

“Remembrance Moves Toward Peace”
May 26, 2024

II Samuel 1:17-27
John 15:9-17

This weekend we turn our thoughts in earnest toward summer. Our numbers are fewer today, as some have left for the weekend, some for the months ahead.

As we turn, I would ask that we pause at least briefly to remember the men and women who have died in war, recalling their sacrifice even as fighting and dying continue around the world.

There are varying accounts of the origin of Memorial Day in the United States. One says that the first official Memorial Day was held in Carbondale, IL, in May of 1868. General John Logan, fondly remembered in song by those of us from the eastern side of the Mississippi, issued an official proclamation after soldiers were inspired when they saw a widow bringing flowers to decorate a Civil War grave at nearby Crab Orchard cemetery.

As a graduate of Southern Illinois University with family roots in southern Illinois, I’m sticking with that story.

Memorial Day does raise some problems for me as one who preaches—especially as one who did not serve in the military—and not for reasons of conscience but simply because of a high lottery number. Some of this difficulty is given voice by Randy Quinn, who is both a veteran and a Navy chaplain.

Quinn writes that as a veteran, he is frustrated by the way we celebrate Memorial Day. It seems to have lost its meaning. Our celebrations have lost their connection with the purpose of the holiday. And any attempts to have a serious celebration seem trite. So, in many places, there are no more parades. There are no more special worship services. There are no special tributes made to the men and women who gave their lives for our country.

As a pastor, on the other hand, he says that he is even more frustrated by people who insist that we should make this national holiday the focus of our Sunday morning worship service on Memorial Day weekend. Our task as the church is not to memorialize the dead, but to celebrate the resurrection. Our task is not to look at what men and women have done to give us freedom but to look at what God is doing to make us free. Our purpose in gathering here today is to offer ourselves to God in response to what God has done for us, it is to look towards God for direction and guidance.

We might find a way forward if we recall the hope that grew out of war.

Four years after John Logan issued the first Memorial Day Proclamation, Julia Ward Howe, who had boldly proclaimed, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” sought to establish a Mother’s Day for Peace on June 2 of each year. She envisioned, not the marking of graves but the end of the wars that led to such graves, saying: “Our husbands shall not come to

us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience. We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.” The one who heard God sound “forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat” concluded: “The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.”

Howe’s strong words were not taken to heart.

Her bold vision was not realized.

And yet, the current United States law that makes Memorial Day a holiday actually frames it as a day on which the people of the United States are called upon to “unite in prayer for permanent peace.”¹ As troubled as I am by our government calling us to pray for anything, even peace, I hear a note of hope in this. This statute gets at the real nature of Memorial Day. This day calls us to turn away from our preoccupation with war and death toward the future of peace that God calls on us to make.

We should not turn too quickly, however.

We need to remember, even to lament with David, those who have fallen.

In the Civil War: Over 360,000 Union soldiers dead in the fight for freedom.

In WWI: Those who fought alongside our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents—116,000 American soldiers dead.

In WWII: Again, those who fought alongside our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents: 405,000 American soldiers dead.

In the Korean conflict: 37,000 American soldiers dead.

In the Vietnam War: 58,000 American soldiers dead.

In the Persian Gulf war: 375 American soldiers dead.

In Afghanistan: 4,500 American soldiers dead.

In Iraq: Also over 4,500.

The statistics overwhelm.

As in all wars, some were just teenagers. Many were poor.

The poet Lawrence Binyon tells of their fate—and ours:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

It is right that we, who grow older with the passing years, remember them. “While we grow weary with the pressures of living, while we grow weary with remembrance and the recalling of past horrors, and the lessons still unlearned,” while we grow weary with seeking peace, it is right that we remember them.

Let us in silence remember with David how those who have fallen.

(Silence)

How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

An older member of the first congregation I served, who was a Major in World War II and a Purple Heart recipient, let me read his wartime diary, in which he described the weapons of war. On the first page he wrote in capital letters: “WAR IS DEVASTATING.” You’d think that would have made the point. But in case it didn’t, he continued, perhaps for the sake of noncombatants like me and many of you here today.

War is infantry troops crawling around seeking to kill each other with rifles, hand grenades, and mortars.

War is artillery where forward observers on high hills look for targets they can destroy with cannon shells.

War is bombing with airplanes where bombs destroy cities and anti-aircraft guns destroy airplanes and their pilots.

War is the cause of sad and sorrowful families where mothers are raising children by themselves because “Dad” will not be coming home. (And of course there is the contemporary reality that “Mom” will not make it back as well.)

The “weapons of war” that David lamented, one Old Testament scholar tells us, were Saul and Jonathan themselves. The weapons of war are not rifles, hand grenades, mortars, cannon shells, and bombs. The weapons of war are troops, forward observers, pilots, and others.

Remember.

Remember that the weapons of war have perished.

The Christian hope moves us from death to life, from war to peace, from hatred to love. The risen Christ meets us in our grief, in our anger but does not leave us there. Jesus calls his disciples to a way of love even when the world would hate us.

Chris Hedges once spoke about war and friendship, asking that we “Think finally of what it means to die for a friend. It is deliberate and painful; there is no ecstasy. For friends, dying is

hard and bitter. The dialogue they have and cherish will perhaps never be recreated. Friends do not, the way comrades do, love death and sacrifice. To friends, the prospect of death is frightening. And this is why friendship or, let me say love, is the most potent enemy of war.”

We are those whom Jesus calls his friends. This weekend, and every day, let us keep our eyes on the Living One. This weekend, and every day, let us pray for peace. This weekend, and every day, let us, as friends of Jesus, live lives that bring the peace of the living Christ to our church, our community, our nation, and to our war weary world.

In some strange way, the memories give life.

The memory of war dead leads, not to a brassy patriotism, but to a deeper commitment to peace.

As we turn our thoughts to summer this weekend, let us remember—so that we might be ever more dedicated to the pursuit of peace and the preservation of our democracy in the challenging days of the summer and fall ahead.

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Section 169g. Memorial Day as day of prayer for permanent peace--

"The President is authorized and requested to issue a proclamation calling upon the people of the United States to observe each May 30, Memorial Day, by praying, each in accordance with his religious faith, for permanent peace; designating a period during such day in which all the people of the United States may unite in prayer for a permanent peace; calling upon all the people of the United States to unite in prayer at such time; and calling upon the newspapers, radio stations, and all other mediums of information to join in observing such day and period of prayer."