

Yes, God loves soldiers

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April 11, 2012



On Easter Sunday, Jake Tapper [interviewed Rick Warren](#) on ABC's This Week, asking the influential pastor a series of questions on faith and politics. Of particular interest were his comments on soldiers and war (which did not make it into the aired segment but are available [here](#)). At the end of the interview, Warren exclaimed, "God hates war, but loves every soldier."

As a combat veteran, I was impressed by and grateful for Warren's statement. The Bible makes clear that war is at best a necessary evil--the idea at the core of the just war tradition. And yes: God loves each and every soldier. But I want to look more closely at the latter thought, especially in light of the suicide epidemic that currently afflicts our nation's veterans and soldiers.

A 2007 [CBS study](#) found that 6,256 veterans committed suicide in 2005. That's 17 a day. More recently, the [Veterans Administration released data](#) indicating that 94 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan alone succeeded in taking their lives (out of 1,868 attempts) in fiscal year 2009. Pentagon data suggests that active duty suicides [outnumbered total combat fatalities](#) in 2009-10. These numbers are the highest our nation has ever seen.

Perhaps more than any other identifiable demographic in America right now, soldiers need to be reminded that God loves them. But to love is to recognize weakness along with strength, to celebrate virtue and rebuke vice. To do so, we need to dig deeper into the dueling identities many soldiers face.

In the interview, Warren highlighted a wonderful biblical passage about soldiers: the story (in [Matthew](#) and [Luke](#)) of the Roman centurion who impresses Jesus with his great faith. Jesus makes no mention, however, of the man's duty to Rome--only the centurion himself does. The story emphasizes his humility, not just his service. In Luke, the military commander won't even "presume to" face the indigenous holy man, instead sending friends to ask for healing in his stead. Soldiers today are often just as humble, shrugging off feats of incredible valor by claiming they were [just taking care of their own](#).

But soldiers often also shrug off hidden pain as well. Aware of this, Tapper asked Warren how he counsels veterans when they have "maybe even done horrifying things." Yesterday, today, tomorrow: 17 veterans will kill themselves, an act that takes an overbearing burden of self-condemnation and doubt. How can this be?

I found it poignant that this interview immediately followed Holy Week. The gospels' crucifixion narratives illustrate well [the guilt and pain soldiers carry](#).

After all, it's the soldiers themselves who crucify Jesus: they are doing their duty in carrying out an execution. Carried away in the horror of martial fervor, they abuse and mock their detainee, even gambling for the war trophy of his bloodied garment. In church last Friday, I remembered Operation Baton Rouge in 2004, when I saw members of my own platoon assault handcuffed detainees, vying for cheap intelligence or an easy scapegoat. They may have gone too far, but they were there out of duty.

Through duty-bound soldiers, Christians can recognize our own complicity in the violence that took Jesus' life. The same person who would yell "crucify, crucify, crucify" before the governor will yell "kill, kill, kill" on the bayonet range. That person was me when I wore the uniform of a U.S. soldier. But it also you, whether you served or not. On Good Friday, we are reminded of exactly where we stood in the mob, and where we deserve to stand before God.

But through the cross, the victim has redeemed the villain. Love has overcome evil; the soldiers who crucified Jesus proclaim him good, and he them. And it's the soldiers' example we follow in proclaiming that "surely this man was the Son of God."

God loves every soldier, but not blindly. God has seen not just the good they've done, but each and every torment they've inflicted as well, each and every time they've overstepped their authority. Holy Week reminds us that [soldiers are in need of confession](#), of being seen wholly and reminded that they're capable of being holy. Time prevented Warren from elaborating on his statement, but I think he would agree that sharing God's love with soldiers includes listening to their stories, feeling their pain and wrestling with them toward redemption.