

Remember Me Where My Heart Dwells

Memorial Day Weekend

Text: Psalm 84:2; I Corinthians 5:35-36; John 19:40

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Memorial Day Weekend, a weekend in which we remember those that we have loved and lost a while. It is a civil holiday and, along with Thanksgiving, perhaps the civil holiday that has the deepest spiritual significance, a time to honor those who paid the supreme sacrifice to preserve our liberty and to keep our freedoms alive, and then from that, the custom generally of remembering those who have gone before us, of visiting cemeteries and adorning graves with flowers, a time to pause, a time to remember, a time to grieve and a time to give thanks.

I remember vividly my first visit to a military cemetery. It was in the spring of 1984 in a little Dutch village toward Arnam. It was a British military cemetery and I think the village was Osterbaan. We visited a war museum there, and then we walked across to the cemetery. As I said, it was spring and the shrubs were absolutely splendid, and the cemetery was so obviously kept meticulously, with great care. I had never been struck before in the environment of a cemetery, but here I was deeply moved, I think for the first time existentially, to look across the field of crosses and stars of David, the names of primarily young men, the dates of birth and the dates of death indicating the brevity of life and the horrible cost of war and the price of preserving freedom and beating back the demonic darkness. It was a deeply moving experience; it was a spiritual experience; it was one of those moments along my pilgrimage way that I can remember that I really felt something very deep.

In 1995, Nancy and I led some pilgrims over to Europe and there outside Cambridge, England, there is an American military cemetery. Again, one simply cannot come upon that scene without being moved. A field of crosses or stars of David in orderly rows, and name after name after name of the youth of the nation. A beautiful memorial wall, a striking chapel, and once again I felt how we have honored our dead. There has been that tradition; there have been those who have seen to it that those who paid that supreme sacrifice are not forgotten, and the very way in which it is all kept speaks of the dignity of the human spirit. Going to Normandy 50 years after the invasion, stepping on the beaches and looking on the cliffs, seemingly impossible to scale, set with concrete bunkers that

seemed impenetrable with their huge guns facing out to sea, then moving up into the American cemetery there, one again feels the tremendous cost in which that battle was won that turned the tide of the war.

Well, those experiences for me, I must admit, were the experiences that imprinted deeply upon my consciousness the importance of the dignified honoring of the dead, and of having an appropriate setting in which to remember, to grieve, and through memory to feel the connections once again, and to let the love of those we have loved and lost well up within us.

The year 1984 was a significant year for me; it was the year of sabbatical, the first six months of that year, the first three months of which we spent in Schenectady where I was the theologian-in-residence in this great, old First Church in downtown Schenectady, and it was there that I was introduced for the first time to a Columbarium. Within that grand old building there was a room set aside, chapel-like, with a table and a candle and an open Bible, and one wall in which there were niches in which were the urns of those whose cremains were being kept. A sacred place in which the people of the congregation could come, sit, meditate, pray and remember, and could experience again the connectedness with those they'd loved and lost. In 1984 I came back in the fall to take up the task here once again and one of the things we did as a kind of exercise in renewal was to constitute eleven task forces in all aspects of our community life. One task force, at my instigation, was a task force to study the viability of creating our own columbarium. The conclusion of that task force at that time was not yet, not now. It may have had something to do with the fact that we included the local undertaker on the committee, I don't know. But, columbaria involve cremation, and in 1984 that was not as common as it is now. It is becoming a more common practice, for various reasons, reasons of space, ecology, economic considerations, and more. But, in any case, I think that it is time for us once again to have that option open to those for whom that is an appealing place in which to remember their loved ones.

I entitle this message, "Remember Me Where My Heart Dwells," because it is very much my own personal perspective. Burial customs are a part of every culture and every society, and there are those who say that burial customs are the last customs that a people will change, it is so primal. It is written so deeply into our past. In traditional communities, there are ways that this is done that are simply taken for granted, as though that's just the way it is and the way it ought to be. I read that little section in the Gospel of John, the burial of Jesus. Whether the story was intended to be literal or symbolic is beside the point. I read it for that little phrase, "... according to the burial custom of the Jews," because every people have had certain rituals of death, certain burial customs, and this is not a matter of some absolute truth. It is not a matter of right or wrong. It has everything to do with a personal perspective or with a personal inclination. And so, on this Memorial Day Weekend which is a Memorial Day which doesn't have to share place with Pentecost, which happens sometimes, or Baccalaureate, which

happens other times, but rather is a weekend which stands alone, I thought it would be the right time for us simply to think together about one more option that is available to us as we deal with death and dying with dignity and with honor.

There is, as I said, no right way to do this. When I began in the ministry, I used to conduct a funeral service with an open casket in the front, which I haven't seen for a long, long time. Those customs do gradually change. If we were an Episcopal congregation, the casket would be led in procession by the cross with the clergy reciting resurrection texts, a very nice ritual, actually. We have in this congregation a funeral pall which is a vestment cloth that goes over the casket, which I don't know whether we have used yet, just because when it comes to that moment, we haven't gotten into that kind of rhythm, but it's a very, very good custom because it puts a sameness on every casket, whether it is mahogany or brass or pinewood box, and a beautiful symbol of our leveling before the face of God.

Whatever the customs of a particular community may be, if they are done with dignity and meaning and if they communicate that to those who are grieving, then they are good and they are right. But there is one word that I ought to address to this matter of cremation because it is my impression that early on it may have been practiced by those who were intending to deny the resurrection of the body. Whether that is true or not, I don't know. I'm sure that it was true that the Church reacted to cremation, sensing perhaps that it was a denial of the resurrection of the body.

Paul's chapter on the resurrection, I Corinthians 15, ought to dispel any problem with the matter of cremation, for in that rather involved and torturous discussion of the 15th chapter, this much is clear - Paul arguing by analogy says that while there is continuity, there is also discontinuity, and that which is buried is not that which comes to life again, and it doesn't make one bit of difference whether the corpse is laid in the ground or the ashes placed in an urn. According to Paul's argument, you don't put a plant in the ground and expect that plant to come back. A plant bears seed, the seed is buried, disintegrates, dies and from it comes a new plant which is resurrection. He talks about a spiritual body, but how can you have a spiritual body? He's stammering, of course, because he's talking about the things about which we really don't know. But, what he was affirming was what he says I think even better in Romans 14, "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord, and whether we die, we die unto the Lord, so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." And his resurrection faith and hope was based in his trust in God who is the God of the living, the God who gives life and to whom we go when our breath returns to the one who gave it. So, as far as the manner of dealing with the body, it is a matter of indifference, a matter of personal preference, a matter of choice, and I think we are seeing a movement more and more toward the practice of cremation.

Why here? Why in the environment of the Church? During that year, 1984, once again Nancy and I made a little journey northward to Friesland, to the North Sea seaport of Holwerd from which my mother's family immigrated, and in those little villages in Friesland in The Netherlands, and generally in Europe, the skyline is punctuated by grand bell towers. Driving into the village, making one's way to that tower, one comes to the village church and there around the church, mantling it, the old churchyard, was the cemetery which is the burial custom of Europe for years. We made our way through the gilded fence and there almost immediately I saw on the gravestones the names of my maternal grandparents, van der Houde and Posthumas, and it gave me a sense of connectedness. It made me realize how we are all bound together in the chain of the generations, bound together in the bundle of life, bound together in the communion of the saints. The old terminology was the Church militant and the Church triumphant, but, as a matter of fact, all one.

It is not at all unusual here in the celebrations of baptisms or marriage or in the solemnity of the funeral service to have three and sometimes even four generations present, rarely five, with deep rootedness in this family of faith, this concrete congregation. With the mobility of people in our day you may say, "Well, there is no longer such a thing as the village church," and yet, I sense with our youth going out and having their children, more and more they are coming back here in their family sanctuary to the baptism of their children. Again, the title of the message, "Remember Me Where My Heart Dwells." This is where my heart dwells. This is where I have lived in community with you all these years. This is where my children have been baptized; this is where my children have been married, made their profession of faith, come back to have their children be baptized. It is here that I have family beyond my family. It is here that I have community, the bonds of love, and it seems to be that one of the finest, if the final, service that the Church can offer is the environment for the remembrance of those we have loved and lost a while. I have some logistics to work out and I know it will create some special circumstances, but I envision having the whole thing happen here - the visitation, service of worship, the gathering following, and for those who so choose, the burial in the Columbarium in the shadow of the Chapel, where one can come at any time to remember, to weep, to laugh and to give God thanks for life enriched by deep bonds of human relationship that death finally cannot break.

Joshua said to Israel on one occasion, "Choose you this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we'll serve the Lord." I would say to you, "Choose that which feels right for you, but as for me and my house, remember us where our heart dwells."