

REMEMBRANCE AND LOVE
Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches
May 24, 2009
John 15: 9-17 and 1 John 4:11-16

This is Memorial Day weekend, the weekend that traditionally marks the end of school and the beginning of summer. Memorial Day has also been known as Decoration Day, the day dating back to the years after the Civil War when the graves of the dead would be cleaned up and decorated by family members. This weekend is a somber time of remembering those who have given their lives that we might continue to live in a free land.

I remember growing up in a small town and marching in the annual Memorial Day parade with our paper poppies. The festive parade began at the town square and ended in the small hilly cemetery where we placed flowers and flags on the graves of those who died in service to their country with bagpipes accompanying us the whole route. At the cemetery, a minister would offer a prayer, an American Legion official would say a few words about duty, heroism and sacrifice, the local Army reserve would dispatch several men to fire rifles in the air, and then a local trumpet player would play taps. In looking back, I realize that our remembering can be healing and redemptive.

In a very thoughtful piece from a special Memorial Day edition of Time Magazine 2000 that I have saved, Roger Rosenblatt wrote about how we remember the tragic events of our nation and how the process of remembering helps us to heal. Rosenblatt described the striking Oklahoma City Memorial that honors the 168 men, women and children who died in the bombing of the Alfred B. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. As some of you have seen, there is a bronze chair for each of the victims, each one with a name on it. Rosenblatt describes how thousands of people visit and become quiet: some look for a particular chair; others stroll reflectively through the rows. Rosenblatt asks, “What uses does one make of the past when it comes to the exercise of evil? How confident can one be when saying, ‘never again?’ Is it ever possible to relieve the terrible gaping absence that death creates?” Rosenblatt argues that from Viet Nam to Oklahoma City, America’s new memorials help us come to terms with our tragic past.

Although Rosenblatt’s insightful article was written before 9/11 and before the opening of the World War II monument, his poignant words continue to remind us of the power of remembering. When we visit these hallowed grounds, we become a little more centered in our identity as Americans, a little more humbled by the mixture of evil and good that has defined our human story from the beginning, and a lot more inspired by those of us who have given their lives that we may live more freely and more fully than most of our world’s inhabitants. My daughter, Katherine and I visited Ground Zero a few years ago before it was completed and I heard about a group’s

efforts to preserve the famous stair case in one of the World Trade Center towers and make it a part of the memorial being planned at Ground Zero. A woman said that this staircase, which brought many to their death as well as enabled many to escape, is a powerful symbol of what survived the wreckage of September 11th and is a stark and humbling reminder of the evil and heroism of that infamous day.

The Time Magazine article, described how our nation remembers some of its most painful experiences: Gettysburg, Iwo Jima, Oklahoma City, Columbine High School, and now September 11th. Professor Ed Linenthal of the University of Wisconsin observes that our memorials and monuments are places of civic transformation and that when we visit our public memorials, we come away as changed people, having experienced something human and sacred in the present in the midst of the pain of the past.

As I was writing this sermon yesterday and asking Kyle and the kids to describe for me their experiences from the times they have visited our country's memorials, Kyle reminded me of when he took Elliot to see the newly finished Oklahoma City memorial. Kyle said this, "Elliot was five or six at the time and we were in Oklahoma City for a baseball tournament. The memorial had just opened and I had spent a long time explaining to Elliot what had happened in this place. We walked around for about an hour looking at the chairs and reading the names and just before we left, Elliot squatted down in an area where children were allowed to write messages or draw pictures

with chalk and with a piece of chalk, Elliot drew a big cross.” Memorial Day itself as well as the monuments of tribute that we have erected through the years remind us that there is something about who we are that wants to remember, something that reminds us, as we reflect back, of the preciousness of life in general and the great purposes of our lives as individuals.

As we remember all those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country on this Memorial Day Sunday, I choose to read last week’s lectionary reading from the Gospel of John where Jesus said to his dear friends shortly before he died: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.”

In a sermon entitled, “No Greater Love,” the Rev. John Buchanan said this about this powerful scripture passage, “Jesus said these words to his disciples on the very night he was betrayed and arrested, the night before he was crucified. They were at the table of the Last Supper and as he sensed the crisis, the closeness of danger, the possibility of the end, it was time for a summing up. The Biblical scholars call the material in the 13th through 17th chapters of John, the Farewell Discourses. Jesus has been talking about the centrality of love and it’s a new way of thinking about God and religion and faith actually. God is love, John will write elsewhere. Not God is power. Not God is judge or God is all-knowing, but God is love. It is the very essence of God to act lovingly and those who abide in

love, abide in God. Those who find ways to express God's love in their own lives, actually live as close to God as it is possible to live.” (From the sermon archives of The Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, May 28, 2000---fourthchurch.org))

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” Jesus left the upper room that night and did just that---he laid down his life for his friends then and for his friends now. When Jesus sent his disciples out into the world and gave them this most radical definition of love, he made clear that we are all called to be not just consumers of God's love but also providers of the love that claims us and sustains us. Jesus never intended the disciples or us to think of the Christian faith as a status symbol in our politics, in the business world or in our social circles. To do so is to miss the point of how Jesus sends us out into the world to love and to serve others, a point that we are humbly reminded of on this Memorial Day.

In his book, **Desire of the Everlasting Hills, The Time Before and After Jesus**, Thomas Cahill observes that one of the insights of the great Jewish prophets was that suffering has redemptive possibilities. In a way none of us can understand God, who does not cause suffering, shares it with us and can somehow use it for purposes that are ultimately good. He quotes Martin Luther King Jr. who said not long before his own assassination, “I have come to believe that unmerited suffering is redemptive.” Somehow God uses suffering for purposes that exceed our ability to understand.

What else, after all, can we say about this one who goes obediently to the cross, than that his suffering is for our salvation, that by his stripes we are healed, that he laid down his life for his friends and that somehow God uses that to make us more human, to make us more loving, to heal us and redeem us and make us more whole, to save our souls?”

I don't know about you, but I have missed Tim Russert's voice, intellect, humor and humanity in the mix of news and politics since his untimely death last June. Tim Russert was the moderator of NBC's Meet the Press for many years as well as a very fair political analyst and commentator. On Friday night as I was thinking about him, I picked up his first book, **Big Russ and Me, Father and Son: Lessons of Life** and found a priceless experience from Tim Russert's life which beautifully illustrates the redemptive qualities of both suffering and love.

Tim Russert said, “It was not until 1980, when I was thirty, that I really began to understand how my father's generation had affected the course of history. I was working in Washington when I was offered a fellowship to visit Europe for five weeks. I wasn't sure that I could spare the time, but my boss encouraged me and finally insisted that I go. I had never been overseas, and except for my father during the war and my ancestors who were born there, nobody in my family had ever been to Europe. When I arrived in Germany, I decided to visit Dachau, the site of the notorious concentration camp, not far from Munich. As much as I had learned

about World War II, and about the Holocaust, nothing prepared me for what I saw and felt at Dachau. The remnants of the camp were still there, including the barracks, the gas chambers, and the ovens where the bodies were burned.

Suddenly, another visitor, a short, older man, came running up to me. He threw himself at my knees, grabbed my ankles, and started sobbing. Then he stood up and started talking to me in Polish, of which I understood not a word, except for 'American,' over and over again. I nodded yes. Then a woman came over and began to translate. This man was a Jew who had been a prisoner at Dachau, when it was liberated by the Americans. He had come back to visit for the first time in thirty-five years, and when he saw me, looking like an American, he was overcome with grief and gratitude. Over and over he kept saying, 'Thank you, America. Thank you, America.' He was crying. I was crying, and so were the other tourists who had gathered around us. He led me to a marker where one of the buildings had been, and he motioned for me to take his picture there.

It was hard to believe what had actually happened at Dachau, and being there did not make it any easier. But my encounter with this survivor, the embrace of this man who was liberated and saved from certain death, touched me to my core. I thought of my father all of the other young Americans who went overseas in World War II to save the world from the tyrannical Nazi regime. When I returned to Munich, I went straight to the post office, and for the first time in

my life, I placed an overseas call. I wanted to tell Dad what I had just experienced and I wanted to thank him for going to war.” (Pages, 18-20.)

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.”

Distinguished New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown said that the deeper you go into this text, the more the words love and life become interchangeable. “One of the great distinguishing characteristics of Christianity is here in the example of giving life away.” (**The Gospel of John, Vol. 2**, p.682)

John Buchanan shares these insights, “What Jesus wanted desperately for his disciples to hear was the word he had come to believe that was the reason for his own being: that the whole creation is full of God’s love, that the human race is the expression of God’s love, that all the religious ritual and rules and liturgies and institutions in the world are for the purpose of acknowledging and expressing gratitude for God’s love and that the highest, most noble purpose of religion and our humanity is to be recreated by that love and to join God in the adventure of living that love and abiding in that love.

If you want to save your life, you have to, in some way lose your life. If you want to be happy, you have to forget about your

happiness and work for someone else's happiness. If you want meaning and satisfaction and fulfillment, you have to find a way to pour out your life. That is the great Christian secret and it is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples, 'You are my friends. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.'"

In Ronald Reagan's speech at the Berlin Wall in 1982, he told the story of a man who received the Congressional Medal of Honor after his death and the heroism that makes us all more human. A B-17 bomber was flying back across the English channel badly shot up by anti-aircraft fire. The ball turret that hung beneath the belly of the plane had taken a hit and was jammed. They couldn't get the ball turret gunner out while they were flying, and he was wounded. Out over the channel the plane started to lose altitude. The skipper ordered the men to bail-out, and as the men started to leave the plane, the boy in the ball turret knew he was being left to go down with the plane. The last man to leave the plane saw the captain sit down on the floor and take the young boy's hand, and he said, "Never mind son, we'll ride it down together."

"No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

As we remember all those who have given the ultimate sacrifice, may we understand more clearly the secret of losing our life in order to save it. As we hear Jesus' powerful words about love and

friendship and service, may we be humbled by the significance of giving life away in order to find a meaningful way that serves redemptive and healing purposes in our world. On this Memorial Day weekend may we remember those who have given their lives in service to their country and may we find ways in the living of our days to give life and love away that we might all become more whole.

Jesus said: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.
AMEN

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Gracious and Loving God, we gather in this place on this Memorial Day weekend to worship You and to give special thanks for men and women who through the years have given their life in service to their country. We are thankful for the values, integrity, faith, freedom and life lessons we have received from what they have sacrificed. We are grateful for how God uses suffering and the sacrificial giving away of life for purposes that exceed our ability to understand. Memorial Day, and the monuments of tribute that have been erected in our country through the years, remind us that there is something about who we are that wants to remember, something that reminds us, as we reflect back, of the preciousness of life in general and the great purposes of our lives as individuals.

We are thankful for reminders in our everyday lives of our human connectedness to all people. We are humbled to realize that when we give of ourselves everyone benefits and in the transactions of compassion and kindness between people, our world is made more whole. Remind us that the way to experience eternal life here and now is to serve and bless those who have needs and when we live in this way, we will experience an abundance of life we could never get for ourselves.

We pray on this day that You would be with our friends and loved ones who are experiencing illness, grief or depression. Help them and us to know that God uses our suffering to bring healing and new

life to our scarred souls and that as we find ways to give life and love away, we are made more whole. May our worship on this day remind us this week of the things that truly nourish our souls and sustain our lives. May we have the perspective and courage we need to live Christ's mandate of giving life away and to more fully devote ourselves to his mission of bringing God's kingdom to our unfinished world and incomplete selves. In the name of the One who showed us how to live and to love, we pray, Our Father, who art in heaven....AMEN.