

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 28, 2006

Reflection: “Life's splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come.” – Franz Kafka

Readings: Acts: 1:15 – 17, 21-26
1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

Hymns: Hymn # #258 Praise Ye the Lord
Anthem Grace - Arranged by Mark Hayes
Hymn # 564 America the Beautiful
Hymn # #538 Lord, Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing

Into the Fullness
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I am not much into “themes” per se. As a teacher, I know the benefit of integrating curriculum into a theme, but in terms of life – well, I’m much more a person who immerses himself into something and then finds his way around, learning as he goes. Now, you know the origin of some of the scars I bear.

It’s no wonder I’ve had to add to my learning, instructional, and ministry styles other ways of interacting with people – most folk – not all - prefer a bit more structure. In truth, structure for me, has been something of an acquired taste... although I am still wont to wander and wonder as I go.

So, I think the suspicion of the “theme” idea is somehow related to this “learning style” of mine. It may be, too, that themes are often triggered by dates, many on a once a year basis, and in some way seem to me like an event clock, signaling the passage of time in yet another way. Maybe something else I prefer to avoid.

That’s not to say that I don’t look forward to things, not at all. And in some cases, I don’t even mind counting – such as the number of Thanksgiving Parades I have been a part of – 16 as of this year. Birthdays, well, that’s different topic.

Another response of mine is a bit more difficult to explain. Our church calendar finds us nearing the end of the Easter season, today, as you have heard and read is the 7th Sunday of Easter. Soon, it will be Pentecost, and we enter into a relatively quiet period of time, until we return in the fall and start thinking about Christmas. Whoosh! Feel it go by?

Inherent in major annual celebrations, I think, even in the church, is the tendency to feel as though the work is done once the time allotted for remembrance is done. Generally, these short periods of worship and observances are intense; as I find Passion Week to be. Not just because of the activity, but because of the content and meaning coming close to critical mass in a short period of time.

I am much more inclined to learn to think and reflect upon the risen Jesus – Easter – on every day of the year, Christmas and the birth of the coming Good News in all we do; Pentecost in every breath we breathe, filled with the Spirit I too infrequently stop to recognize, as I breathe.

Do you get what I mean? Sometimes, I feel as though these observances are anticipated, prepared for, participated in, completed, and then placed aside until the next time. Doing my best to live in the moment somehow draws me to the improbable desire of trying to hold all these things closely, integrated into my life, at all times...clearly an impossible thing to do. I know my shortcomings of being sometimes forgetful and able to be easily distracted. So, I see these remembrances as sort of a cognitive prosthesis, helping me to remember what I too often forget.

And that may be the real reason I shy away from being “calendarized,” because it means I have to pay attention to things I might just as soon wish to let go by, things that have too much confusion and conflict in their narratives, things that mean maybe I have something to do in order to honor what is being recalled. Things...that are unsettling.

I think Memorial Day is like that for me. I think I get somewhere caught up in the middle of the politics and the gentility, when mostly it is an intense call to pay attention, recommit myself, and get energized and willing to do what needs to be done. In other words, I need to pray for help.

So, looking for “the links” between gathering here in worship, my life, and this day – I go to where I frequently go first – to history, to make sure I have it right. As usual, I discover more than I knew to start off with.

Memorial Day Notes:

It was 1865, 151 years ago. [Henry C. Welles](#), a druggist in the village of Waterloo, NY, mentioned at a social gathering that honor should be shown to the patriotic dead of the Civil War by decorating their graves.

In the spring of 1866, he again mentioned this subject to [General John B. Murray](#), Seneca County Clerk. General Murray embraced the idea and a committee was formulated to plan a day devoted to honoring the dead.

Townspople adopted the idea wholeheartedly. Wreaths, crosses and bouquets were made for each veteran's grave.

The village was decorated with flags at half mast and draped with evergreen boughs and mourning black streamers.

On May 5, 1866, civic societies joined the procession to the three existing cemeteries and were led by veterans marching to martial music. At each cemetery there were impressive and lengthy services including speeches by General Murray and a local clergyman. The ceremonies were repeated on May 5, 1867.

The first official recognition of Memorial Day as such was issued by [General John A. Logan](#), first commander of the Grand Army of the Republic.

This was [General Order No. 11](#) establishing "Decoration Day" as it was then known. The date of the order was May 5, 1868, exactly two years after Waterloo's first observance. That year Waterloo joined other communities in the nation by having their ceremony on May 30.

That was its beginning, and although it is thought to have begun simultaneously in several different areas of the country at once, Waterloo, NY is considered the home of Memorial or Decoration Day.

The poppies that many of us buy each year from the VFW and others to raise funds for Veterans had its origin on the battleground in Canada.

Written by Major McCrae, a surgeon attached to the 1st Field Artillery Brigade, "In Flanders Fields" remains to this day one of the most memorable war poems ever written. Written between battles, while looking over a cemetery, where a close friend had just been buried, McCrae scribbled out the 15 lines of the poem in the Ypres salient, following seventeen days of treating men, immersed in the signature violence to human lives embodied with war:

In the nearby cemetery, McCrae could see the wild poppies that sprang up in the ditches. Here is what he wrote:

In Flanders Fields

John McCrae, 1915.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Miona Michael, an American woman having read the poem, published in 1915 replied with this:

We Shall Keep the Faith

Oh ! You who sleep in Flanders' fields
Sleep sweet-to rise anew;
We caught the torch you threw,
And holding high we kept
The faith with those who died.
We, cherish, too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor red
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies.
But lends a lustre to the red
On the flower that blooms above the dead
In Flanders' Fields
And now the torch and Poppy red
Wear in honour of our dead.
Fear not that ye have died for naught:
We've learned the lesson that ye thought
In Flanders' Fields.

Over time, Memorial Day/Decoration Day has expanded to include recognition of those who serve in the military of the United States of America. Its roots though were in remembering the dead and the lessons of dying in war.

In many ways, those who serve today do just that. They honor the dead and injured of war and conflict by seeking to create a peace and security that has been paid for with the greatest of sacrifices.

(According to the last census taken, there are almost as many military personnel active and reserves as there are Presbyterians – about 2.5 – 2.5 million.)

<http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/cwc/other/stats/warcost.htm>

And there have been many who have paid the ultimate price. With three million of the 42,000,000 men and women who fought in World War II surviving today, this fact is known well. In perspective, those that survive exceed all those who serve today, about 2.5 million – almost the same as the number of Presbyterians in our church.

Notes follow:

	killed in action	Related Death	Estimated Combined
Revolutionary War	4435	*	
War of 1812	2260	*	
Mexican War	1733	11,550	
Civil War (combined)	184,594	373,458	550,000
Spanish American War	385	2061	
World War I	53,513	63,195	
World War II	292,131	115,185	415,000
Korean War	33,651	*	
Vietnam War	47,369	10,799	
Gulf War	148	145	
Iraq War	over 2000		

*non-battle deaths not known for these wars. Estimated costs through the Gulf War – about 3 Trillion Dollars, with WWII costing a little over 2 trillion dollars all by itself.

Military Service During War	42,348,460
Battle Deaths	650,954
Other Deaths in Theater	13,853
Other Deaths in Non-Theater	229,661

So, the memory of these dead, the families they have touched, the descendants that include all of us in one way or another, these lives, losses, sacrifices on behalf of our freedoms and our country – surely must be diligently honored.

But I say, not just one day or a weekend a year. And not just in synch with marches, parades, and political speeches - and I feel compelled to remember that I have a role here and silence -- it is not.

For a while, I liked to say that at the time of the Vietnam War I let my status go 1A, declining the student deferment and taking my chances with the lottery. I wasn't seeking to fight, but friend of mine, David Goldsmith, had gone to Nam and not returned. I wasn't thinking about a just or noble war; I was just thinking: "Who was I not to go if my neighbor had to go?"

I was of a family and background that led me to believe the government was trustworthy. It wasn't long afterwards that I started to understand that institutions in which I had placed my trust could be trusted, as long as I went along with their ways. What I had yet to learn was that institutions could be trusted to be who they were.

Anyway, to object to war was too filled with lack of compassion, courage, faithfulness, it tore at the core of the fullness of who I was. Or who I thought I should be at the time. Time...

Well, times have changed, I didn't realize then that I could honor David and others who had died in different ways, including objecting to the war that had taken their lives. There is honor and remembrance in such a thing. There is honor in remembering all those who have died by trying not to make the same mistakes of getting to war where we (the world) need war to resolve our differences. Such, I think, would be the greatest decoration of all for those whom we honor – the end to war.

As Christians, we are called in a different way to the theater of violence. It was MLK who said:

"Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace...If this is to be achieved...(we) must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love."

Love. All month long we've been listening to verses from 1 John and John about love. The power of love: love in the face of fear, in the face of oppression, as a remedy for marginalization, and other methods of the dominant used to maintain power. It's axiomatic: to keep power it has to be ever-amassed in the geo-political sense in ever greater quantities, and unless it is rattled and used – it is seen as impotent and weak: anathema to those who seek its control.

Love, will take a while. Folks like us and others are working at it. The Good News guides us to such a place. However, until a world order of love can be initiated, we will have to - at least - settle for peace...committing ourselves to peace – not war. First end the war and deal with terror for what it really is: fear. The only true remedy for that *is* love.

Madeline Albright, former Secretary of State in the Clinton administration recently asked the question, "Where have the clergy been in the Iraq war?" recalling the vast involvement of clergy in protests over the Vietnam War.

She states that in a post 9/11 world the idea of criticizing the military policies of the United States, for any reason – is tantamount to being seen as unpatriotic and weak on terror – in fact, I think it is the opposite.

I have learned something since those early years in the 60's. To honor those who have died, I cannot make the same mistake and disengage as the holiday passes, back to my typical life in a capitalistic society, where others are away from home, doing the fighting, keeping us safe at home. It has to be more than a Memorial Day if I am to find the fullness and integrity of the love I am called to

follow, believe in, and am sometimes too willing to set aside when it comes to taking an active role. The struggle is more than resisting a calendar mentality; it's learning how to live into this kind of love – even in the face of terror. Living into a love of preparedness that is built upon the fullness of faith, love itself, compassion, and the belief in the inherent sacredness of all life. A belief that killing is no more of an answer than it was for Jesus to be killed two millennia ago.

Administrations will change. You may like this one more than the last or the next one less than the past... what is clear is that this administration sees war, force, and holy missions as their method for resolving conflict – some say – long before necessary.

Either way it is not George Bush or the lack of him that should drive our, my response, but our Christian heart that calls for love and fullness of love – at all risk...even the risk of being seen as unpatriotic or weak on terror. Love at all costs, rather than war.

And herein is some of the problem with national songs. “God Bless America” – for example. Well, doesn't God bless Iraq, Kuwait, Rwanda, Dharfur, Indonesia – or is it just us? When we invoke the blessings of God in this way, does it become a form of idolatry and marginalization of others? Is that what we mean? Or, is it something else?

How do we separate the idea that singing songs of America are endorsements of any one policy of passing leadership?

How? We pray and we talk. We talk about the verses. And we sing in appreciation for what we have been given with a generosity of spirit for those around the world. We sing or read poetry with a steadfast belief that all of this beautiful earth is of one God, and we thank God for what we have – with the expansiveness of the poet's heart, recognizing that we are all of one world and when we sing of our land – we are singing of yours, too – that is, all the land.

That's some of what I think fullness is about. Seeing this world not as themed or timed or fragmented, but as a thirsty planet seeking the waters of peace and love, honoring all those who have died, decorating them today and everyday with the Good News of the gospel in memory of the one we follow and who is risen today and everyday. May you find such things on this journey of the Spirit and Heart.

Amen