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“Faith At the Frontlines” By Rev. Jeffrey V. O’Grady, SMCC Pastor

I recently heard Rear Admiral Margaret Kibben give a speech. She’s the first female chaplain at the U.S. Naval Academy, and now serves as the Chief of Chaplains of the U.S. Navy, which means that 1,500 chaplains throughout the world ultimately report to her. Her speech, entitled “At the Frontline of Faith, There is Faith at the Frontlines,” underscored the fact that the U.S. Constitution established the free exercise of religion as a fundamental value. In order to defend that right for those serving in the military, chaplains, as non-combatants, serve alongside soldiers, representing their faith communities in some of the most demanding circumstances. She says, “Chaplains are where it matters, when it matters, with what matters.”

Memorial Day provides us the opportunity to be where it matters with what matters too. Our community is invited to gather at the War Memorial at Lacy Park to commemorate our neighbors, family and friends who’ve served in the Armed Forces, especially during times of war and conflict. We must remember those who have given their lives in defense of the values we cherish, or something essential to human life is lost. Several years ago I was asked to say a few words at a small gathering at City Hall to launch a fund raising campaign to build that memorial in Lacy Park. I quoted a speaker who fought in the battle of Gettysburg during the Civil War. Joshua L. Chamberlain was a professor at Bowdoin College in Maine who left his position to join the Union Army, becoming an officer. He was wounded six times in the twenty battles that he fought, receiving the Medal of Honor for his role in the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863. Following the war, he returned to teaching and later served as the Governor of Maine for four terms.

Chamberlain returned to the battlefield at Gettysburg and penned these words: *“In great deeds something abides. On great fields something stays. Forms change and pass; bodies disappear, but spirits linger, to consecrate ground for the vision-place of souls. And reverent men and women from afar, and generations that know not and that we know not of, heart drawn to see where and by whom great things were suffered and done for them, shall come to this deathless field to ponder and dream; and lo, the shadow of a mighty presence shall wrap them in its bosom, and the power of the vision pass into their souls.”*

We gather this Memorial Day to “see where and by whom great things were suffered and done for” us, and to “ponder and dream” long enough for “the power of the vision pass (to) into (our) souls.” The same vision that directed the lives of Chamberlain and Rear Admiral Margaret Kibben, and countless other military chaplains and service personnel can also seep into our lives with the power to shape us. My father received a Purple Heart for injuries received during World War II in the Battle of the Bulge in Europe. I’m grateful for his memory and his sacrifice for the values we share and hold dear. Let’s remember together this Memorial Day all those who have sacrificed for us, and that “there is faith at the frontlines.”