

Title: Who Will Remember?

Text: Joshua 4:1-7

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It's time to remember and celebrate another Memorial Day or as it was called for so many years "Decoration Day." No one is really certain of the origin of this special day.

Some say in 1865 Southern women began decorating the graves of their soldiers from the civil war. Others believe it began in 1866 when Union veterans brought flowers to the graves of their comrades. For a time Memorial Day, Decoration Day, was observed on separate dates – North and South – until passions cooled and commemoration gave way to mutual remembrance. In 1890 it was a legal holiday in most states on May 30th. By 1972, most states celebrated it on the 4th Monday of May. So, here we are again on another national holiday – Memorial Day.

Now is our time to remember. A time to remember all those men and women in the ranks of the Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Air Force, Army and Navy, who died in service to their nation. From the trenches of WWI to the foxholes of WWII; from San Juan Hill to Pork Chop Hill; from the jungles of Vietnam to the deserts of Kuwait; from the mountains of Afghanistan to the cities of Iraq, we - You and I - are summoned to remember. We remember the cost of this freedom we enjoy in this nation and to remember the terrible, harsh reality of war. What is the ultimate price for those who are engaged in defending and protecting our freedoms is this day's purpose! Memorial Day reminds us that the freedoms we enjoy and employ in this nation were and are secured at a great and horrible cost in the suffering of both the combatants and the civilians.

Memorial Day! Memorial Day reminds us that the battles fought were not so much about bugles and banners, as it is a reminder of war's ultimate cost, by its destruction and death. Memorial Day is a time to remember the dispatch of our armed forces into battle must always be – ALWAYS BE - as a last resort and never a quick step in the resolution of conflict or the restoration of justice within and among nations. Memorial Day ought to be (and needs to be) a day of solemn remembrance, of necessary reflection, of renewed resolve, and yet I wonder, as I suspect many of you wonder, who will remember on this Memorial Day?

Oh, there will be drive by celebrations here and there as we are coming out from under self-isolation. We see virtual celebrations of the National Mall, a remembrance of a parade down Constitution Avenue. In some communities, there will be a speech or two. In some places there will be those who remember, especially in a cemetery where someone's mother or father, brother or sister, daughter or son, or friend will stand or kneel with flower in hand... and a tear in the eye... wondering what might have been if this young life had lived its full term. So, there will be those who remember. But what of the others?

What of those at the backyard picnic? What of the ones at the beach? What of those for whom Memorial Day is simply and only a day of leisure? Who will remember? For each one who remembers, many – many – will not. It was not always like this.

I remember an earlier time, a different but not so distant place, in the small town of Lexington, NC. The year was 1967 or 68 and I was about three years old. My dad was in Vietnam and my mother returned to her parents' home. My grandfather (Papa) was very sick while we lived with

my mom's parents, and I think he had died by the time Memorial Day came around while we lived there. I was really too young to remember, but I do remember seeing the single star taped to the front window coming down as my dad was coming home. I remember my mother shedding tears, tears that I frankly didn't understand. I didn't comprehend that my father was away and the reality of my grandfather's recent death. I didn't understand why she wept. Now I do, or I think I do. In the passing of the years, I think the tears came from the difficulty of her dad's passing and her husband being so far away. I think there was room for her most necessary tears.

I also remember going into Lexington and the local Conrad and Hinkle Grocery Store being closed as were all the stores on Main Street. The factories were silent and families left the farms and fields and came to town to see the parade. My uncle Till found me a place on the curb where I could sit and hear the band playing. Suddenly the band stopped playing its upbeat music, and I could hear the single drum beat as the formation of mostly men marched by. As they marched ramrod straight I could see them looking off in the distance. One young man next to me yelled, "Uncle Joe! Uncle Joe!" But not a single person turned right or left. They simply marched onward, looking straight ahead because they were not there in that moment. They were somewhere else. They were remembering. In that distant time, they were onto something back then. Something precious! Something that we need today. What was it? I think we need a bit of those memories again. I think we need to remember.

I remember another time and another place. I was in 3rd grade in Fort Huachuca, AZ. We were wrapping up another school year. For an-end-of year grade we were given a chance to make some extra credit by memorizing a poem. Those who accepted the task stood in front and all together we recited these words:

*In Flanders fields the poppies grow
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....
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields. (by John McCrae)*

When we finished, I remember looking over and seeing the teacher's single, solitary tear slowly making its way down her cheek. She remembered.

In those days and times, Memorial Day was not a time to go play at the beach. No, it was a serious time to pause, to reflect, and to remember. We need to remember.

Now, this is our moment in history and many in this country are ready to quickly go to war or use the military as a pawn for some political agenda. At a moment in history when too many believe that modern wars are defined by surgical air strikes, smart missiles, and drone planes. At a time when the media is forgetting the pictures of the coffins returning from Afghanistan. When too many of us turn off our minds and hearts as easily as we change TV channels from the grim reality of war's ultimate cost to view our entertainment on the tube caught up in some political

party's opinion that we need to bluster and ready to be the hammer! No, we need now more than ever to remember.

In our scripture today, God wanted Joshua to set aside a time to remember. The 12 stones set before the people were to be reminders for them. What kind of reminders? What were they to remember? They were to remember their time in Egypt that they were immigrants in a foreign land escaping persecution and pain. That their lives were filled with suffering at their master's hand in Egypt. That God heard their desperate cries as they were being harshly and unfairly treated and sent Moses to lead God's people to freedom. They were to remember the wanderings in the desert and the covenant God gave them. They were to remember that God did not forget them or abandon them. They were to remember their pain and never forget their struggles and pains as they dealt with the alien in their land. That God provided for them all along and God's promise was to protect them. That a price was to be paid for their disobedience as their leader Moses was not allowed into the Promised Land because he lost his temper and took matters into his own hands. The stones were by Joshua to be their reminders.

God sent us another reminder. In FPC's sanctuary, and sanctuaries around the world and beyond time and space, we remember when we celebrate at the Lord's table. What do we remember? We remember who we are as beloved children of our loving God! We remember Jesus' sacrifice, his death, and his resurrection that gives us freedom from our sin. We recall that on the night of his betrayal Jesus broke bread and offered his cup as a remembering of his sacrifice – reminders of his gift to us on and through the cross. Through Jesus' sacrifice we are offered our true freedom on this Memorial Day. These gifts of bread and cup spur us as a community of faith to orient ourselves differently this Memorial Day. Let's together decide to see more than a field of Army chamoes or a sea of Navy blue. Let's remember the sacrifices made for our freedoms.

Let's remember those men and women who had hopes and dreams who died to soon. Let's remember those from our family and friends who gave their lives. Let's remember those families serving in our nation's armed forces - the price that they pay. What they live with day in and day out! What the children have to experience! The lost time with their families – the graduation ceremonies and the proms. It is time to remember.

Why remember? Well, each of us has our own personal reasons. I have mine and you have yours. I remember because – to use my dad's words – I want to 'pay my respects' so that I may grieve with those who grieve. For you see, the pain of that loss does not leave. Oh, it may be softened a little over time. But it does not leave. It is always there. So we need to be there with them.

I also remember so my children will remember. In the words of the Psalmist, "In the counsel of the Lord stands forever the thoughts of his heart to all generations." I want my children to remember the price that's been paid for them to live in this free land. I want to remember so that I can strengthen my resolve to be about the task of peacemaking. So that my son and daughter, and other sons and daughters, and other grandchildren may not be compelled to go into harm's way.

So, who will remember? Friends, you and I (we) will remember!

*In Flanders fields the poppies grow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields. (by John McCrae)*

Joshua 4:1-7 When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve **stones** from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight."

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these **stones** mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These **stones** are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."