



## Ministry to Service Members and Their Families: Seeing the Person

AARON FULLER

**H**ow do we minister to people who work in professions that challenge our Christian faith? This is a question many Christians might ask, but it is the wrong question. Such a question forces us into theoretical dichotomies, like “hate the sin, love the sinner.” Now, we are no longer talking about ministry, but are rather placing our own ideologies above living, breathing human beings whom God loves.

The story of the centurion in Luke’s Gospel (7:2–10) provides insight and a way forward. The centurion’s slave is dying, and the text paints a portrait of the centurion, who is both a soldier and a human being. The encounter is odd in that the centurion likely held power over the whole region. He says as much, but acknowledges the limits of his own power over against who he believes Jesus to be (7:6–9).

Here’s how I read this: it is about a *person of need* who is a centurion. Sure, there are a lot of complications tied to this person’s profession—his title and privilege, and his ownership of another human being. But even with all of those realities, he comes, recognizing who Jesus is and asking Jesus to do for him what he knows he himself cannot do: heal someone from the clutches of impending death. An odd encounter? Yes. But regardless, the centurion comes to Jesus, and Jesus responds.

Jesus’ response teaches us a lot. Nowhere in the text does Jesus require a renouncing of the centurion’s profession or authority. Nowhere does Jesus admonish the centurion for his war making, the countless lives he’s taken (or ordered taken), or his allegiance to an oppressive empire. Jesus simply takes the centurion at face value—a human aware of his own limitation—and does for him what he himself cannot do.

For me, it is hard to keep my bias about ministry to those whose profession is fighting our nation’s wars out of the equation. I served for over eight years as a submarine officer on active duty in the Navy and continue to serve as a chaplain in the Navy Reserve. However, I am first a parish pastor, and I understand there are those in my congregations who might not look favorably upon particular wars and those who participate in them.

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## Ministry to Service Members and Their Families: Seeing the Needs

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**W**ar. It's not a very popular topic in Christian circles. Although the Bible is full of war stories, we don't tend to focus on them. Reading the Old Testament, I have come to realize how active God is in the war stories of the Bible. As we consider how congregations can support soldiers and their families during deployment, I want to consider how God can be active through us.

Deployment is rough. It's rough on the soldier who gets sent away, and it's rough on the family and friends who remain at home. I've heard comparisons made between deployment and other absences in our lives, such as extended mission trips or serving in the Peace Corps. Yes, there are similarities, such as living in and among a different culture, living more simply than we are used to back home, and being in harm's way. These are all difficulties to overcome, and they make it more difficult to return home. Military deployment, however, is rough on a different level, in a way we don't like to name, let alone talk about. Being a soldier and being deployed means that the soldier might be called upon to take the life of another human being. There is an underlying current within every soldier every day in a war zone: stay alert, stay alive. I served in Iraq in 2005–2006, and I continually wrestled with the reality of being a Christian *and* a soldier. How can I hold them together? How can I be both? There are no easy answers, but for me they both belong to who I am as a person. My calling to be a soldier was just as strong as my calling to be a pastor.

Congregations are not immune from the effects of deployment. There are families in our midst who are dealing with the stresses of war on a daily basis. We hear a lot about soldiers coming home with post-traumatic stress disorder, and many more soldiers come home with post-combat stress, a lesser-known but more common result of war. The stress that the families endure is not as noticeable, especially when we see them only briefly during the hubbub on Sunday morning.

Congregations can help support soldiers and their families by being the church, loving God, and loving our neighbor. Remember that it is about the love of God. It is not about us and our love (or lack thereof) for the mission of any war. The love of God will surpass our own understandings.

Loving soldiers might involve sending care packages and letters on a regular

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The story in Luke 7 serves as a guide for us all. The question is not, "How do we minister to people with different beliefs?" but rather, "What do we see when people with different beliefs come to us?" Do we see warmongers? Are we disgusted because we think these people represent all we believe is evil and wrong in the world? Or do we see human beings—individuals, their spouses, their children—who come in great need and limitation in the midst of living in a broken world?

As pastors, we call our communities of faith to see people as Jesus sees them, and that means seeing them in their great need and brokenness. We are called to see those who are traumatized by violence, and as a result suffer from mental illness. We are to see individuals who spend up to a year or more at a time away from their families with little to no communication. We are to see how families are changed when military service members go away for long periods at a time. We are to see marriages and parent-child relationships strained by uncertain deployment schedules and constant transition. We are to see people and families who experience life within an entirely different dynamic from our own, people affected by the reality of war.

For me, that is the first and most important step. Jesus calls us to stop seeing people within categories that diminish personhood and humanity. Jesus calls us to embrace and love another's humanity, even when the categories and roles they participate in go against our ethics and morals as Christians. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that Jesus calls us to embrace humanity *especially* in such cases.

Embracing people who represent challenges to our Christian beliefs can help us see and discern God's presence and action even in the midst of the madness of war. When we come alongside those in need, aware of their own limitation, we become aware of our limitation and need as well. And I believe, in that moment, hearts are transformed. That is the place from which Christian ministry of compassion, healing, and love can freely flow.

The question, then, when it comes to ministry to and with those who serve in our armed forces is this: "What is the great need of the person standing before me?" And perhaps another helpful question worthy of our reflection is this: "How do I look past the wrapping of my ethics and morals to see the true gift of the other in relationship?" ⊕

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basis. Keep in mind that some soldiers are stationed in very remote places with little room to collect “stuff.” On the other hand, many soldiers are stationed in areas where nothing will go to waste; everything will be passed around and shared. If it’s difficult to think of something to write in a letter, simply inform the recipient of the latest happenings in the community with details that might bring a smile to their faces. Write about the latest church blunders or how the pastor almost tripped walking up to the altar and the children giggled uncontrollably. Make it fun. Make it personal. One of the favorite letters I received when I was in graduate school was from my dad writing about his experience that day at the bank’s drive-up window. It’s amazing how simple stories from our daily lives can brighten someone else’s day. And certainly let your soldiers know that you are praying for them and for their safety. These are all simple ways to help soldiers know that they are not alone and not forgotten. Don’t let your worries about sending the right stuff keep you from sending it, because it is more important simply to assure them that they are remembered and loved.

Loving the military families back home can involve many facets of life and community, including providing companionship, lending a helping hand, and being a listening ear. When a family member is deployed, that person leaves behind a hole. We can try to be a companion to alleviate some of the loneliness. Invite families over for dinner. Include them in a family movie or game night. Invite them to join a group at church. Think about ways you overcome your own loneliness and offer that to the family. Lending a helping hand is probably the most common way to support the families. Mow the lawn. Take them meals. Offer to take the kids for a play date. It’s difficult for many to ask for help, so telling them to let you know if they need anything might come up empty. If you see a need, offer to take care of it. Being a listening ear is very important. The families wrestle with a lot of unknowns during deployment, so having a safe place to talk about their fears might be an invaluable piece to relieving stress.

However pastors and congregations decide to support soldiers and their families, remember to be active in their lives just as God was and is so active in the lives of God’s people during war. We can’t eliminate the stresses of war, but we can give soldiers and their families moments to breathe in the midst of it. ⊕

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