

EPIPHANY 5 B

1 Cor.9:16-19. 22-23

Emil Kapaun

Today's 65 million refugees – the largest number since World War 2 –
the horrific tortures and killings of ISIS and Hamas
who bury alive and crucify children,
the oppression in Ukraine, Korea and Africa,
religious persecution, ethnic cleansings, global suffering
and injustices, are massive and appalling.

Yet, against this background every tragedy, every age,
has its small voice of protest,
it's heroic resistance, it's determined love in a climate of hate,
it's ray of hope and time of despair.

Among the millions such unsung heroes, as an example of what goes on,
let me share the story of a brave man, a brave soldier,
a brave man, soldier, and priest, Father Emil Kapaun.

The son of Czech immigrants in a small town in Kansas,
Kapaun enlisted in the army during WW2
and was dispatched to the Southeast Asian theater of war,
where he soon gained a reputation for just appearing
wherever the fighting was.

He returned home, received a master's in education
from Catholic University and then went on to become
a parish priest in Pilsen Kansas. But it wasn't enough for him.

Kapaun re-upped for military service in 1948.

As a result, after the Communist invasion of South Korea,
he wound up being among the first American troops
who hit the beaches and pushed their way north
through hard mountains and bitter cold.

Then Chinese forces entered the war with a massive surprise attack –
perhaps 20,000 soldiers poured down on just a few thousand Americans.
In the chaos of dodging bullets and explosions,
Father Kapaun was seen racing between foxholes,
out past the front lines and into no-man's land,
dragging the wounded to safety.

When his commanders ordered evacuation, he chose to stay in Korea.
Kapaun resumed his constant presence under unbelievable hardship.
Even when enemy fire rendered his jeep inoperable,
he took to riding a bicycle along the front lines.

One of his fellow prisoners, Ray M. Dowe, Jr., later wrote
in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1954 about the chaplain's rides:

***“Helmet jammed down over his ears,
pockets stuffed with apples and peaches
he had scrounged from Korean orchards,
he'd ride this bone-shaker over the rocky roads
and the pass through the paddy fields
until he came to the forward outposts.***

***There he'd drop in a shallow hole behind a nervous rifleman,
crack a joke or two, and hand him a peach,
say a little prayer with him, and move to the next hole."***

It was no surprise that chaplain Kapaun was awarded the bronze star in Korea for heroism in August 1950 for running through enemy fire, dragging soldiers to safety.

But eventually he was captured uninjured by the Chinese military in 1950, after refusing to leave wounded soldiers. On one occasion, he pushed away the weapon of a Chinese soldier standing over an American with a broken ankle, and the two of them were taken on the Tiger Death March to a North Korean prisoner camp, Pyoktong, with Kapaun carrying the soldier for a time.

On that terrible march, when other prisoners stumbled he picked them up. When they wanted to quit – knowing that stragglers would be shot – he begged them to keep going.

Kapaun was inventive and tireless. He turned old shirts into bandages and snuck out to wash old bandages and old garments for the suffering. Among the dying, Captain Emil Kapaun traded his watch for a blanket at a North Korean prison camp – and cut the blanket up and made it into socks for fellow prisoners.

Among the men he was called ***"The Good Thief,"*** delivering stolen food

retrieved on trips inside guards' areas.

He recited American menus for starving prisoners,

and he led officers in ***"America, the Beautiful"***

and the national anthem ***"God Save the Queen"***

for Brits in the camp. He fixed leaking water pouches

with the burned down soles of rubber boots

and became, in general, a huge pain for the Chinese guards

trying to indoctrinate the prisoners.

When guards would ask, ***"Where is your God now?"***

he would reply, ***"Right here."***

The guards continued to ridicule his devotion to his Lord.

They took his clothes and made him stand in the freezing cold for hours.

Yet he never lost his faith. At night, he used to slip into huts

to lead prisoners in prayer, saying the rosary,

administering the sacraments by offering three simple words,

"God bless you." One of them later said that, with his very presence,

he could just for a moment turn a mud hut into a cathedral.

That spring, he held an Easter Service.

As the sun rose that Easter Sunday, he put on his purple stole

and led dozens of prisoners to the ruins of an old church in the camp.

And he read from a prayer missile that he had kept hidden.

He held up a small crucifix that he had made from sticks.

And as the guards watched, Father Kapaun and all those prisoners –

men of different faiths, perhaps some men of no faith –
sang the Lord's Prayer and ***“America the beautiful.”***

“That faith,” wrote one survivor, ***“that they might be delivered from evil,
that they could make it home, was perhaps the greatest gift
to those men; that even amid hardship and despair,
there could be hope, amid their misery in the temporal
they could see those truths that are eternal...”***

Looking back, one of them said that is what kept a lot of us alive.”

***He joked with the soldiers and said prayers for them,
and held them in his arms like children
as delirium came upon them,”***

Dowe wrote in 1954.

***“But the main thing he did for them was to put into their hearts
the will to live. For when you are wounded and sick and starving,
it's easy to give- up and quietly die.”***

Kapaun fell ill in the spring of 1951. Thin and frail, he began to limp
with a blood clot in his leg. And then dysentery, then pneumonia.

That's when the guards finally saw their chance to get rid of him.

They came for him over the protests of the men who loved him.

The guards sent him to the death house, a hellhole with no food or water
to be left to die of starvation. And yet even then his faith held firm.

“I'm going to where I've always wanted to go, he told his brothers.

And when I'm there I'll see a prayer for all of you."

And then, as he was taken away, he blessed the guards,

"Forgive them," he said, ***"for the no not what they do."***

Despite an apparently improved condition,

guards took him away to a dingy, dark building to die alone.

"Tell them back home that I died a happy death," he shouted.

Two days later, he died. His body was taken away, his grave unmarked,

his remains recovered but unknown until a DNA match.

On March 4, 2021, U.S. Senator **Jerry Moran**

and the Catholic **Diocese of Wichita**

confirmed the remains of Emil Kapaun had been identified.

On September 29, 2021, a Mass of Christian Burial was held

in Kapaun's home state of Kansas at the **Hartman Arena** in **Park City**.

Kapaun was declared a ***"servant of God"*** by the Catholic church,

considered a precursor to sainthood.

President Obama, on April 11th, 2013,

posthumously awarded Father Kapaun age 35, the Medal of Honor.

He said, ***"This is the valor we honor today –***

an American soldier who didn't fire a gun,

but who wielded the mightiest weapon of all,

a love for his brothers so pure that he was willing to die

so that they might live."

Among the wicked ones it's good now and then
to remember the quietly heroic lovers. Amen.