

## “In Memoriam: the Heroes of Covid-19”

John 17:10-21 Memorial Sunday 5/24/20

Clinton G. Roberts

Jesus Villaluz was a Patient transport worker at Holy Name Medical Center in Teaneck, NJ. Villaluz worked there for 27 years, which by May had treated more than 6,000 Covid patients. Jesus' coworkers said he never rushed his patients and was always concerned for their privacy and safety. He said, “My worst day at work is better than someone's best day as a patient.” The governor of NJ shared an anecdote about how Jesus won a raffle and shared his winnings with his coworkers. Jesus died from Covid-19 complications on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. His fellow workers lined the hallway of Holy Name for the first time in honor of Jesus to say good-bye.

Linda Bonaventura was an LPN at Wildwood Healthcare Center in Indianapolis, Indiana. She dedicated her career to helping seniors and children with special needs. She would often work 16-hour days at the center, using her light-hearted sense of humor to make people feel better. She would spray herself down with Lysol before returning home. One week after coming down with a sore throat, she died on April 13<sup>th</sup>.

Roy Coleman was an army veteran and EMT who worked as a Housekeeper at the VA Medical Center in Shreveport, Louisiana. He was a church deacon, a Sunday School teacher and an usher. Roy volunteered with special-needs adults. His wife Mabel said, "He was funny, kind and he was giving." Roy fell ill on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. After three trips to the ER, he was admitted 4 days later. He died at the VA hospital where he worked.

Marsha Bantle was a registered nurse at Signature Healthcare in Newburgh, Indiana. She was 65 years old and her family begged her to quit after a resident where she worked was diagnosed with Covid-19. But she wouldn't leave. "My patients can't leave their rooms, they can't see their families. They really need me right now," she told her cousin. Marsha lived alone. On April 17<sup>th</sup>, her temperature spiked. She didn't want to worry her family, but when it was clear she needed to be hospitalized, she asked for the other patients' names in ICU so she could pray for them. Marsha died of Covid-19 on May 1<sup>st</sup>. The nursing home where she worked has had 19 Covid-related deaths in the last six weeks.

\*\*\*\*\*

Today is Memorial Day Sunday, a time to honor and remember those who have died in service to our country throughout all the wars in our 244 year history. That list is long, containing names as famous as Dr. Joseph Warren, who died defending the redoubt on

Bunker Hill from the British in the cause of liberty; and other names as obscure as my friend Joe, a Native-American Huey helicopter pilot who served two terms of duty in Vietnam lifting our troops out of firefights in the jungle, only to die alone eight years later from a heroin overdose and PTSD.

Tomorrow is a day to honor and remember all of our fallen—both those we know and those we don't know who have served our nation at the cost of their lives. Tomorrow is not a day to glorify war, for as Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman said, "War is hell"—and he knew what he was talking about. What we must honor and remember is the sacrifice of those who answered the call to defend our nation in time of war, in order that we may fully appreciate the gifts of freedom and peace which they have laid down before us. What we do with those precious gifts will be the most powerful way we can honor our dead and embrace a vision of our unity under God "with liberty and justice for all."

But this Memorial Day seems different to me: different in light of a very different kind of war that any of us ever imagined would be fought on American soil, here in a nation with the best medicine to be found anywhere on earth. It is a war not with human, but with an inhuman enemy; a virus infecting millions, and the front lines aren't "over there" as the old song goes, but "right here" in our City, our county, our town.

Consider the story of “Jennifer” a nurse on the Covid floor in our local hospital where many of us know people who’ve been patients. Jennifer is a single mother. Her only child is sheltering-in-place with her own mother while Jennifer lives apart, working full-time to support them all. She hasn’t hugged her child for weeks. Each day, Jennifer must put on layers of protective clothing and equipment including gloves, gown, mask and shield—much like a soldier preparing for hand-to-hand combat. Yet her weapons are instruments of healing—not the least of which is her physical presence itself in rooms where patients are suffering in solitude without the benefit of family. Beyond the medicines and the menial tasks of nursing, Jennifer is offering her vulnerability, her compassion, and her care.

These are what our Covid-19 heroes look like, whether they are healthcare workers, firefighter/paramedics, police, sanitation workers, pharmacists, grocery store workers, funeral home workers, and yes—even soldiers in the National Guard. We owe an inexpressible debt of gratitude to all these heroes, and more.

But how will we pay it?

When the Lord Jesus was preparing to pay for the debt of your sins and mine, he told his followers on the night before his crucifixion, “This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you.” And then he prayed for them. Specifically,

he prayed that God would protect and sanctify them to go out into the world to do the work that he had done: to bring near the Kingdom through ministries of teaching, healing and prayer. Just days earlier, his greatest teaching on the Kingdom concluded with these words:

*For I was hungry and you gave me food,*

*I was thirsty and you gave me drink,*

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me,*

*I was naked and you clothed me,*

*I was sick and you took care of me,*

*I was imprisoned and you visited me.*

Some of our seniors are all-but imprisoned in retirement centers right now, unable to leave their rooms or receive visits from friends and family. One couple from our church had been suffering keenly in isolation when a stranger, a CNA on the unit knocked on their door, offering to take them for a walk on the grounds. You cannot imagine their gratitude for this man, who humbly offered his service in this way. *I was imprisoned and you visited me...* Indeed he did.

Jesus ended his prayer that night with this petition: *I ask not only on behalf of these disciples, but also on behalf of those who will*

*come to believe in me through their words, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may come to believe that you have sent me.”*

Friends, Jesus was praying specifically for us, for those who have come to believe that Jesus is Lord without seeing him in person. But wait—perhaps we have seen him, in the actions of all these heroes who have stood—and fallen—in harm’s way for our sake.

If we are truly grateful, what will we offer in return? Let it begin with our unity as believers: our unity of purpose in serving those most impacted by this war. Let it be seen in our care for our black and brown neighbors, who’ve been disproportionately impacted by this pandemic; let it be seen in our care for the stranger, the immigrant and the imprisoned; and in our care for our “mothers and fathers” living in retirement and nursing homes in our midst; let it be seen in our feeding, clothing and sheltering of homeless, jobless and displaced people; let it be heard in our sharing the Gospel; and let it be powered by prayer.

How then will we respond to Christ and remember these humble heroes in the fight against Covid-19? Perhaps an old song from the Sixties says it best:

*We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord;  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored;  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love;  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

**Let us pray...**