place for a baptism. The pool was in the back in a relatively quiet place. And we were there in the winter months, so I didn’t think there would be a lot of people. Well Sunday came and after chapel services on the ship, I arranged a vehicle to take myself and Petty Officer Coleto and one or two others to the Sailor’s Center for a baptism. When we drove up, the Sailor’s Center was packed! There were Sailors everywhere – in the lobby, eating in the restaurant, and yes all around the pool. No one was in the pool, but there they were all around the pool’s edge, sipping drinks lounging under umbrellas, basking in the Middle Eastern sun. I looked at Petty Officer Coleto and said, “Are you ready to do this?” “Do you want to do this?” He said, “Yes chaplain, let’s do it!” So the two of waded out into the water and of course everyone immediately could tell something was going on. So I felt like I should say something. I said “Gentlemen, you did not know you were going to be invited to a baptism today. But Petty Officer Coleto is going to be baptized today and we’d like you to be witnesses. Is this OK?” The sailors all heartily agreed. I looked at Petty Officer Coleto and asked him if he believed that Jesus Christ had died for his sins and rose again the third day, and did he intend to follow Jesus forever with God’s help. He said he did, and so I baptized him there in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

When he came out of water, his face was aglow and much to our surprise, everyone broke out in applause. And it wasn’t the trivial light-hearted clapping you might expect. These men were moved. You see their safe world had just been punctuated by the faith of this young Sailor who dared to follow Jesus, “out there.” I said, “Petty Officer Coleto, these men will never forget this moment. You’ve just preached a sermon that will endure the rest of their lives.” THAT’S living outside the wire. Yes, it was a baptism; but the image is clear. Stepping outside the wire is being willing to leave behind the love of this world and desire for its approval and openly identify with Jesus Christ…no matter the cost. It’s so important to say this because the world won’t always applaud our faith. In fact, it almost never will. In our Gospel reading today from John 17, Jesus says that as believers, we’ll be hated by the world. And that’s why he prays for us – NOT that we will be removed from the world, but that we’ll be IN THE WORLD and walk in the truth – be sanctified in the truth. It’s really the great paradox of our generation. Our generation is one that esteems courage and resolve, but only in some things. When it comes to faith and possessing clear convictions that flow from our faith, we’re not
taught to engage others or speak truth... No, we’re taught to maneuver; to maneuver away from danger, away from giving voice to our convictions, away from anything that might cause offense. We’re taught to stay inside the wire, where our faith is private, our religion is our own affair, our moral judgments never rise above the level of personal opinion. And so we rarely feel the great trepidation and exhilaration of stepping outside the wire for Jesus. But this is where he calls us – all of us.

As a Citadel Cadet, I became involved in two groups that, looking back, saved me from a lot of bad decisions and heartache - Fellowship of Christian Athletes and my local Church. It was a decision I made early on as I remember thinking to myself, I’ve got to get plugged in to people for whom spiritual things matter or I am going to fall away from what’s most important. Toward the end of my time as a cadet – junior or senior year, I remember one day walking with three friends in the beautiful park outside the front gates of the Citadel. It was a spring day, beautiful, the wind was lightly blowing, and the sun was about to set. We were on our way back from a baseball game, and the subject of faith came up in our conversation. I don’t remember what we talked about, but I do remember alluding to my convictions over some issue. It didn’t happen all at once, but within a few moments, I realized that my friends had walked away, laughing at me for holding such beliefs, and leaving me to walk the rest of the way alone. I remember this moment vividly, because it struck me: I had not been in this place in my life before. It wasn’t some great abandonment – they were still my friends. But in those moments, I became aware of two things:

First, following Jesus will cost us something. 2nd Timothy 3 says “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” In fact Jesus says “Beware when all men speak well of you.” As Christians we are never quite at home here…our faith will always cost us. We’ll never experience the full embrace and approval of this world. Midshipmen, if you’re trying to do both – serve God and live for the world - it’s impossible. Jesus says, “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and the world.” The second thing I became aware of that day – far more important - is that when we do follow the Lord, there is great reward. In those few moments that I walked back to school, as the warm breeze blew over me and I realized what had happened, I began to sense the great love and fellowship of the Lord Jesus surround me; and I sensed him saying to me, “Carey, it’s all going to be OK...I am with you.” I wish I could say I’ve always been faithful to the Lord. I haven’t. But I can tell you that when we are faithful, when we step outside the wire…or find ourselves there, there is a great reward; and the reward is God himself.

Isaiah 43 says “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will
not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” Class of 2015 this is God’s great promise to you and you need to hear this. For YOU WILL pass through the waters and the seas; and YOU WILL go through the fire in the days and years to come. You’ll steer ships into dangerous waters and narrow straits. You’ll lead Marines on dis-mounted patrols in hostile lands. You’ll land your aircraft on a pitching deck in rough seas. You’ll run silent and deep, beneath the waves, on missions none of us will ever know about. On Friday, your nation will bestow upon you a Commission that says you’ve been entrusted to go and do this…to lead men and women in defense of this nation. And this is good and honorable. But there is a greater commission that God gives you this day. It’s the commission that this window in in the chapel is all about. I’m talking about that trust and responsibility that God gives all his faithful to:

Go into all the world and preach the gospel, to take his message to the ends of the earth, knowing that you will never be alone, for he will never leave you or forsake you, and when you stand before kings and rulers and authorities and you’re asked to give an account, don’t worry about what to say, for the Lord will give you the words to speak in that hour, for whoever honors Him, he will honor, and LO, he will be you always even unto the end of the age.

This is the GREATEST COMMISSION. It’s the commission that says, “Go! Step outside the wire in your faith, follow the Lord Jesus Christ above all, leave behind the safety of the world’s approval, and cross that boundary of obedience where your life is used to the glory of God. For what is our chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. And how can we not, after all that Jesus has done? The truth is, Jesus, like a good Commanding Officer had already stepped outside the wire for us. He crossed that boundary of obedience to the Father, saying, “Not my will but Thine be done.” He walked out into the danger and exposure of evil men and enemies. And 2,000 years ago on a dusty road in Jerusalem, with your name and my name on his heart, He walked past the gates of the city, despised and beaten, the cross on his back, and there…he gave his life for you and me. So on this Baccalaureate Sunday, and every day, let us go forth to Him THERE - outside the gates of our own lives, outside the wire; that we might know the reward of His presence and the joy of being at the very center of His will. The will of God is not necessarily the safest place to be; but it’s the best place to be. For that’s where Jesus is. May we be there as well.

They that have ears to hear let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.