

“The sons and daughters you never knew”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Psalm 127:1-5 and John 15:9-17*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

A few weeks ago, when I was in Princeton for a friend's ordination, he and I went for a walk in the woods near his house. He led me off the beaten path, through thicket and mud, to a tall oak tree. Leaning against the tree was a headstone, its inscription weathered and barely legible. I squinted and made out the words: Nelson Wyckoff, Private, 20th Regiment, US Colored Infantry, Died May 23, 1901.

It turns out that Nelson Wyckoff had served at the age of 20 as a Union soldier in the Civil War. He had fought for his freedom and for the freedom of all black Americans, in what remains to this day America's bloodiest war.

We don't know why his grave rests in those secluded woods far from any cemetery. For a long time, no one even knew his grave was there.

Today, we have heard the Psalmist promise that the warrior and the faithful servant of God will not be put to shame, but will be honored, strengthened, and blessed. Blessed with a quiver full of children. It's a nice promise. But where was that promise for Nelson Wyckoff, buried in the woods, forgotten?

On its surface, the promise of the Psalms can seem like a lie. Life just doesn't work out that way. As Jesus reminds his disciples, the rain falls on the good and the bad alike. Good men and women do not always receive good lives. Many of us here could speak in this very moment the names of men and women who served in our armed forces, never to return, never to marry or have children of their own. And when we hear the story of a veteran with PTSD killing 12 people in a bar in California and then taking his own life, just a few days ago, we are reminded that even those who do come home to us do not always come home the same. They come home wounded, changed, sometimes never able to regain the life, the family, that was once theirs. Veterans in our nation are disproportionately poor, homeless, in need of healthcare and support, abandoned by the country they risked their lives for. Where is the promised respect? Where is the quiver of children?

So many of us work so hard, risk and sacrifice so much, only to receive more struggle.

But what if the Psalmist is promising something different? And what if that promise could change our understanding of who we are and what we do? What if that promise could redeem and give hope to every veteran sleeping under a bridge, or buried in the earth? What if it was comfort for every parent, every teacher, every chaplain, every doctor or nurse, every non-profit or social worker, every person who's tired and wonders if all their sacrifice even matters? What if

I could tell you that it does matter? What if I could show you proof that your life has made a difference?

A few years ago, some hikers caught a glimpse of stone poking through tangled vines and fallen leaves. They cut away the thicket and discovered the grave of Nelson Wyckoff. County officials began to piece together Nelson's life from historical records. They tracked down his family, generations later, who had never heard of their ancestor. Never knew that they were the descendants of a freedom fighter. They cleared away the debris from Nelson's grave, posted an American flag and Civil War marker, and held a ceremony of honor over his resting place.

It was part of a statewide effort to reclaim lost burial sites of African Americans who fought in the Civil War. Because of segregation, many brave soldiers were never buried alongside their white comrades, but were buried in unclaimed lands, along highways and deep in the woods. Now, those graves are being reclaimed and honored. When Dolly Marshall was led to the gravesite of her great-great-grandfather, a Civil War veteran, she fell to her knees and said through tears, "I knew my ancestors were more than just slaves and that, if I remained steadfast, I would find them."

And find them she did. As did Nelson's family. As are thousands of families all over the country. Generations and generations of free men and women living, working, striving, dreaming—a quiver full of children.

I suggest to you that the Psalmist isn't promising that we will be blessed with happy and easy lives. He isn't promising that every good person will go on to have children of their own, or lucrative careers, or healthy bodies. Jesus, after all, spent a great deal of time preparing his disciples for suffering and resistance. What he's saying is that if you give up your life for God, for your brothers and sisters, if you dare the battered foxholes of this world, you can trust that God will be there to make it matter. It's a promise that what we do will not be in vain. These endeavors, brave and terrifying, shall make a difference. We may not see the difference today. We may not see it in our lifetime. But through the sparks we make today, God will raise a bonfire of love to light the whole world.

It's not an easy life he promises; it's a purposeful life.

The legacy of a veteran, who sacrifices to preserve the life and freedom of others, is not merely to be found in the annals of their family or the ground in which they are laid. It is to be found in all the lives made possible by their sacrifice—a quiver full of sons and daughters, thousands, who live by the mercy and courage of these we honor today. The Lord builds their house. The Lord guards their city. The Lord gives them rest from their toil. They shall not be put to shame.

When Pericles, the Athenian statesman, was called to deliver a funeral oration during Athens' war with Sparta, he said, "The whole earth is the tomb of heroic men and their story is not given only on stone over their clay but abides everywhere without visible symbol woven into the stuff of other men's lives."

*Abides everywhere... without visible symbol... woven into the stuff of other men's lives.*

Those lives are our quiver.

For this brief moment, let us make those lives visible. Anyone who is not a veteran, I invite you to stand if you are able. Veterans, look now, look at these faces, and see the sons and daughters you never knew. Your legacy. Proof that your life matters. If I could tear down these walls and show you the whole world, I would show you a world of people standing. For you. **Amen.**