

“A Living Sacrifice”

Psalm 46

Romans 12:1-2

May 29, 2016

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Memorial Day

Romans 12:1-2

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

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Some of you remember when Memorial Day was always on May 30. I remember, that's for sure – my brother's birthday is May 29, and my twin sister's and mine is May 30. As a child, every Memorial Day weekend was marked with three birthday cakes, which was absolutely heavenly. But even three birthdays couldn't interfere with Memorial Day. No matter what else was planned, we dropped everything that morning to put up our flag and then get out in time for the Mt. Prospect Memorial Day parade. My sister Karen and I donned our Brownie uniforms, as our (much) older brothers grabbed their trumpet and trombone to march in the high school band.

And what a parade it was. Twenty years after the end of World War II, and hot on the heels of the Korean War, hundreds of service men and women donned their uniforms and marched in honor of their fallen comrades. Crowds lined the streets the entire way, waving their flags. The parade reached its conclusion at Lion's Park, where a stage was set up, and solemn speeches flew across the vast green, filled with attentive throngs. And always, at the end, the poignant notes of taps, played by a lone bugler. The silence that followed seemed to last forever— silence punctuated only by the sounds of American flags flapping briskly in the wind, while all the grown-ups discretely wiped their tears.

Memorial Day. Now, for many Americans, Memorial Day holds its primary identity as the start of the summer, a three-day-weekend bracketed by Labor Day at the end. Commercials urge us to set aside the weekend yard projects or time at the beach or even mattress-shopping. I don't mean to wag my finger, which we preachers are prone to do. But I do mean to wave my flag – to wave my flag and say a prayer for the fallen.

So let me pose the question: how *should* we be honoring Memorial Day? Let me start by saying that I recognize times are different now than when I was a child. In my parents' generation, *everyone* knew someone who had served; *everyone* knew someone who had lost a loved one. That is no longer true for us, which requires us to be more intentional about honoring the fallen. Let me also say that I don't pretend to have a good answer to my own question; I have no all-encompassing list of ways to honor our fallen servicemen and women. My goal is to lay this question before us, and spark our conversation. So let me offer a few modest places we can start – a few small ways we can give thanks for those who sacrificed their very lives for us.

First, and most obviously, I think we owe our fallen servicemen and women the simple gift of memory. In our fast-paced world, when we can't even remember what we had for dinner yesterday, it requires effort to remember. It might start close to home. For me, it's easy: both my parents served in World War II – they met in the Army. Don't tell anyone, but Mom was enlisted and Dad was an officer, and they dated anyway. They spoke of people they had lost. Soon, we'll have a Vietnam veteran in our family: Annie's future grandfather-in-law. As I've gotten the privilege of knowing him, I've heard stories of his service, and the scars he bears of the friends he lost. To this day weeps when he remembers them. My guess is that many of you have your own stories. But this is my conviction: it doesn't matter whether or not our own families have been touched by war. Whenever *anyone* lays down their life for us – or even gives up their gifts for us – they *are* our family. Their blood that's shed? Their time that's offered on the altar of our country? Today we remember that those ties that bind have made us brothers and sisters.

Which leads me to my second point: this Memorial Day, I think we owe it to them to do our best to come together as a nation again. A nation is much more than a fluke of birth or residency ... a nation is much more than arbitrary lines drawn on the map. A nation is a place of belonging, of identity, of mutual concern, of shared responsibility, of loyalty and – dare I say it? – love.

I worry about our country. I worry about the screed of vitriol, of disparaging tweets and dismissive speeches, of racist and misogynistic rants. I worry about our devolution into name-calling and hate-baiting. And, to be honest, I also worry about political correctness, of over-sensitivity and suppression of opinions. Don't we owe it to those who died for our country to do better?

Last month, moral philosopher David Brooks sparked my imagination when he spoke of invited us to reclaim patriotism. Patriotism, he suggests, is much more than mere tolerance of people who share space with us that we have to put up with. He quotes someone describing tolerance this way: I “stomach your right to be different.... [but] if you disappear off the face of the earth I'm no worse off.” That's tolerance. We'll put up with each other, but if we're honest, we'd be just as glad not to have to.

Patriotism is different. Patriotism is a higher calling. Patriotism means “love of country, which necessitates love of each other [We] have to be a nation that aspires for love, which recognizes that you have worth and dignity and I need you. You are ... part of the promise of this country.”ⁱ What a remarkable statement: love of country requires us to more than tolerate each other. Love of country requires us to love each other – even when we don't like each other. Love of country demands that we stay in covenant with each other even when we wouldn't choose to be each other's friend. Isn't that the least we owe the people who died for our country – men and women, poor and rich, black and white, Republican and Democrat – who died for each other, and for us, even when they had *nothing* in common but their love of country?

Which leads me to my final point. This Memorial Day, as we remember those who died for us; as we strive to be a nation worthy of their sacrifice; let us also commit to live our own best lives – to be all that we can be. Not everyone is called to *die* for a higher calling, to die in service to God or country. But everyone *is* called to *live* for a higher calling. Let me say it again: Not everyone is called to *die* for a higher calling, to die for God or country. But everyone *is* called to *live* for a higher calling – to live so that others might know freedom, and justice, and mercy.

This is the heart of St. Paul’s appeal in our Scripture reading this morning. Paul is speaking to all of us who didn’t know Jesus face-to-face, but who live in freedom by virtue of his sacrifice for us. Paul urges us not to squander that freedom, but instead, to cherish it, to use it well, to be as intentional about our lives as Jesus was about his death. This is what Paul tells us:

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds.”

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Do not be conformed to the world’s values: to the world’s focus on pleasure, or wealth, or selfishness, or popularity, or pride. You can do better than that, Paul tells us: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

What does it look like to choose to live as a “living sacrifice”? What does it mean to choose not to be “conformed to this world”? It’s not magic; I see it in you all the time.

Here are snippets of conversations I’ve had recently.

- ❖ I heard from some of you about your service to your family. One of you shared how you slogged away, day after day, to get the kids off to school and the laundry done, and when your kid was struggling you set aside your own agenda to get him to a counselor *again*. You worry, but you don't mind doing anything you can. It is a small sacrifice to try to get him healthy.
- ❖ I heard from some of you about your work. One of you shared how you stayed up all night to get the major project at work done on time, and you didn't mind, because it was crucial – crucial for your company, crucial for the consumers, crucial for your co-workers who depend on their income.
- ❖ One of you shared how you got on the plane one more time and traveled yet again for work. One of you shared how you went overseas not just to clinch the contracts, but also to view the factory floors. You're awfully glad you did, for you discovered that some were wonderful, and others didn't care one whit about their workers safety or hygiene – and you boldly came home to name which ones to embrace and which ones to avoid.
- ❖ One of you shared how you put your money on the line – again - in another business venture, not just to strike it rich but to insure that other people will have jobs ... and above and beyond, because you want to prepare for a major investment in philanthropy.

This is what I've seen in you as you've hurled yourselves toward causes that level the playing field:

- ❖ Some of you have worked your tails off to make sure the non-profit you serve – I've heard from some of you who've been raising money for Boys & Girls Club and Reading Power and many others – to make sure they're funded in the face of the state's budget crisis.

- ❖ And some of you have offered to help those who can't help themselves, providing free legal counsel or counseling, or working for an agency providing social work for people who can't afford it otherwise, even though it means a hit to your own pocket.
- ❖ And some of you have sent emails and bring speakers and raise awareness and money for people in Syria who are trapped between ISIS and the government and a thousand splintering rebel factions.

And all that ... all that is *literally in the last two weeks*. I've seen you spend your lives as a "living sacrifice." And I believe in my deepest heart that this is the best way we can honor those who died.

This is what I hope for us today, as we honor those who died for the sake of our freedom and justice. I hope that we'll be able to lift our eyes a little higher and open our hands a little wider – to give ourselves as a "living sacrifice."

Isn't that what Abraham Lincoln called us to do on that cold November day in 1863, on the blood-soaked ground of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, when he spoke in honor of the many men who died there? His goal was to rally a nation weary of war – to inspire his people to look beyond the small stage of their own brief lives to see the eternal auditorium in which their courage played a part:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. ...

[We] cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. 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.ⁱⁱ

That is my prayer for us this Memorial Day. That we remember those who have fallen ... that we commit ourselves to be a better nation, not merely tolerant, but to love our country by loving one another ... that we rise to our own sacrifice – a living sacrifice – so that these dead shall not have died in vain. May it be so, that this nation, our nation, may have a new birth of God, born from the blood that was shed for us.

ⁱ A version of this op-ed appears in print on April 5, 2016, on page A27 of the New York edition with the headline: How Covenants Make Us. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/opinion/how-covenants-make-us.html?mwrsm=Facebook&_r=0

ⁱⁱ There are five slightly different versions of the Gettysburg address. This is the Bliss copy, from *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Roy P. Basler and others; see <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>.