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Happy Veterans Day weekend, everybody. As is the case for many of you, I suppose, Veterans Day weekend is, for me, a time filled with mixed emotions. I am incredibly thankful for the men and women who – sometimes by their own choice, and sometimes despite their own choice – have served in the military at home and abroad. At the same time, my heart breaks as I consider all of the sons and daughters, moms and dads, brothers and sisters who – because of the violence of war – didn’t come home, or who returned broken and battered, and whose shattered lives and shattered families never became whole again.

Veterans Day traces its heritage back exactly 95 years, to a November morning in 1918, when “on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month” an armistice went into effect ending hostilities in Europe between the Allied Forces and Germany, thereby bringing an end to “The Great War”, the so-called “war to end all wars”, the war whose name eventually was downgraded simply to World War I. Time passed. And the “war to end all wars” didn’t prove to be the case. And so, in the aftermath of World War II in the 1940’s and the Korean War in the early 1950’s, the name of the holiday was changed by Congress in 1954 from Armistice Day to Veterans Day, as a day to recognize not just the veterans of The Great War, but to recognize all veterans of all ages.

I’ve been thinking of the various branches of the Armed Forces these past few days now – Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard – and I was reminded of the advertising campaign that the U.S. Army used for over 20 years, with the catchphrase recruiting slogan, “Army. Be all you can be.” It really was a

brilliant piece of marketing strategy which they developed. It said nothing about whether you were going to be an infantryman, or operate a computer, or drive a tank, or sit in an office somewhere filling out paperwork for eight hours a day, or manning some lonely outpost in the middle of the mountains in Afghanistan as a member of the U.S. Army. But it said everything about living into the potential, growing into the person, which you were truly meant to be. And, at least to me, it also implied a second message as well, that, wherever you find yourself in life, in terms of “being all you can be,” you’re not there yet.

This morning’s gospel lesson recounts one of those strange conversations Jesus sometimes found himself embroiled in with a group of religious scholars. It seems as though biblical fundamentalists – then, as now – would find some rather obscure mandate buried deep in the pages of the scriptures, and then twist that story around to justify an entirely different point of view which they were seeking to advocate. It’s exactly the same pattern of thought that lots of people still use to this day to twist the scriptures to defend their own personal view of reality.

In this morning’s case, they bring up an ancient tribal custom (ancient even in Jesus’ time) called levirate marriage. Thousands of years before Jesus, when the early Jewish community lived in small scattered family tribes, the custom of the day, as described in the 25th chapter of Deuteronomy, was that if a man and woman were married, and the man was to die without having fathered a child, the man’s brother was obligated to marry the woman, and her first child would legally be the child of her deceased first husband. Got all that? In this way, property rights and family genetic purity would be maintained... which, in these little family tribes was a pretty big deal.

So... in today's gospel, a group of scholars comes to Jesus with a question: Using this principle of levirate marriage, they present a rather outlandish proposition. "What would happen," they pose to Jesus, "if a man died childless... so the widow married his brother... and then he died childless... so she married the third brother... and he died... and the next one died... and the next one died... and so forth... until she had married and buried all seven brothers in the same family without having given birth a single child? (And this is when the scholars twist the meaning of the story.) "So" they ask, "... whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" First of all, the custom of levirate marriage has nothing to do with the resurrection. And secondly, these scholars assume that life in the hereafter is somehow just an extension of life in the here-and-now, as though nothing substantive had really changed. But Jesus will have none of their twisted logic and misuse of the scriptures. And so, to counter their own selective use of the scriptures, he applies his understanding of the great stories of his tradition to describe his own vision of the resurrection life.

Now, I've got to be honest with you. I don't have the faintest idea of what life is going to look like on the other side. Whether it is the image from the Book of Revelation of streets paved with gold, or whether it's puffy clouds and angels with gossamer wings, or (my personal favorite) whether it is more like St. Brigid's image of heaven as being a lake of beer, in the end it doesn't make a whole lot of difference to me. So Jesus and the Sadducees can go right on with their dueling images of paradise, and I'll just go along living my life the best that I can.

What does have a huge impact on my life right now, however, is Jesus' assertion that God "is not God of the dead, but of the living" – and that says a whole lot more to me about life today than it does about whatever might happen

down the road somewhere. It is a basic and fundamental statement about God's intent for all creation... an intent which might best be summed up in Jesus' words in the 10th chapter of John's gospel, when he proclaims, "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly."

The words of the old African American spiritual tell us: "I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world of woe. But there's no sickness, toil, or danger in that bright world to which I go." Those words may express a sentiment held by many of us, but I don't see much evidence of Jesus encouraging people to plod their way through this life, in the hope that there was something better waiting on the other side. It's not as though, in Jesus' mind, this world is merely a "dress rehearsal" for the real thing, the real life which awaits us in the great "bye and bye". In fact, just the opposite seems to be the case. Time and time again, Jesus' message is about life – lived to its fullest – in the here and now. It's about pushing through, breaking down, obliterating the roadblocks which death sets in our path, so that life, real life, full life can be found and celebrated and lived in its place. Jesus' question to each of us – across the miles and across the ages – is not whether there is life after death, but rather whether there is life after birth.

Back in 1999, a movie came out entitled *The Sixth Sense*. It told the story of a young boy named Cole, who had a particularly rare gift (if you can call it that)... he could see ghosts, he could see people who had died. In one interchange between the boy and his therapist, Cole describes this strange phenomenon. "I see dead people," Cole says.

"Dead people like, in graves? In coffins?" his therapist asks.
"Walking around like regular people," Cole responds. "They don't see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don't know they're dead."

“How often do you see them?” the therapist asks.

“All the time,” Cole says. “They’re everywhere.”

I’ve got a confession to make to you all this morning. I see dead people, too. No, not the kind of dead people that young Cole saw in *The Sixth Sense*. But I see people walking around every day who carry in their heads, and carry in their hearts, and carry in their bodies the cold reality of death. And the saddest part of it is that so many of those folks have confused the death they carry with life, and so have come to believe that “the way that it is” is just “the way that it is supposed to be.” You know these people too... people who carry with them the death of a hope, the death of a dream, the death of a relationship, the death of a vision, the death of their pride or their integrity or their dignity or their respect... and sometimes that death is so real you can see it, you can feel it, you can smell it when the person walks in the room. It is a kind of death which paralyses us; and stunts our development as people of God; and causes us to build walls between ourselves and others, and between ourselves and the world; and prevents us, in the words of that Army slogan that I talked about earlier, from “being all you can be.”

But living a life of faith is about believing that God has something different in store for us... not just later, but right now. It’s about believing that every day can be our best day; that the powers of darkness will not have the victory over the powers of light; that (while not denying the reality of death in our life) death will not have the final say over who we are and whose we are. As St. Paul wrote in his 1st letter to the Corinthians, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” Living the resurrection life is about believing that each of us and all of us can “be all we can be” as we live a life of grace.

It is into an awareness of that life of grace that we welcome Eden Fletcher this morning through the sacrament of baptism. It's not as though she isn't already loved by God, or that she doesn't already have a special place in the God's heart. But this morning, her baptism is a reminder to us all that ours is a God of the living, and that we are invited to experience that new life in all its fullness.

The invitation this morning is to push through whatever kind of death is confining us to "the world as it is", with the promise of new life awaiting us in "the world as it might be." The Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue once wrote: "In the western tradition, we were taught many things about the nature of sin, but we were never told that one of the greatest sins is the unlived life." So live life as fully as God has intended for you to live it; naming that death within yourself which is holding you back; and offering it to Jesus, who holds out his life-giving hand with his word of promise: "Ours is a God not of the dead, but of the living."