

Wesley United Methodist Church

May 28, 2017

“A Time to Remember.”

Revelation 7:9-17

Memory is a tricky thing. Particularly as we get older. You know the story about the three women who were talking. The first said, “Sometimes I go to the refrigerator and forget what I need by the time I get there.” The second woman said, “When I go upstairs, I can’t remember whether I’m going up for something or I’m on my way down.” The third woman said, “I’m lucky, I guess, (knocking on wood), I don’t have that problem. Oh, there’s someone at the door.” Memory is a tricky thing. There are some things, however, that we should never forget. One of these is the sacrifice that others have made in our behalf.

It was a spring morning in 1866, just after the Civil War that had devastated the South. A group of Southerners did something quite extraordinary. They marched down the streets of what was left of their town to a cemetery. There they decorated the graves of the soldiers. ALL the soldiers. Union as well as Confederate. The mothers and daughters and windows had buried their dead. Now they buried their hatred. The time for healing had come. It was the first Memorial Day.

Have you ever wondered why Memorial Day is in May? Its date doesn’t recall some historic battle. Or the start of some war. Or the signing of an armistice.

Why, then, May? For a very practical reason. Because it is a time when flowers bloom. Flowers with which to decorate graves.

There are those who remember when Memorial Day was called Decoration Day and when the cemeteries were filled with people kneeling to plant a flower or place a garland or unfurl a flag or say a prayer. Some still do. But most people can no longer be bothered. It would take time away from the beach, the backyard, the ball park.

At the National Cemetery on Long Island, one of the nation’s largest, it has become necessary to advertise for volunteers to place flags on the graves of veterans as the number of veteran volunteers has decreased. However, many of those who volunteer have no idea why they are there.

One young man, a 13-year-old Scout, was asked if he understood why the members of his Boy Scout Troop were there placing flags on the graves.

He quickly replied, “To get service hours.”

Memorial Day is obviously not one of our major holidays. But we need to remember. We need to remember the debt we owe to others. You and I do not have what we have today by our own efforts alone. There is no greater myth than that of the self-made man or woman. We owe an enormous debt from the moment we come into this world. Some of that debt is owed to young men and women who shed their blood on battle fields. Many of them gave their lives because they truly believed that freedom is worth dying for.

To honor their sacrifice is not to glorify war. War is the ultimate blasphemy against God. Still, we live in a cruel world where tyrants would impose their will on others. It would be nice if we lived in a world where people always played by the rules, where no one coveted his neighbor’s property, where never again would we have to depend upon military might to enforce justice. But such a world does not exist. We do not know what dangers may await us.

When the war between the States flared up, a young Texan enlisted and marched off to fight with his friends. “We won’t be gone long,” he claimed, “cause we can lick them Yankees with broom sticks.” Four years later when the fighting was finally over, the young man came home, a beaten man. One of his neighbors asked, “What happened? I thought you were gonna beat them Yankees with broom sticks?” “We could have,” replied the young man, “Except we couldn’t get ‘em to fight with broomsticks.”

It would be nice if we could totally eliminate our defense establishment with the knowledge that no nation would commit aggression against its neighbor again. But that’s not the way the world works. Through the centuries young men, and sometimes young women, have been sacrificed in the cause of one noble ideal after another. Some of these wars have been senseless and barbaric, to be sure. But others have been necessary. We honor the memory this day of those who have given their lives believing that they were making the world safer, freer and more humane.

Of course, there are others who have given their lives for us who never wore a uniform, never carried a gun. Our Scripture talks about those who “wash their robes in the blood of the lamb.” Among these are those who have given their lives in the service of Jesus Christ. And there have been hundreds of thousands of such sacrifices through the ages. They died in battle, too. The battle between light and darkness. Their sacrifice reminds us how anemic our own witness for Christ sometimes is.

They gave their all. We dare not forget them.

A story tells about a soldier who was mortally wounded. His buddy Jim stayed by him through his long and lonely ordeal to the very end. "Jim, I'm going to die," Charlie whispered to his friend. Knowing Jim had no family of his own, Charlie added, "But I want you to go back to my mother and take my place there." "But Charlie, your mother doesn't know me," Jim reminded his dying comrade, "and she would not allow me to come into her home to live as a son." "I will write a note and you will take it to her," Charlie explained. The note told of Charlie's ill fortunes, of his wounds, and of his suffering, and how Jim had stuck by him by day and night through it all. The letter closed like this, "Mother, receive Jim for my sake."

Jim carefully tucked the letter away in his waistcoat. After the close of the war he went to Charlie's home town and sought out the mother's home.

He knocked at the door and stood waiting, ragged and worn from the war, a very unsightly character.

As the lady opened the door, she looked upon him and thought him to be just another beggar passing by. But Jim handed her the letter through the half-opened door. She read it, recognizing her son's handwriting. When she read the last line, "Mother, receive Jim for my sake," the expression on the face changed, tears of deep emotion welled up inside, and she threw the door open wide, receiving Jim "for Charlie's sake."

According to our Bibles, that sort of acceptance is the story of the cross.

God accepts us as his own beloved children for Christ's sake. We may not understand why it had to be this way. But we look at the cross and see there an open door.

And so we remember. We remember those who died that we may live in freedom. We remember those who died that we may live in faith.

We remember Christ who died that we may live forever. That's the ultimate meaning of this Memorial Day weekend. It is a time to remember and it is a time to finish what they started.