Truly grateful to be here today. As many of you know, this chapel and certainly the Yard, have very special memories for me. Not the least of which are the hundreds of weddings I’ve performed here. Often used the Ecclesiastes passage - and often wondered how much those blissful couples remember of that day, let alone that encouraging scripture, save for the videos they may return to on their anniversary.

For those of you who are liturgically inclined, I purposefully stepped away from the lectionary this morning substituting it with the encouragement of Ecclesiastes and several other passages, given our celebration of the Navy’s 241st birthday and our opportunity to gather as a community of believers who enjoy that heritage. My hope is that we take this time to reflect on our legacy, meditate on our responsibility to serve our country, and listen for the divine mandate to care for God’s people, especially those who have made this journey with us, wearing the cloth of our nation, more specifically, the blue and gold of our Navy.

241 years. Think of the men and women, who have gone before us, served with us, who sights are set on serving well after us.

Truly, our rich history has been built by men and women of fame and accomplishment, but our heritage is based is on the honor and respect we have shown our shipmates.

Consider some of the awareness months. Each September the Navy, as well as our country, pays special attention to the plague which has infected our members, the sad truth of suicide. Posters, public service announcements, programs flood the commands, in an attempt to stem the tide of the rising numbers of those who, out of overwhelming despair and hopelessness, choose to end their lives. In April, we turn our sights on the perniciousness of sexual assault. Less well known, but just as critical is this month, the month of October, which has in the recent past been identified as the time when we take a stand against domestic violence.

In each of these awareness campaigns, a good bit of the focus turns on the bystanders. And the emphasis is on intervention. "See something. Say something." "Never leave a Marine behind." The message is that Bystander Intervention can prevent the host of problems we’re trying to get our hands around.

Perhaps Edmund Burke, who lived in the 18th century said it best, ”The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” ~ Edmund Burke. (1729-1797)

But I think we're missing something in our approach to destructive behavior if all we emphasize is reaction. It’s more than stepping up to stop a crime, more than talking someone off a ledge, more than arresting violent behavior. Or coming in from the outside/from the periphery to intervene in a moment.
The CNO in his Design for Maritime Superiority talks about core attributes using the words: Integrity, Accountability, Initiative, and Toughness we demonstrate our Honor, Courage, and Commitment not just to the Naval service, but to every one of our shipmates.

In other words, in the Navy there should be no bystanders.

Think about a ship. When anyone takes their eyes off their responsibility to ship's maintenance, damage control, safety, gear adrift – the literal integrity of the ship is at stake. When any Sailor loses sight of the care and concern for a shipmate, our Navy’s integrity is at stake, and our own personal integrity.

No one in uniform is exempt from the responsibility to speak up, step in, intervene, and stand up to anything that undermines our commitment to our core values. But it’s our integrity, accountability, initiative, toughness that not only guarantee the respect and dignity due each American, but which are vital to the security, the welfare, of each Sailor, but they reflect what we stand for.

But I would maintain that as Christians there’s even more to be said.

Consider the Gospel reading from this morning. This is a wonderful story of four friends, clearly committed to ensuring that their friend gets the help he needs. Having heard of Jesus’ miraculous healing powers, these friends took it upon themselves to get their friend to help as quickly as possible. There was no waiting around. No hoping that Jesus might see their friend in the course of his visit. Clearly not bystanders who are often unsure of themselves as responders, unclear about whether intervention is needed or welcome, or what they should do to help, these friends took matters, literally into their own hands, and carried their friend to the resource he needed.

Faced with an apparent obstacle – the crowd was so big, the numbers so large that there was no room, even outside the door, that there was no way they were going to get into the house— they took the initiative to get up on the roof, dig a hole in it, and lowered their friend into Jesus’ presence.

It’s all there, isn’t it: integrity, accountability, initiative...

And toughness. Now I’ll be honest with you, and if he were here, I’d say the same to his face, I did not like that CNO insisted on the word toughness. When I think tough, my mind goes to images of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hulk Hogan, Ford trucks. Perhaps you can see how it would be misinterpreted. In our own story, these four men had to be some pretty hefty dudes.

But the definition of toughness is much more than physical capability. It’s about knowing where strength comes from. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger knew that. He’s quoted as saying that, “Strength doesn’t come from winning. Your struggles develop your strengths. When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender, that is strength.”

David Brooks in a recent editorial in the New York Times stated,

"Perhaps it’s time to rethink toughness or at least detach it from hardness. Being emotionally resilient is not some defensive posture. It’s not having some armor surrounding you so that nothing can hurt you."
"The people we admire for being resilient are not hard; they are ardent. They have a fervent commitment to some cause, some ideal or some relationship. That higher yearning enables them to withstand setbacks, pain and betrayal."

With this in mind, the four friends were tough. Now maybe facing a crowd can’t be defined as an honest-to-goodness struggle, perhaps not what we would call a major setback, but our protagonists were nevertheless ardent, fervently committed to getting their friend the help he needed. They were committed to healing. More important, they were committed to their friend. And they were willing to withstand...or more accurately, stand with their friend.

Again, maybe this isn't the best example. We know that Sailors, Marines would never leave another behind especially when they can see goal in front of them. It was just a roof, after all. But even the most ardent Sailor can be beset by a sense of hopelessness. Hopelessness and uselessness. When the answer isn't standing in front of them, when they don't really know what's needed, when there is no real sense of relationship per se, when an individual's own attempts to deal with the cards they've been given hasn't proven exactly successful. “What’s the point?” “What can I really do?” “Who am I to think I can make a difference?”

And herein lies the problem. When it comes to standing with a Sailor, a Marine, family member, those who are sharing our work spaces, all the while silently enduring tremendous personal burden, woefully behind on their bills, who have left their families on inordinately long deployments even though their relationship is on the brink of divorce.

As shipmates, where is our integrity, accountability, initiative? Toughness?

Maybe the four friends only thought they were bringing him to Jesus to be healed – a worthy cause to be sure. But knowing the source of their own strength, maybe, in fact, they understood somehow that they were bringing him to salvation. Remember, Jesus, didn't heal him right away, at least not physically. The whole point of breaking through the crowd was so that they believed that their friend would be healed of his paralysis. Instead, Jesus said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

What does healing look like? We think it looks like a problem solved. The blind can see. The lame can walk. But what healing really is is not a matter of shaking one's disability but an awakening to the spirituality of one’s acceptability.

Think again about our shipmates, the ones silently enduring tremendous personal burdens. Who fear, "If I show weakness, I am unacceptable." The ones who can’t meet their budget. Who say to themselves, "If I can't feed my family, I am useless." The ones who are on the precipice of divorce. Who have convinced themselves, "If I am unloved, then there must be something wrong with me." The ones who are wounded, who truly believe, "If I'm broken, then what good am I?"

This is when we should be digging through roofs and breaking down walls to let them know that though weak, poor, disappointed, broken - they ARE anything but unacceptable. Exercising our initiative should be doing everything in our power to bring them to healing. Through Christ's suffering, they have been made acceptable to God.
A bystander would succumb to the paralysis of questions like, "what’s the point?" “What can I really do?” “Who am I to think I can make a difference?” But you, we, are just as weak, poor, disappointed, broken, but we have come to know that through the death of Christ we have been made whole.

Remember that? Remember when that finally hit home to you? It no longer mattered what illness was ravaging your body, your list of disappointments, your broken life, what mattered was that nothing could - nothing can - separate you from the love, the whole and unconditional acceptance, of God. Your sins are forgiven.

_The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore._

Faith is from whence our toughness comes.
And our integrity, accountability, initiative, toughness reflect what we stand for.

When we see our shipmates in distress, paralyzed by their life situations, why wouldn't we want to bring them to salvation? What are we fervently committed to? What are we ardent about?

On this our Navy birthday – especially here on the Yard – we know fervor. We know ardent.

Why would anything be different regarding our faith? Why would we be any less fervent, less ardent about talking about, celebrating, making people aware of our heritage of grace and love - way more than just honor & respect – which has been passed on to us from the beginning of time?

When anyone of us takes our eyes off our responsibility to maintain our obligation to our neighbor, or control the damage threatening the souls of so many around, preserve their safety and well-being, the proverbial gear adrift; when we lose sight of the care and concern for our shipmates – the integrity of our faith is at stake.

_Pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up._

For “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for people of faith to do nothing.”

You see, it isn’t about their toughness...it’s about ours. And our integrity, accountability and initiative. In this way we will fulfill the law of Christ.

In faith, there are no bystanders.
Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Mark 2:1-12 (NIV)

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Galatians 6:2, 9-10

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.