

May 27, 2018

*“Memorial Day 2018”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; John 15:9-14

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I want to begin today with a poignant Memorial Day tribute. Let's watch this video.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k9Si28k0Fk&list=PL\\_0kLGotJNJ02t55rzBtOM4bUprY7Vuw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k9Si28k0Fk&list=PL_0kLGotJNJ02t55rzBtOM4bUprY7Vuw)

Now I have three thoughts I want to share with you on this Memorial Day. First, and most obvious, is the debt of gratitude we owe those men and women who serve and have served our country, and especially for those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. For consider why they died. They died, simply stated, to preserve the way of life we so take for granted. And I think as a society we're somewhat casual and careless in regard to the freedoms and opportunities with which we've been blessed. Because just look around the world. Statistics tell us that over two hundred million Christians experience severe persecution. 2.1 billion people do not have access to safe and clean drinking water. One half the world's population lives on less than \$2.50 a day. And so many live in countries where they are oppressed by their government. In contrast, we live in a country with religious freedom, where there is immense prosperity - food, water and clothing is plentiful, where we have doctors and medicines that keep us alive and well, where we have opportunities in education and vocation that abound, and so much more. In fact, according to author, Jonah Goldberg, in his book, "Suicide of the West," we might be living in the greatest moment in the history of the world. And all this came at a price – human life. No, freedom is not free! And our failure to remember their sacrifices is a failure to protect the very things for which they died, and for which we live and so delight in having on a daily basis.

Now my second thought about Memorial Day is that it certainly puts into perspective the reality of life and death. As we heard from Ecclesiastes today, everything under the sun has its time and its season. And that certainly applies to our living and our dying. As a pastor, I've seen too many people afraid to talk about or face death, even with all those assurances God has given us as to what comes after death. Maybe they're sad to leave this life, maybe they have a lingering doubt about God's assurances, or maybe they're afraid to meet their maker. That's why I like the way Rev. William Sloane Coffin puts it. He said, "The one true freedom we have in life is to come to terms with death, and as early as possible, for death is an event that embraces all our lives. And the only way to have a good death is to lead a good life. Lead a good one, full of gratitude, generosity and compassion, and then there's no need at the close of the day to fear the dying of the light. We can go gently (and I might add, boldly) into that good night." Yes, lead a good life. Which is really not so hard, if we just follow those words of the prophet

Micah, "love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly with God." You see, if we truly seek God's will and follow God's direction for our lives, then I can assure you that death will not be an enemy, but rather a friendly angel leading us to the One whose greatest hope is to say to each and every one of us, "Well done good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master."

Now of course this begs the question as to what heaven will be like? The Apostle Paul said of heaven, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." Oh, some like to try to imagine heaven... as streets lined with gold, an elderly bearded God seated on his throne, angels sitting around playing harps?!? Or maybe as the familiar old joke goes: In heaven, the English are the police, the Germans are the mechanics, the Swiss are the administrators, the French are the cooks and the Italians are the lovers. But in hell, the English are the cooks, the French are the mechanics, the Swiss are the lovers, the Italians are the administrators and the Germans are the police! When we consider all the sentiments, passions and implications this joke evokes I think it pretty well sums up how we want to view heaven. As a place of security, contentment, peace, happiness, joy, love. With no stress, no worry, no sickness, no hatred, no fears. Heaven is the kind of place that well, using one of today's familiar colloquialisms, it's "to die for." And the Bible gives us just enough of an insight of heaven to confirm these high expectations. It's where "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more." Jesus described heaven as "paradise," as a glorious "banquet" set as a feast for his people, as a celebration with God and all the saints of heaven. But I especially like the way an old theologian described heaven – as "an unknown region with a well-known inhabitant." Isn't that a great! An unknown region with a well-known inhabitant. But even greater is that the "inhabitant," Jesus Christ, has given us this assurance: "I go and prepare a place for you, and if I prepare a place for you I will come again and take you to myself." Sounds good, doesn't it? This glorious place, where we will spend eternity?

Now the alternative to heaven is something else most people don't want to talk about. And that's hell. For the time being, I'll keep it simple and just tell you how Jesus described hell. He described it as a place of "outer darkness" where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." The Bible calls it "a place of sorrows, a bottomless pit, a lake of fire." But regardless of all the images of hell and devils and fire, that have been conjured up in our minds through paintings and stories, you can be sure the worst part of hell, the very worst part, is the fact that a soul there will be separated from God for eternity. Think about that. Could anything be worse than being separated from God?

And my final thought regarding Memorial Day has to do again with sacrifice – the greatest sacrifice of all – Jesus dying for us on the cross. He said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” Now Jesus’ statement is really a statement of a self evident truth. Because what is more precious on earth to any one of us than our own life? <sup>1</sup> The value of human life is so high that the value of other things can't be compared to it. Except for one thing. Just one. And that is love. Sacrificial love. Like the love of a mother or father for their child. Like the love of a man or woman for their country. Or, like the greatest love of all - the love of God Almighty for humankind. You see, God's love goes well beyond what we can imagine for one important reason. St. Paul stated, “One will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for a good man someone might dare to die. But God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Yes, in dying for our sins, Christ, too, died for our freedom. The Bible says, “By the blood of Christ, we are set free – our sins are forgiven.” And so, as Christians, let us never be careless or casual in regard to what the cross means for us. For it is a symbol of both Christ’s great sacrifice for us, and his great love for us. Remember, crucifixion on a cross was a terrible way to die. It was shameful, excruciatingly painful, degrading, and humiliating. Yet that same cross has become the centerpiece of our Christian faith. Why? Well, that is something you can only experience when you stand humbly beneath the cross. Because where else is there that can tell you all that you need to know about God? And more importantly, where else is there that can show you so much of what you need to know about yourself? I don't know of anywhere else. Do you?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> No Greater Love, Pastor Scott Harris

<sup>2</sup> The Death of Jesus, Rev. Eugene Bay