

“How the Navy Taught Me To Be A Christian”

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Text: Galatians 3:21-29

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Christian. Once a conversation I had with my XO—surprisingly—led to a policy change on our ship. As I reflected on these experiences, I came to realize that even clothing ourselves in Christ imperfectly can influence others and have an impact where you live. But not always. I served on the Terra Nova for 14 months. After the first two months the Captain asked me if I would be willing to lead worship services on board if we were at sea on a Sunday. I agreed, happily! After all, I had already been a preacher and worship leader while in university. When I led worship I would get 10 to 20 sailors showing up out of a crew of 110. I felt pretty good about that! Until the XO told me, “You know, if a member of the crew desires to attend worship we are obliged to give him time off duty.” It took a moment for the penny to drop and then I grasped it. I said, “So you are telling me that they are coming to worship to get out of work!” God is not always the most important motivator... our influence can be much less than we hope...and reflection can keep one humble.

The most significant period of reflection happened a year before I left the Navy, and it was about that issue: do I stay or do I go? What direction do I want in my life? Might God even, perhaps, have a direction for my life? Is it congregational ministry? So one night, surrounded by darkness, I offered these questions up to God in prayer. After, I felt an extraordinary sense of peace and a conviction that the way would become clear. A couple of days later a fellow naval officer, for no apparent reason, told me, “You know, you should be a minister.” No one had ever said that to me before. A couple of days later a different officer in a different situation told me, “You know, you should be a minister.” The following Sunday I worshipped in a Presbyterian church in Pictou NS. After the service I shook the minister’s hand, and he said, “What church are you the minister of?” Surprised, I told him that I was a naval officer. “That’s strange” he said, “At the beginning of the service I saw you sitting there and I thought ‘now there is a minister on vacation’.” [God has a sense of humour]. Reflection is thinking about Scripture, Jesus, your experience, and thinking about how you think about things that your faith may deepen and your walk as a disciple become more faithful. In that particular moment I was reflecting on what was for me a unique and extraordinary experience in the strange coincidence of these three happenings coming on the heels of my prayer. Was this God’s answer? I think for some people (well, for me!) it takes a certain kind of courage to have the conviction to say “yes” to that question. But my hesitant “yes” then started me on the journey I have pursued to this day.

I commend the practice.

Last week we looked at the practice of reflection. In reflection we think about our lived faith in light of Jesus, scripture and our experience. The practice of reflection helps us center ourselves in Christ and helps us to figure out what discipleship will mean for us as a person of faith. This morning I want to illustrate the practice through personal stories from my 8 years in the Navy. Growing up I lived a very insular life consisting of school and church. I was on the Board of Managers of my congregation as a teen, an elder at 21, I led the youth program while in university. I was in a contemporary music group that led worship all around southern Ontario. I was an occasional preacher. In the midst of this, a military recruiter came to our high school and I learned that they would pay me a salary monthly to attend university as long as I committed to 4 years of training and 4 years of service. I signed up. In those days the recruiting slogan was “There’s no life like it!” I had no idea(!) how very true that statement was. I had no idea what life on a naval ship would be like with 110 men who were dramatically different than me. The change in my life was so jarring that I was jolted into the practice of reflection. Being a Christian in my insular world was easy. The question now was, “how will I be a Christian in this world?”

When I showed up on my first ship my fellow cadets knew I was different. I didn’t swear, I didn’t drink alcohol and I didn’t chase women. I stood out. And I had this habit of reading my Bible each night before turning in. This is not how you remain inconspicuous in the Navy...especially given that 18 trainees shared sleeping quarters that was a little larger than the master bedroom of my house. We got to know each other. On our third day on board the Executive Officer was talking to us. Along the way he said, “I understand that there is a *Christian* among you” and he went on at length sharing with us his very low opinion of Christians. Little did I know that he would go on to teach me the greatest faith lesson of my life. Several weeks later we spent a weekend in Portland OR, and I made the greatest find there in a pawn shop: a gorgeous Gibson guitar for less than \$300. Fabulous price! But the price was large enough that I would have to pay customs duty on the guitar when we returned to Canada. So I asked the salesman for a second receipt showing a smaller amount. Now, I thought this was brilliant and I proudly spoke of my brilliance with a few of my fellow cadets. Now a destroyer is a very small world. The day before we got home the

Executive Officer gathered the cadets and said, “I understand that one of you has purchased a valuable guitar but also has a plan to not pay the required duty. We are servants of the Queen and as such we must uphold the law in all we do. I expect that cadet to do the right thing.” When the Customs officer came on board the next day I was the only crew member to meet him...and that meeting took place in the Executive Officers’ cabin. The XO said nothing, but I am sure he was thinking “Oh...it was the *Christian*. Typical.” His naval ethics was better than my Christian ethics. Of the 10 commandments #8 is “thou shalt not steal.” I got a humbling lesson in the meaning of integrity that day, delivering a profound realization. I learned the lesson in that moment that how I live my life is a choice and if I was going to be a person of faith in the tiny world of life on a ship I was going to have to figure out how to live as a Christian in that setting. That became my pursuit for the next seven years, the result of my sudden immersion into the practice of reflection.

I was a watch officer, so when I was on watch I had control of operations and navigation. My life was on the bridge looking out over the vast ocean. The sea is a strange world. We could be out for weeks and never see a shoreline, knowing confidently that the nearest land was only 2 km. away, straight down. A good amount of time was not operational, not particularly dangerous, and the “no chatter” rule on the bridge all worked together to afford me time to reflect. Often my reflection would be contemplating God, often through the words of the Psalms. It was in those days that I really discovered the psalms, recognizing them as real, honest personal expressions of faith. The psalms are like entries taken from personal journals: reflections on faith, prayers, struggles with God. I came to see that the people who wrote the psalms were trying to do the same things I was trying to do: to figure out God and faith in the midst of the experience of life. The psalms were the products of the reflections of their authors. There were times when the ocean was as flat and still as a mirror. There were clear nights when the stars shone in all their glory. Psalm 8 could come to mind. “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them?” I found wonder in God while sailing. I also spent time in the Bering Sea off Alaska in December with three hours of sunlight a day. I saw some significant storms, one that included 10 meter tall swells. In times like this words like Psalm 46 would come to mind: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble...though the waters roar and foam.” I found calm in God. It would be years later that I would come to understand that what I was doing was a reflective practice called contemplation.

While I understood myself as a Christian, for the first years in the Navy I was not comfortable in my own skin. I would find myself asking, “how should I be in this situation? How should I show up as a Christian? Dare I do it?” Paul wrote to the Galatians, “You who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (3.27). It’s a very evocative verse, especially for a sailor who clothes himself in a uniform every day. The clothing of a uniform speaks volumes about the wearer. A uniform is a suit of clothes that shows others how you have chosen to live, the commitments you have made. It shows people that you have chosen a life of service. When we see a person in uniform we know who that person is and what they stand for. Paul said, writing to the Galatians, in our baptism we have clothed ourselves with Christ, and that should show others the commitments we’ve made, the life we’ve chosen to live that is also a life of service. There were many challenges, big and small, that challenged how I would put on Christ. For example, on one ship three of us discovered that we were Christians: me (and officer and Presbyterian), a Petty Officer (a sergeant and Pentecostal) and an Ordinary Seaman (a private and Roman Catholic). We became friends and in foreign port we occasionally went to church together. My XO on that ship told me I shouldn’t be doing this. “Officers do not fraternize with men in the ranks.” My reflection question was, “Which clothing was more important: the uniform I wore and what it represented, or being clothed in Christ?” We kept going to church together. In my 7th year of naval service I began to question whether it was appropriate for a Christian to be in the military. So on one tour I took with me three books to read on the topic, that spoke to the three main Christian viewpoints on the issue: pacifism, Christian non-resistance and the just war theory. After reading and reflecting I concluded that maybe I shouldn’t be in the military...and that reflection ultimately contributed to my decision to leave. I need to note that my thinking changed again 10 years later in light of the tragedy of the Canadian peacekeeping efforts in Rwanda and through the influence of General Romeo Dallaire’s book. Sometimes the evil of war is the only recourse to stop a greater evil.

“You who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” To be honest I was clothed imperfectly, partially. But the practice of reflection—reflecting on Jesus, scripture, my experience, how I should live—kept bringing me back to the question, “what is it to be a Christian? How is it that I should live?” My choice was to live my faith unobtrusively. Low key. To hopefully live my faith quietly with integrity. I did not want to confront or offend, because there is no escape when you are on a ship at sea. But what surprised me, time and again, was how people noticed my faith all the same, even though I kept it low key. Colleagues would occasionally ask me what I—a Christian—thought about an issue. Once a fellow officer wanted a heart-felt discussion on what it would mean for him to become a