The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, Virginia

The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday, Year C.
10:00 a.m.
June 8, 2025

"A Soldier's Heart"

Words, words, words. We are plagued with words wherever we go. Pick up your phone, and before you even call someone, it is talking to you. Get in the car and it talks to you. I went to the library the other day with the hope of silence, and everyone was talking. You would expect a song called "The Sound of Silence" to be quiet, yet that classic is full of words and music. I have met people who love talking so much it is hard to get them to stop. You can actually walk away from them, and they keep babbling on and on, not realizing their audience is gone.

It seems that ever since God decided to speak the universe into being, people have been talking nonstop. According to the passage from Genesis, all of that talking put God on edge. The people of Babel had only one language and one set of words. They could understand each other so well that they devised a plan to build a tower that would reach the heavens. God came down from the heavens to have a peek and found the tower a problem. Then God confused their language, which put an end to the enterprise.

Of course, we should be clear that this story is an etiology. A story that explains the cause of something in a nice, neat way. Think of the fables, such as how the leopard got its spots. Rudyard Kipling was very adept at writing these. But he did not create the genre by any stretch of the imagination.

I wonder if God really needed to muddle our original language for us. Think about how often we are speaking to another native speaker of our language, only to be completely confused by the conversation. It happens in so many ways. Put a person from the Midwest, and person from the deep South, and a New Englander in the same room and listen as the confusion begins. Is it soda, pop, a soft drink, or a Coke? Is it a water fountain, drinking fountain, or a bubbler? Add English accents like Scouse, Cockney, and Geordie, and the confusion grows almost exponentially. As George Bernard Shaw said, "England and America are two countries separated by the same language!" I think that could apply to many more native speakers of English, including South Africans, Australians, Canadians, and New Zealanders.

Imagine trying to learn English as a second language. It is a minefield of words that mean one thing in a particular context and something different in another. There are *homophones,* words that sound alike but are not spelled alike and have different meanings (e.g., their, they're, there). *Homographs* are words spelled the same way but have different pronunciations and meanings (e.g., read/read, bass/bass). *Homonyms* are words that are spelled and pronounced the same but have different meanings (e.g., bark, right, palm, park).

I wonder if the writers of the Tower of Babel blamed God for mixing up their language when it was all their own doing. Once the Tower project started to fail, they went their separate ways in disgust, and as they did, their languages diverged even further.

It is not just the language and the way it evolves, it is also what seems to be the modern desire to make difficult subjects soft. We are especially averse to speaking of death, so much so that no one dies anymore. What started as a way to describe someone's spiritual journey of passing from this life to heaven has morphed to pass

away, pass on, or just pass. These euphemisms are used in secular contexts. Even self-proclaimed atheists are prone to this language.

One particular manner of sterilizing language is on my heart this weekend for two reasons. First is our recent observance of Memorial Day, when we remember those who died in military service to our country. The other is the 81st anniversary of D-Day on June 6th. The Allied invasion of Nazi occupied Europe that was part of the Great Crusade to liberate the continent from the plague of fascism. What these brought to mind is how we have sanitized and dehumanized the effects of combat on soldiers through words.

We are aware that people who experience combat may have physical wounds. It is the hidden wounds that have not always been recognized or treated. The oldest naming of these psychological injuries goes back to the Civil War, where the condition was known as “Soldier’s Heart.” There is something very compassionate about this name. It describes the affected aspect of the person without muddying it up with jargon. The trauma of battle wounds the soldier’s heart and mind in terrible ways.

World War I brought us the new and very blunt name of “Shell Shock.” Given the relentless artillery barrages characteristic of that war, it seems like an appropriate name. It carries the weight and sharpness of battle if not the compassion of Soldier’s Heart.

By World War II, Shell Shock, which may have been too shocking a description for noncombatants, was out. The new term was less descriptive and less distressing: “Battle Fatigue.” The soldier was tired of battle. I can well imagine most soldiers were battle-weary from the first encounter. But this description was easier for those at home to hear.

However, we were not done anesthetizing our language to the horrors of combat, whether in air, on land, or at sea. By the Vietnam War, it seemed that the one suffering from the stress of combat was no longer a person. They had become a psychiatric condition. The new name did not mention soldiers, shells, or battles. Instead of Soldier’s Heart, Shell Shock, or Battle Fatigue, people were now suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. A long description with nothing to suggest it was due to war or that there was the need for compassion. Just another coding option from the DSM-5.

We have learned a lot about confusing the language over the centuries. So much so that native speakers do not even understand each other. We do so to our own detriment. We shut away death instead of understanding it as a true part of life. We hide the wounds of military veterans, men and women, behind psychiatric jargon. We confuse our language so we do not have to deal with the reality of life.

I want those who have served our country to get the best medical care possible. If that means that we call it PTSD, so be it. I just think that we would be doing better by them and ourselves if we remembered that it is the Soldier’s Heart, the Sailor’s Heart, the Airman’s Heart, the Nurse’s Heart that suffers. Let us remember they carry unseen scars and unexplainable pain with them long after the battle is over. Instead of obfuscating with words, let us overcome our differences to provide quality care for their injuries, seen and unseen. Whatever language we speak, I hope that is something we can agree upon.