

"Give Our Deaths Their Meaning: A Memorial Day Reflection"
Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
May 25, 2014

"Memorial Day" by Barbara Pescan (adapted)

Spirit of Life
whom we have called by many names
in thanksgiving and in anguish—

Send peace for the soldiers who did not make the wars
but whose lives were consumed by them

Let strong trees grow above graves far from home
Breathe through the arms of their branches
The earth will swallow your tears while the dead sing
"No more, never again, remember me."

For the wounded ones, and those who received them back,
let there be someone ready when the memories come
when the scars pull and the buried metal moves
and forgiveness for those of us who were not there
for our ignorance.

And in us, veterans in a forest of a thousand fallen promises,
let new leaves of protest grow on our stumps.

Give us courage to answer the cry of humanity's pain
And with our bare hands, out of full hearts,
with all our intelligence
let us create the peace.

.....

Memorial Day is a solemn affair. Its point is often confused with that of Veterans Day. Memorial Day is not about the veterans that survived the battle. It is about soldiers who died there ... who never had a chance to call themselves veterans. Memorial Day is about the war dead.

And in the midst of the parades ... the sales at the shopping mall ... the start of the tourist season ... the firing up of the grill ... in the midst of it all; a nation gives thanks. And yes, there are prayers. In fact, I will be offering prayers at one such

ceremony tomorrow. But in general, as a nation, we don't stop in our tracks at the parade ... at the mall ... at the beach ... at the grill ... in order to hold up Memorial Day's meaning.

I find myself envying the British who honor the WWII war dead in a most stirring way. I learned about this tradition in an unlikely place: in Lynne Truss' book about manners. In it she describes the ritual:

In Britain ... the last thing we do well (and beautifully) is pay respects to the war dead. ... The controlled emotion of Armistice Day tugs at conscience, swells the commonality of sorrow, and swivels the historical telescope to a proper angle, so that we see, however briefly, that we are not self-made: we owe an absolute debt to other people; a debt that our most solemn respect may acknowledge but can never repay. We stop and we silently remember. ... The first cannon fires at 11 a.m., and one is overwhelmed by a sense of sheer humility, sheer perspective. We are particles of suffering humanity. For two minutes a year, it's not a bad thing to remember that. *Talk to the Hand* by Lynne Truss

I don't think that anything we do on Memorial Day here in the United States reminds us that we are "particles of suffering humanity". There is nary a mention of Memorial Day's origin so I will mention it here. (Although there are several origin stories claimed, I'll be sharing just one of them.) The first Memorial Day was in 1865, a year that stands out in the United States' historic arc. Former slaves were horrified that 257 Union Soldiers had been buried in mass graves in Charleston, South Carolina. These men took two weeks to give each one of the soldiers proper burial.

That root story is worth mentioning, don't you think?

This Sunday is the last in a month of sermons concerned with covenant. So let's consider our covenant with the young dead soldiers. That covenant began with former slaves who understood that at the very least, a soldier who made the ultimate sacrifice deserved a proper burial. Today, the honor ceremony that is the ritualized return of dead soldiers to Dover Air Force Base upholds that covenant. From World War II through the Panama invasion of 1989, there had been media coverage of this honor ceremony that provided powerful proof of the ultimate sacrifice. In fact, so powerful is it that in 1991, in the lead up to the Gulf War, the then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney banned media coverage. The first Bush administration did not want the American people so reminded. In 2009 the Obama Administration lifted that ban.

But our covenant must go deeper than that. Especially when we are in the midst of war – as we have been for the past 12 years. When we are in the midst

of war it seems that Memorial Day shouldn't be the only time that the young dead soldiers are remembered. Actually, this Memorial Day is the first that the names of the soldiers who died in Afghanistan and Iraq were read out loud in a ceremony in Washington, DC. But here at All Souls, we have read these names every Sunday for 10 years. I know how excruciating it is to hear those names, Friends. I know because it is excruciating to *read* those names, to say each one out loud. In each name is a story. In each name is a grieving family. A community of dearly beloved. In each name is possibility cut short. We call out their names to honor their sacrifice but as importantly, to remind ourselves that it is us who must give their deaths meaning.

After death, it is up to us as civilians, as citizens, as people of faith to give their deaths meaning for their lives had been chock full of meaning.

I realize that what I am about to say may well be blasphemous on this particular Sunday. I sincerely apologize and would like to speak with the veterans among us especially if what I say causes you offense or hurt.

When I call out those names the excruciating pain fills a place in my heart where there should be meaning ... but where I find none. Did they die for "*peace and a new hope or for nothing?*" I don't accept that they died to preserve our freedom and liberty. Or our safety. I cannot bear that these young men and women may not have died for just cause.

Our covenant to these young dead soldiers must be to give their deaths meaning ... especially if we cannot reconcile ourselves to the war they were made to fight and sacrifice their lives *in our names*.

Soldiers have no say in the call to war. They do not get to decide which war is for worthy cause and which is not. General Norman Schwarzkopf, said that "It doesn't take a hero to order men into battle. It takes a hero to be one of those men who goes into battle." Increasingly in this country, it has been one man – the president – who has declared war. We have witnessed a dangerous precedent - one that we can ill-afford to see continue and that is the danger of executive power. This abuse of power must stop.

And finally, as a country, as people of faith, we must care for our veterans when they return from war. The debacle we are witnessing at the Veteran's Administration is the height of insult in the wake of duty fulfilled. It dishonors a nation's covenant to those who serve. It makes for yet more excruciating pain ... and a good dose of embarrassment.

We pray ...

*Send peace for the soldiers who did not make the wars
but whose lives were consumed by them.*

We pray for peace. In ways large and small, we dedicate our lives to the attainment of peace.

And on this day, we honor those who gave their lives for their country – at times a country whose ideals were lost on our powerful leaders.

I invite you to rise in body or in spirit as we call the names of those who died this past week – three in Afghanistan. And I invite you to call out the names of those you hold close and dear and who died in battle.

Hear these names

*[The young dead soldiers] say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for
peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,
it is you who must say this.*

We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.

We were young, they say. We have died; remember us. Archibald MacLeish

Amen.

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