

Memorial Day Weekend  
"Remember!"  
Psalm 77:11-15; II Peter 1:12-15  
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On May 30, 1868, more than three years after the Civil War had ended, children all over America picked wild flowers and placed them on the graves of fallen soldiers. In towns and cities from Nantucket to Sacramento, governors and generals gave speeches extolling the bravery and self-sacrifice demonstrated on both sides of that conflict. Amid the brass bands and cannon fire, ministers gave thanks for the abolition of slavery and a reunited nation while searching for God's purpose behind the deaths of 620,000 men. In Washington, they wore mourning scarves and decorated the graves of unknown soldiers who had died at the Battle of Bull Run. Four thousand citizens marched to the National Cemetery in Richmond and marked each of 7,000 graves with a miniature American flag. In Baltimore, disabled veterans witnessed ceremonies from horse-drawn wagons. "Every hero was honored and every grave had its share of flowers," reported a citizen of Illinois. It was our first Memorial Day.

Tomorrow, our most CURRENT Memorial Day, some will visit the local cemetery and decorate graves much as they had on that first one. Speeches will be given, gun salutes fired off, and some local minister will rise to administer the benediction, marking the official end of the ceremony- I, for one, have been a part of many such occasions over the years. For others, the day will be spent shopping, planting tomatoes, playing golf, mowing the lawn, and firing up the barbecue. As the unofficial beginning to summer, they'll be content to let others mourn and remember for their focus will be more on living than on death.

Of course, the purpose of memorials and Memorial Day celebrations are really not for the benefit of those who died but rather for OURSELVES. By hearing their stories and sharing their memories, we gain a front row seat to the triumph of the human spirit. We learn how ordinary human beings can accomplish the most extraordinary feats of courage in the face of the most overwhelming challenges. Such courage can often be found in the most unexpected places. When I was pastor of Old First in downtown Syracuse, New York, one of my dearest friends there was also one of the meekest, most mild persons you could ever meet. I've never heard him utter a negative comment about anyone much less a curse word in the almost twenty years we've known each other. Yet during the Second World War, he was so desperate to get into the Army that he lied about his age, telling the recruiter he was 18 when in fact he was only 16 years old. Not long afterwards, he was sent to England where he participated in the D-Day invasion of France. It was therefore appropriate that on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day Landing—June 6, 2004--I had him share his military exploits and the lessons he had learned from them from our church's pulpit. But his military experience didn't end there for immediately after Europe was liberated in May of 1945, he was then shipped half-way around the world to the South Pacific where he helped end the war against Japan. Over dinner one evening, I made the simple suggestion that as an eyewitness to such events, younger generations needed to hear his personal

stories. Therefore, would he consider contacting some of the local schools and sharing them. Sure enough, he followed through on it and now this quiet, unassuming man spends many of his days visiting local classrooms throughout the Syracuse area, sharing his story with children about one of history's most important events.

During the years I served as a pastor in Waterloo, Iowa, a beautiful new Iowa Veterans' Museum was built and dedicated there. Waterloo was chosen as the site because it was also the home of "the Fighting Sullivans"- the five brothers who all perished together when the U.S.S. Juneau was sunk by a Japanese U-Boat during the battle of Guadalcanal in World War II. They actually grew up just a few blocks behind my church and so there is a strong reminder of patriotism throughout that city. Not long after it opened, Rose, our son Michael (who had just enlisted in the Navy), and I took a tour of it. As we walked through the various exhibits and read the stories of Iowans and their participation in America's conflicts from the Civil War right up to the present, it hit me how there must always be some causes, some ideals worth fighting for, even if by doing so, it may cost us our lives. There must be SOME things in life so important that we'd be willing to die in order to protect them, or else life is diminished and has very little significance for us. There must be some rights, some principles SO basic such as a right to freedom and self-determination, a right to some quality of life and a right to civil justice, that we'd be willing to risk our own lives to safeguard them because the alternative would be so much WORSE.

But if the heroism and sacrifice of our military men and women help teach us some of life's greatest lessons about ourselves and the human spirit, it is ALSO important to remember that by honoring them as we do, we find OURSELVES inspired to CONTINUE the fight and thus FINISH the work they had begun. Lincoln expressed as much in his Gettysburg Address when he said:

*The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these 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.*

What Lincoln was saying was that commemorating the dead involves far more than just festooning City Hall with bunting, calling out the big brass bands, putting little flags on each grave, and then delivering flowery speeches about the bravery of those men who died on battlefields across the world. No, it was more imperative for those STILL living to REMEMBER in order that they might be STIRRED to action, that they might be INSPIRED to complete the noble task begun by those who had gone before which for Lincoln was to preserve the Union and return to those ideals in which our nation stood and was originally founded upon. Only in THAT way do we honor the memories of those who died.

In a sense, our New Testament lesson for this morning is PETER'S Gettysburg Address. Like Lincoln, he is speaking about the importance of memory and of remembering. He says three times in three verses that they are to "remember" the truths they were established in for it is by REMEMBERING that they now belong to God and are each members of Christ's body, REMEMBERING the doctrines and truths they were first taught that they'll be able to remain strong in the face of persecution and to challenge those who would pervert the truth for their own benefit. It is the duty of Christians everywhere to remain firmly founded in the faith. This will enable them to grow in grace and in the personal knowledge of Jesus Christ which will, in turn, allow them to complete the task to which they were called which is propagating the Good News of Christ's kingdom and promoting his righteousness throughout the earth. Through his preaching and teaching, the author hopes to "stir the early church to remembrance" about the love and grace of Jesus Christ for he knows that the moment the church FORGETS, all manner of spiritual death and decay would enter in.

"Remembering" has been Bible's prescription since the very beginning. Over and over again, God told the Israelites to "remember" his covenant with them for that was the one guarantee of his faithfulness and their blessing. He said repeatedly, "Remember how I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The Exodus, the Israelites flight from Egypt, was the single most central event in all their history and to FORGET that would be to forget that God was their help and salvation. In the New Testament, the disciples received the SAME word of instruction- to "remember." In Jesus, we see one who was always reaching out to the poor, the sick, the alienated, the disinherited, the fearful, the lonely. He was their friend and he opened up his arms to them, enlisting them in his ministry. He incorporated them into his spiritual fellowship, the church, where they were welcomed and accepted, not on the basis of who they were or what they had done, but what they could BECOME as faithful followers of Christ. He filled them with his Spirit and promised he would never abandon nor forsake them, that he would accompany them even unto the ends of the earth. He made them feel that they never had to be anxious or lonely again. However, they were to always "REMEMBER" this and not forget it. This is why in the Lord's Supper, Jesus instructed his disciples that they were to always celebrate it "in remembrance of him."

The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that my PRIMARY responsibility as a minister of Jesus Christ is to actively remind us all again and again what he has done for us and what this thus means for our lives. No other duty is GREATER- not presiding over meetings, not counseling church members over their problems, not going to the hospital or visiting our shut-ins, not performing weddings or presiding over funerals, not representing our church in the community- although I do ALL these things and LOVE doing them. Rather, it is to "stir you to remembrance," to help remind you who has pledged his eternal love and support to you in any and every circumstance and situation and, what's more, that he promises never to leave or forsake you- EVER! I can't think of a finer definition of preaching than "stirring you to remember." It is NOT the fine art of keeping people entertained for twenty minutes on a Sunday morning, nor is it trying to sound clever by coming up with new and creative ideas to maintain wandering attention spans week after week. Rather, the TRUE purpose of preaching is to STIR YOUR MEMORY. It is to help of us ALL remember who we are in Jesus Christ and of

those truths we were first grounded in if we are ever to grow into the kind of person God desires us to become. I cannot emphasize this enough- that my number one responsibility is to REMIND you week after week of God's love through Jesus Christ and what he has done for you, while YOUR primary responsibility is to REMEMBER. That is one thing I cannot do for you- I can REMIND you but I cannot REMEMBER for you as only YOU can do that for yourself. In this way, EVERY SUNDAY thus becomes its own "Memorial Day" for us.

ONE MORE TIME, I cannot emphasize it more strongly, that pure and simply the essence of the Christian life lies in our "remembering." We are to "stamp it behind our eyeballs" as one seminary professor of mine liked to say. This is why we PRAY, so that we not only can talk to God, our Heavenly Father, but so he can remind us of how much we are cared for and how closely he holds US to his heart. This is why we STUDY THE BIBLE, because it reminds us of the promises of God and of his pledge of faithfulness to each one of us. And this is why we GATHER FOR WORSHIP on Sunday mornings, so we might not only tell God how much we love HIM but so we might be reminded how even MORE is his constant love for US!

And the REASON we are exhorted to "remember" is because it is so darn easy for us to "FORGET!" It is so easy for us to become so overwhelmed with problems and cares and difficulties and just tending to our day-to-day responsibilities that we eventually "forget" who it is that "walks with us and talks with us and who tells us that we are his own." Without being intentional about remembering, we can soon find ourselves drifting away from him and not even REALIZING it, the same way a boat will slowly drift away from its mooring as the tide goes in and out if it is not securely tied to the dock. In time, we may eventually forget he is there for us ENTIRELY, even forget he is within us and in whatever happenstance we may presently find ourselves in. Likewise, without intentionally remembering, we can find ourselves slowly drifting away from his CHURCH, from our much-needed fellowship with other members of Christ's body and all the resources that are a part of her--her teachings, her sacraments, and her missionary activity--so that we no longer feel we even NEED the church in our lives. I know first-hand what a terrible scourge Alzheimer's is for I witnessed my own mother slowly recede into that unforgiving fog of total forgetfulness. Well how much MORE tragic is it to be afflicted with SPIRITUAL Alzheimer's- that is, to no longer remember who we are as members of God's household: to forget that God is our father and Jesus Christ our brother and that through his Church we are now brothers and sisters to one another; or that by his Spirit, he has taken up residency within us to make our heart his new home. Can there ever be anything more tragic or much sadder than to FORGET something so vital as THAT?

Therefore, on this Memorial Day weekend, as we take time out to remember those brave men and women who lost their lives so that WE might enjoy those basic ideals of freedom, peace, and justice, may we ALSO stop to remember how we are children of God and loved by him with an everlasting love; REMEMBER how he has forgiven us and called us into a personal relationship with himself; REMEMBER how he has filled us with his Holy Spirit to journey with us wherever we go; REMEMBER how he has incorporated us into his Body- the Church, the most wonderful family anyone could possibly ask for; and REMEMBER how when our time on earth is over, he promises to escort us into a whole NEW life where sickness and sorrow and

death are no more. So let us remember, my friends- REMEMBER! REMEMBER!  
REMEMBER! For if we do, then EVERY DAY may truly become a Memorial Day WORTH  
remembering. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, forgive us all for being so lackadaisical in our Christian  
lives, for taking your grace for granted and not being vigilant enough about it. Help us to  
“remember” how your love for us is constant and that you never leave our side. Keep us from  
becoming so overwhelmed with our own problems and duties that we shove you into the back of  
our minds and you eventually become an afterthought to us. Help keep us close to you. In the  
name of your Son Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*