

May 29, 2021
Exodus 3:1-12
Acts 2:17
John 15:5-17

“We here resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain”:
Reflections on Memorial Day

The celebration of Memorial Day began in the very first few years following the Civil War; when women of the South started the tradition of laying flowers upon the graves of those who had died. As you may know, the civil war was one of the most devastating wars in our country’s history. The total number of those who died, or were wounded or left bereaved is incalculable. Abraham Lincoln once lamented that it would be entirely appropriate for “the heavens themselves to be hung in black.” (Shenk 2005:203)

When I come to the task of preaching on Memorial Day Sunday, it is always with a heavy heart. For war troubles my soul. I am not sure if there is such a thing as a “*just war*”? Can war ever be “justified?” Maybe. *Maybe*. And It well may be that you and I would not answer that question in the same way. But the older I get, the more I realize that human life- all human life- is precious and precarious . And death – any death – falls heavy upon my heart and soul.

On a few occasions, I’ve had the opportunity to participate in a funeral service at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington D.C., where now well over 400,000 veterans have been laid to rest. As far as the eye can see, across acres and acres of simple white crosses, lies a veritable ocean of grief and loss. It is a staggeringly shocking and humbling sight; representing the toll of sacrifices made in service to this country. The number of soldiers and seamen who have died, in total, in our nation’s wars is now nearly a million.

The task of Memorial Day, it seems to me, is to honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice - gave their very life - **believing** that their service was given for the betterment of humankind - some purpose larger than themselves.

Remember these words from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address?

“We have come to dedicate a portion of this field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that this nation might live....They gave their last full measure of devotion that we here might highly resolve that those dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

It is an awesome responsibility – to honor such sacrifice. The legacy left to us, is– in the largest sense of the word- this nation itself. And what are we to say about this legacy – now? That’s what I’d like you and I to ponder together this morning – with the help of our guests.

We have come through - are still moving through - a challenging and disheartening time in our nation’s history. Over 600,00 people have died in a pandemic that has savaged us as a nation in much the same way as a war. It left an incalculable number of people grieving. It exposed gross inequities in our health care system– and in our educational and social structures. It has exacerbated the disparity between the rich and the poor - a disparity that grows more desperately

crippling with each passing day. Our political structures have been rocked by the most severe divisiveness and alienation imaginable. Politicians elected to office find accord nearly unmanageable. Truth is daily, in the words of an old hymn, “on the scaffold” There are scholars who think that democracy itself is “on the scaffold” as well – its future in jeopardy.

Not long ago, David Brooks, in an editorial in the New York Times, said that we are a country whose very birth is steeped in the Exodus narrative. We were founded by a people who sought freedom from oppressive systems, and who journeyed into the unknown in hopes of creating a better world. This is our “over-arching narrative.” Our forefathers sought to create a social politic that was true to the Christian values they held dear. Lord knows there were massive failures even early on in our history. But creating a “promised land” has always been about an engagement in faith and hope, honor, trust and truth. And while the promised land has surely never been actualized in America, it is the worthy and noble goal toward which we still strive- or so I hope. Reclaiming that “story” is the path to honoring the legacy of those who gave their very lives for a vision of a land of promise and purpose, equity and peace.

We have been fortunate here in this church community to work alongside some very good partners in faith as we try to build the kind of world we feel called to build. And while I admit the tasks ahead of us are daunting, I’d like you to hear some of the stories of the work they are doing – and we, as a church, are supporting. Our hope is that as we move out of this time of pandemic, we will, **each of us**, find the will to engage in some of the work that lies ahead.

- [Remarks by Frida Berrigan who works with the organization called FRESH in New London.]
- [Remarks by Jim Crawford who works with the HOPE partnership for affordable housing.]
- [A reflection by Cathy Zall, director of the Homeless Hospitality Center in New London. Cathy formerly served this church as Associate Minister for a number of years.]

Thank you, Frida. Thank you, Jim. And thank you, Cathy.

Four days before Martin Luther King was cut down by an assassin’s bullet in Memphis, he preached a sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. As we draw near to the end of our sermon time, I’d like to give Dr. King “the floor”...

“We are tied together in a single garment of destiny; caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way we are structured....

(He continued...) Human progress never rolls on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be coworkers with God...

(We need people of good will) to put their bodies and their souls in motion. And that will be the kind of **soul force** that will make the difference.” (MLK: April 4, 1968 at the National Cathedral)

This church community has a goodly record of being a *soul force for change* in the world. It's the vision that drives us forward. It's the story that drives us forward - hallowed by the loss of a million lives –and by countless sacrifices. It's the *soul force* that will enable us to say...

“They did not die in vain.” Amen.