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This sermon supplement was recited by Matthew Brown at "Community Worship" in Graham Taylor Hall led by Christopher Gilmore and Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR)

### Reflections on the Nature of War

I'm grateful for the encouragement and guidance received from many of you, both staff and fellow students here at CTS, directing me to a ministry involving the healing and reconciliation of veterans of war. The initial focus of ministry will be Vietnam era veterans, with a concentration on the 2.6 million men and over 7000 women (including over 300,000 wounded) who did time in VietNam. I'd like to share some of the lesser known aspects of the VietNam war with you.

Understandably, many veterans find it difficult or impossible to discuss the darker aspects of their experience and also, understandably, many non-veterans are unaware or have tended to dismiss those darker aspects of war. The latter is due, in part, to our silence--and we must overcome that reticence in the service of truth. As soldiers in VietNam (like those of any war), we mirrored (in a most dramatic way) the cracks and flaws of the society that put us there. Facing the most unpleasant realities of war is an essential task for truth seekers not content with the comfortable lie or half truth.

The upper class, with access to deferments both legal and questionable, were able to avoid service in VietNam. In my home town, Draft Board violations by the well-connected or wealthy were neither pursued nor prosecuted. Of those who did serve, 25% came from families at or below the poverty level, and the average age was 19. More than 58,000 are listed as killed. The VietNameese toll of dead and wounded was many, many times greater and continues to mount as a direct result of the explosives (7 million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos, Cambodia and VietNam) and toxins (like agent orange) left behind.

The dead and wounded continue to mount in this country as well. More veterans have committed suicide than died in the war itself, a trend that continues.

Veterans are vastly overrepresented among those involved in family abuse, crime and drug addiction, and 30% of all homeless in this country are VietNam veterans. The negative impact on families, spouses and children is immense. Though our military budget remains a pork barrel for vested interests, funding for the treatment of vets is woefully inadequate--relying heavily on volunteer efforts. If all costs relating to the aftermath of a war were included in the initial projections, so called military solutions might be rejected on economic grounds alone.

As a veteran of the VietNam war 1968/69 and a veteran of the war at home thereafter, the Fellowship of Reconciliation's principles and vision have special significance. The sixties saying sums it up: "killing for peace is like making love for chastity". The ends are unavoidably shaped by the means employed. "The medium is the message" is another expression that comes to mind, which may help cut through the rhetoric of the propaganda mills designed to shield us from the realities of war. I will preface the attempt to convey the medium of VietNam war experience with a few examples of the unacknowledged or repressed side of WWII (the so called "good war"). There is a generic side of all modern warfare which is usually hidden from the public. The only exception has been VietNam, America's first television war. During the "good war" (and later in VietNam), Civilians were systematically targeted as in the fire bombings of Dresden, Tokyo, etc. and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. 92 American soldiers were executed in France for crimes against civilians. A former high school teacher and mentor was a member of a large unit with a special policy toward prisoners of war; all were summarily executed--some of the German soldiers were children barely 15 years of age. A common practice in the Pacific theater was the decapitation of Japanese soldiers; their heads were boiled and the skulls used as souvenirs.

In VietNam the summary execution of the wounded by US troops could be viewed on the 6 o'clock news. In the hamlet of My Lai, 500 men, women and children were slaughtered. Colonel Oran Henderson, charged with covering up the killings there, told reporters: "every unit of brigade size has its My Lai hidden someplace". Anthony Herbert, the army's most highly decorated soldier, was hounded out of the service after filing court-marshal proceedings against a murderer of civilians. Herbert didn't spell out the details but it may have been directed at the Major in charge at Landing Zone North English who executed 18 children as they picked over the garbage dump there.

Another veteran living in Connecticut plaintively explained to me why so many unarmed civilians were killed in his sector. He was a former Hitler youth who

served on the Russian front during WWII. His rationalizations were at times identical to those of soldiers I questioned in Bong Son following the shooting (without orders to do so), of unarmed civilians. One identical answer was: "we had to teach them a lesson". In early 1969 an incident of suspected racism was under investigation by the provost marshals office covering VietNam. African Americans were together on one end of the barracks, Whites on the other end. The Whites opened fire and all 15 African Americans were killed, accidentally, the Whites claimed. A soldier in Pleiku routinely ran down Montagnard tribes people, crushing them under the wheels of an earth mover en route to various camps. CIA's "Operation Phoenix" is credited with the summary execution of 20,000 civilians suspected of being members of the communist underground. A short cut method of execution was sometimes employed whereby the suspect was identified, his probable village location at a given time established, and the entire village napalmed accordingly. The "collateral damage" was given a positive spin when added to the "body count" of enemy killed.

Some ranking officers and NCO's tried very hard to stop the wanton rape, murder and pillage of civilians. However, the good image of the military was the top priority, and prosecution of war crimes would tarnish that image. Consequently there were no serious penalties meted out, and silence and coverup became the order of the day. The so called enemy did some of the same in their own way, to the best of their ability. In stark contrast to the heights of fancy and rhetoric that lead us into war, the prime motivator fueling the medium of war itself is revenge, so the killings and atrocities escalate on all sides. In any war zone, moral high ground becomes a mirage, murky swamps the everpresent reality. The military is an exceedingly blunt instrument--not a diplomatic tool. When we project all evil onto the other, the one noble battle (a confrontation and integration of our own shadow), is already lost. Whenever that spiritual battle is lost the familiar pattern is repeated. The relatively poor of one nation are (all too easily) persuaded to kill and maim the poor of another nation, resulting in a great profit for the few and an incalculable loss for our common humanity and environment.

Together, with a little faith, we can move that mountain of lies and deceptions, whose icy streams become the source of all those rivers of blood. As more and more rationalizations supporting war are exposed for what they always have been, the more realistic F.O.R.'s alternative appears. The Fellowship of Reconciliation statement of purpose includes the following: while seeking to develop resources of active nonviolence, F.O.R. members refuse to participate in any war or to sanction military preparations. Amen.