

What is Worth Dying For?

Memorial Day Weekend

Micah 4:1-5, Philippians 2:1-11, Luke 24:50-53

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Memorial Day is a wonderful way for a nation to take time to remember, to take time to remember that we stand on the shoulders of generations that have gone before us, to remember that the wonderful heritage into which we have entered is the consequence of the vision and values of those generations who have envisioned and lived and sacrificed in order that we might have the privilege of living in the kind of environment, the kind of ambience that we have come to take for granted. It is a good time for us to pause and to remember, in order that we might once again become truly grateful, mindful, and humble, and that we might offer ourselves, dedicating our lives, in turn, for the continued visioning and valuing that will allow the generations yet unborn to know the grace that we have known.

So, it is good for us on Memorial Day to be led to the cemetery, to remember those who have birthed us, those who have died for us, those who have caught the vision and dedicated their all, living by that which is noblest and highest. It is a good day. It is a good day to remember, to be humble, and to give thanks, lest we congratulate ourselves that somehow or other our cleverness or our ingenuity or our wisdom or our hard work have gotten us all of this grace in which we stand, lest we become proud and feel somehow or other that we are special and that perhaps we have earned the grace in which we live. So, it is a good time to remember.

And then, it is a good time to ask ourselves, "What will we do with all we have received? Will we exploit it for our own self-indulgence? Or will we, in turn, dedicate our lives, in the light of such grace, that not only our children and our children's children, but all the children of earth might come to know the freedom that we have, the freedom to pursue our vision and live by our values in peace?" That is the question for the morning.

I want to set before you two biblical images: The first is the elevation of Mt. Zion. That is a theme which you can find here and there in the Hebrew scriptures, that elevation of Mt. Zion. Jerusalem is built on a hill, of course, and in the prophetic

condemnation at the end of the third chapter of Micah, because of the corruption of the leadership, building Zion on blood, having no concern for justice and compassion, the prophet says this city will be plowed and Jerusalem will be a wooded hill. But then, because the prophets, although they were so blistering in their condemnation of that which was wrong, were also people of hope who left their people with a vision, the fourth chapter of Micah begins with that vision of the elevation of the holy hill of God, the elevation of Mt. Zion, and the prophet says that as the city is elevated on a hill, all of the nations and all of the people will flow to it, and they will flow to it because they will say, "Let us find there the word of God. Let us be instructed in the Torah."

The Torah is that wonderful word which defines the first part of the Hebrew scriptures. We sometimes translate it Law, but it is so much more than law; it is a way of life. Torah was a way of life. In Deuteronomy, Moses was cited as saying to Israel as he is about to depart, "I set before you life and death. Choose life." Torah was the way of life, and so the vision of the prophet is that all of the peoples and all of the nations will flow to Jerusalem and there they will be instructed and God will arbitrate between their disputes and will help them to settle their problems and difficulties, and then they will go home, having been instructed in the way of life. What will be the consequences of that?

They will be able to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and they will sit everyone under his own vine and his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid. What a picture. And it is the elevation of that holy mountain. It is the concrete living out of that way of life that is so magnetic that it attracts the people to come and to learn the secret. There is no imposing of some kind of uniformity. There is no imposing of a vision, be it ever so noble, because the imposition of a vision demands coercion and finally the tyranny of the vision. There is no religious empire here. There is no longer a struggle for power, but rather, the nations come and learn and go their respective ways, and they live in peace. The prophet says all of the peoples will live according to the word of their God and we will live according to the word of Yahweh. No homogenized state of things. No boring uniformity. But rather, the kind of freedom that enables a people to live according to their vision and their values in peace.

One was born out of the womb of Israel one day and he was immersed in that covenant, and he knew the prophets, and he felt the passion of the prophets. Micah had been born in a little village outside of Jerusalem, so he had an eye on what was going on in the capital city. Jesus from the north country knew that finally it was to Jerusalem that he must turn his face, for he had a word to speak, a word of truth to power. And his concern was very much the concern of Micah. If I had taken you to chapter six and verse eight, those familiar words of Micah - what was this vision? What were these values? What was the Torah, this way of life, that was the best and the noblest of the tradition of Israel? God says, "I have told you what you must do. Do justice, love kindness, act justly, love

compassionately, walk humbly with God,” recognizing, that is, that no matter who you are, how great you are, finally you stand under the aegis of that eternal mystery, the source of all being.

Jesus imbued with that same vision, came to Jerusalem, and they crucified him. They tried to kill his truth, but he had embodied the divine intention, and those who were closest to him believed that this was God’s anointed. They believed that this was God’s Messiah, this was the promised one. They looked at him, they experienced him, they heard his teaching, they saw his action and they said, “That’s it. There is the embodiment of the divine intention that is the finest expression of that whole covenant that has brought us to this point.” He was crucified and they were devastated, but before long, strange as it was, they said, “You know, he’s not dead. He’s alive.” One soon had a vision and another one had a vision and they were encountered. Paul had an encounter last of all, that heavenly vision, and so Paul gave expression to what has become the expression of the faith of the Church, for he said, dealing with that Philippian congregation trying to get them to get along and have a good spirit with one another, he used the example of Jesus, Jesus who was humiliated and whom God exalted. God exalted him, he said, giving him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess. And that, of course, is the church’s affirmation of the ascension of Jesus, the affirmation that Jesus, who embodied the divine intention, who was crucified, could not finally be crucified, could not finally be killed. That for which he stood, that which he embodied could not die. This Jesus who was crucified must surely be in the presence of God. And so, they lived in the confident expectation, that hope, that God would do some mighty act, that this one would come.

Now, don’t get all worried about Jesus’ space travels, the ascension, his floating up into the clouds. Don’t let that bother you. Carl Sagan, the astronomer now deceased, quipped that if Jesus, 2000 years ago had left on his way out of the universe, he’d still be on the way. Well, that’s not the point, of course. The point is that they knew that Jesus was the embodiment of God in the midst of the human scene, and that which he embodied was alive, and that embodiment in the presence of God was the elevation of all that was noble and good and true, the finest and highest expression of everything that that people of Israel had hoped or dreamed of.

Two biblical images. I connect them because of the elevation theme. But, as a matter of fact, what the prophet was saying was, “Look, this way of life, this word of God, this matter of justice and compassion and humility, when that is lived out, that will be so magnetic and so attractive, it will draw, it will lure to itself. There is no need to impose it. It will, as it were, sell itself. If you can concretely embody it, the world will take note of it.” Those, likewise, who had lived with Jesus knew that that’s it. That’s the highest expression of the human possibility, and he is exalted, he is lifted up. And again, one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess, because that is the ultimate, that is the last word.

Two images, a vision and value, that when in freedom chosen, would enable the world to be at peace.

This past week Nancy and I sat with our financial adviser. He comes twice a year, usually timing his visits just after the stock market had rallied. But, this time he came and, of course, the nation had just gone on orange alert, and when you deal with the stock market, the bond market, you know that wild card sends everything spinning out of control. Who can say, who can predict, who can guide, who can counsel? He threw up his hands. I felt sorry for him. And Nancy was getting really panicky, and I said, "Honey, don't worry. There are a lot of churches in the area that are going to want me to preach for them on occasion." But then, after Michael had talked about the volatility of everything and the uncertainty of everything and the unpredictability of everything, and Nancy was deep down in her chair, he said, "You know what really makes me afraid? I'm afraid for my two-year-old granddaughter. I wonder what kind of a world she is going to live in," and I thought to myself, isn't it ironic? Here we are the world's lone superpower and we're afraid. We celebrate a Memorial Day weekend under high alert and there is an anxiety and an uncertainty, and I wondered, must we not be doing something wrong, or is there not an alternative way to be?

Someone gave me a copy of a commencement address. This is the time of commencement addresses. This one just happened to be an address of forty years ago. Do you remember forty years ago? Some of you do. The world had come out of the Second World War; we were in the midst of the Cold War; we were afraid to death of the Communists; we were in lock with the Soviet Union in that impasse of terror, with our mutual nuclear arms aimed at each other with the possibility of total annihilation. Forty years ago. At that time there was fear all around, as well. And so, this commencement address suggested what was really important. These are just some excerpts, but it will give you the flavor. The speaker says,

I have therefore, chosen this time and this place to discuss a topic on which ignorance often abounds and the truth is too rarely perceived - yet it is the most important topic on earth: world peace.

What kind of peace do I mean? What kind of peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace - the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living - the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children - not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women - not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.

I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary rational end of rational men. I realize that the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war - and frequently the words of the pursuer fall on deaf ears. But we have no more urgent task.

No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue. As Americans, we find communism profoundly repugnant as a negation of personal freedom and dignity. But we can still hail the Russian people for their many achievements - in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage.

So, let us not be blind to our differences - but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.

The United States, as the world knows, will never start a war. We do not want a war. We do not now expect a war. This generation of Americans has already had enough - more than enough - of war and hate and oppression. We shall be prepared if others wish it. We shall be alert to try to stop it. But we shall also do our part to build a world of peace where the weak are safe and the strong are just. We are not helpless before that task or hopeless of its success. Confident and unafraid, we labor on - not toward a strategy of annihilation but toward a strategy of peace.

John F. Kennedy - Commencement Address, American University, 1963

That was forty years ago; the world lived under a terrible threat, but there was one voice that said at such a time of fear, let us seek peace, the freedom of all peoples to live out their vision and their values in peace. That is a vision and a value I would die for, because anything less is to fail really to live.

References:

John F. Kennedy. *Commencement Address*, American University, 1963.