

“and a child shall lead them”

It began with 5 days of artillery barrage in which over 1.7 million shells were fired.

At 07:30 on July 1, 1916 whistles were sounded and the men went over the top of their trenches, each carrying about 60 pounds of gear—including picks, sandbags and shovels. The plan by the commanding generals was that this attack would cut through the German lines and turn a static war back into a war of movement. But about half of the Allied shells didn't explode and many more didn't hit the intended targets. Much of the protective barbed wire in no-man's land remained uncut. When the whistles sounded, the Germans left their bunkers and readied their guns. The British were slow marching directly into machine-gun fire. Nearly 20,000 British officers and enlisted men would die on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Almost 40,000 more were wounded. It was the worst day for casualties in British military history.” One German machine gunner recalled, “When we started to fire we just had to load and reload...They went down in their hundreds. We didn't have to aim, we just fired into them.”¹

If we figure 12 hours of sunlight on that day, 28 men were killed per minute every minute of that day, and nearly double that many were wounded or maimed, and unable to fight. At the end of that first day, the Allied troops had taken three square miles of territory from the Germans.

Despite the shockingly heavy losses of July 1, British General Douglas Haig and other military leaders resumed the attacks the next day – and the next. As author Nigel Jones said, “There was a remarkable refusal to give up.”

The British Imperial War Museum estimates that between 1 July and 18 Nov, 1916 the British suffered 419,652 casualties, the French 204,253, and the Germans between 437,000 and 680,000. Even using the lower estimate of German losses, over a million men from all three countries were either wounded or killed outright. The Battle of the Somme cost the combined countries an average of 7,500 men a day for each of its 140 days.

One hundred years later, almost to the day, Melody and I stood on many of those battlefields. The fields are once again used for farming. The houses and villages have been rebuilt. You cannot be in this region without sensing the incredible carnage that took place here. Barbed wire and unexploded shells can still be found. Unnatural hummocks still can be seen. I cannot adequately describe to you the awe of imagining what those days were like. The overwhelming loss of life felt very palpable all these years later.

Our guides pointed out the German trenches and bunkers in their superior vantage points, and the open fields and rises the Allies had to cross without cover, just man after man after man. We saw little plots of 100 or 300 graves, and a mile or so away, another cemetery, and another and another. The men were often buried where they fell, in awkward clusters of four here, and ten there. Many are listed as unknown, or ‘A soldier of the Commonwealth’ because their cardboard dog tags had deteriorated by the time they were buried. This part of the world lives with the deadly reminder of the cost of war every day, all day.

World War I was already two years old when General Haig began the Battle of the Somme. Experts and pundits often say that generals fight the last war over, not the current one being waged. In other words, their tactics, their experience and their vision of how to wage a war are all shaped by the lessons from the last war. I can't speak broadly, but to my untrained eye it seems that many of these military leaders were not prepared at all for the dramatic changes in weapons and tactics used here. Flame-throwers, hand-grenades, trenches, poison gas, tanks, machine guns, dirigibles, and airplanes were all new to this war and/or its leaders. Further, the leaders seemed confounded by the superior advantage trenches provided, and continued to deploy troops into the killing fields as if they were unending pieces on a giant chess board. I stood in the midst of these positions in awe of the scope of the killing and wept day after day.

This weekend is Veteran's Day, a time of car sales, mattress deals, and no postal delivery. It's a time when everyone wants to wear khaki and thank a veteran with a free or reduced meal. It is so named because it is the anniversary of the Armistice of "the War to end all wars."¹ On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month 100 years ago the fighting ceased. It was the end of a bitter war completing a century of intense hatred and increasing hostility, especially between Germany and France. And it was the first time war could truly be called global. Not only did fighting occur in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific; troops from 32 countries were involved, including: Morocco, South Africa, Austria, Australia, Hungary, New Zealand, Canada, India, Turkey, the United States, Bulgaria, Germany, Russia, Japan, France, the United Kingdom, Greece, China, Italy, and others.

Melody and I went because I wanted to understand the ethos of this War, and how it transformed European and American society. I did not realize I would also be schooled in how wars went from scalable and comprehensible to the precision destruction of our modern endless conflicts.

Here are some of my reflections honed over the last two years since our trip to the Western Front:

- When the War started, the United States was a distant, isolated partner. By War's end, we were an indispensable friend and world power. These people are eternally grateful for our companionship in this War, and only we can tarnish that affection.
- The righteous conviction of political and military leaders can have devastating consequences. They can so easily stir up the sense of being wronged in the citizenry that we all clamor for vindication.
- The bonds that draw us together into a common humanity are indissoluble. I believe humans want to do good and be fair, but forces that thrive on fear would rather see us hating and rejecting love and friendship. We hate at our own peril.
- The overwhelming number who serve do so out of some measure of duty. May we not cheapen it by falsely glamorizing war, and embellishing warriors as killing machines.
- Killing another's body is much more palatable if one has already killed in the heart.
- Life is indeed sacred. Behind each grave stands a grieving family. In front of each grave stands a life never lived, and dreams never accomplished.

- Our faith tells us to love neighbor as self, be merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and leave vengeance to God. When conflict becomes the final arbiter of justice, we have diminished God and all God's creation.
- We cannot be faithful and complete in our love of God without loving all others who have been given life by God—our neighbors. That matrix of heaven-bound to earth-bound, with the sinews of person to person—that is the stuff of the cross.

On this veteran's day, I would invite us to remember all who have died in our wars. And all who were injured in body, mind or soul. And all who have fought. And all who have stood on the battlefields and wept at young lives cut short. And all those who have come home seeking to live in peace. Let us not make a mockery of real sacrifice by glamorizing war.

* NOTE: This sermon was preached on Proper 27B (November 11, 2018), but using Proper 26B lessons.

1. Russell Freedman, *The War to End All Wars: World War I*, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2010, 97
2. British author, H.G. Wells, in a 1914 article called this the 'War to end all wars.'