

No greater love

President Donald Trump often says things that invite criticism. So I'm puzzled when his critics bother to attack even his more innocent remarks.

The president is charged with insensitivity for saying to the widow of a fallen soldier that "he knew what he signed up for ... but when it happens, it hurts anyway."

I don't know whether he said exactly this, and if so in what manner. But it's what my wife and I told ourselves, and what friends said to us, after our son Thomas was killed in 2004. He was shot while providing cover fire for his Army comrades, as they confronted insurgents attacking police stations in Mosul, Iraq.

We meant that Thomas was not the random victim of some meaningless accident. He deliberately risked his life to protect others. He was a hero.

Our soldiers do know what they signed up for, before going into combat. They are given a questionnaire about their preferences for funeral arrangements in case they don't survive.

Thomas wanted to be buried at our local Catholic cemetery, not at Arlington, in a suit rather than a uniform. "The Army has me for five years, or until something happens to me," he told us. "But eternity is mine."

There are many arguments about why we send some of our finest young people to risk their lives in the Middle East. After 9/11, a reason that made sense to many was: We send them to draw the fire of the terrorists and return that fire, so the terrorists can't come here and kill thousands of innocent men, women and children. They lay their lives on the line for others.

This ran through my mind when I read about a recent court decision, claiming that a Peace Cross near my old neighborhood in Maryland is an unconstitutional "establishment of religion." The cross memorializes 49 local men killed in World War I. It is part of a memorial park that has clearly secular symbols, but is set apart in the middle of a traffic circle and is the tallest monument.

In a 2-to-1 decision, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said this cross illegally uses public land to teach Christianity. The court demands that it be removed, or (I'm not kidding) that the arms be chopped off to make it an obelisk.

Maybe the court didn't know that obelisks were symbols of an ancient Egyptian religion, worshipping the sun god Ra. Or that the world's most famous obelisk stands in (gasp) St. Peter's Square in Rome. (The Washington Monument doesn't count — it's made of many stones, and genuine obelisks are of one piece.)

But the important question is: What does the cross symbolize that makes it appropriate for war memorials — even for the fallen who may not be Christians?

The answer seems obvious. Jesus is the pre-eminent example of a “man for others.” He loved children, humble sinners and the poor; he challenged the “powers that be,” and was crucified for it as he predicted. He knew what he signed up for.

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (Jn 15:13). Jesus taught this, and lived by it. Christians additionally believe he died for all our sins, and triumphed over death in his resurrection.

But his saying is invoked at funerals of any religion or none — for fallen soldiers, and others (missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, police officers, firefighters) who pay the ultimate price while helping others. In this broad, deeply human sense, they are “Christ figures.”

Perhaps other judges will realize this when the case is appealed.

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