“Filled Up – Poured Out”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
2 Samuel 23:13-17
May 25, 2014 VPC
Last year, on Memorial Day, our family went down to Arlington National Cemetery. There is a new app for the iPhone and Android phone called, “ANC Explorer” for Arlington National Cemetery. You enter the name of the person whose gravestone you want to find and a dot appears where the stone is, another dot appears where you are and it guides you right there. I entered the name of my Uncle David, who was career Army, and Aunt Joyce, and the app took us right to their gravestone. It is a place of quiet reverence for my family. Then it hit me. I could use it to visit the grave of a Yorktown High School classmate and one of my dearest friends, Patrick O’Neil, if he had been buried in Arlington.

Some time ago, in the days before Facebook and all sorts of online search engines, I decided to track down my closest high school classmates since we had scattered to the winds. I found every one of them but Pat O’Neil, who had lived just down the street. Pat was my partner in the do-nothing machine contest in our Yorktown senior physics class. We had to invent a machine with a lot of moving parts that ended up doing absolutely nothing. We came in second place and always felt, “We wuz robbed!” After we graduated, I went to Georgia Tech and Pat went on to the Naval Academy. When I had trouble locating him twenty years later, it dawned on me to contact their alumni department to learn of his whereabouts. Eventually, I received a letter saying, “Mr. Ott, It is with great regret I write to inform you that Lieutenant Patrick Warren O’Neil, ’70, is deceased as the result of an aircraft accident at Patuxent River Naval Air Station, MD on June 13, 1978.” Using the iPhone app, we found his grave. A salute to his memory and a prayer for his family. Needless to say, it really messed me up.

Our own church family was saddened this week to learn of the death of Eli Takesian, who was Associate Pastor here for seven years. Eli served as a military chaplain during the Vietnam War. In the middle of the battle of Huế City, in what was one of the longest and bloodiest battles of the Vietnam War, “Eli, without hesitation, made his way - unarmed - through the battlefield in Huế City [in the height of the conflict] in 1968. He brought prayers, support and hope to the wounded.” “When you do something courageous, you are filled with fear,” Takesian said. “Once I started attending to the Marines, that fear evaporated because the greater need was for the wounded and dying Marines.”

1 Eli was a wonderful pastor here, especially appreciated for his love for and encouragement of

1 http://www.deltaonefivesmc.com/styled-21/index.html
children. We miss Eli with grief and gratitude and pray for his dear wife Margaret.

What is Memorial Day? Memorial Day is not a special day in the life of the church, but it is a national day of grief and gratitude. As followers of Jesus, we are grateful for those who gave their lives for us, even as we are grateful for our Lord Jesus, who gave his life for us. So, it is always appropriate to grieve for loved ones who died in the service of our country and to offer gratitude for their service and their sacrifice. Indeed, some may well give their lives for us this very day.

Along this line are two practices I have found helpful. Remembering those “in harm’s way” on our behalf is not reserved for Memorial Day and Veteran’s Day. Every now and then the Washington Post publishes the names and pictures of those who have died “in harm’s way” on our behalf in the preceding months. I like to stop whatever I am doing and look at each picture and offer prayers for the loved ones of each person to our Lord. I know if I lost a loved one in combat, I would appreciate it if someone took the time to look at the picture, say the name and offer a prayer. We also print in the bulletin the names of people related to VPC who are “in harm’s way”. It’s a good practice to read the names once a week and pray for their protection and for those who love them.

Our text this morning tells of a curious incident in the life of David when he was leading a band of fighting men as David was doing his best to escape the clutches of King Saul, who was out to kill him. The lead warriors in David’s band of men were referred to as “The Thirty.” Today, these thirty guys (there were actually 37) would all go in the first round of the NFL draft. If they awarded the equivalent of the Medal of Honor in the days of David, every one of them would have received one. They were deeply loyal to David, incredibly capable warriors and were men of highest valor. They were in a remote hideout called Adullam and David started thinking about his hometown, Bethlehem, about fourteen miles away. We pick up the story there.

“Towards the beginning of harvest, three of the thirty chiefs went down to join David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the valley of Rephaim. David was then in the stronghold;
and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. David said longingly, ‘O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!’” (2 Samuel 23:13-15).

Now David wasn’t actually asking someone to get the water. He was just longing for the refreshment, not just of water, but of his boyhood home. I can get that. The very old Ott family home north of New Orleans had a draw well. You cranked a rope to lower a canister down a pipe into the well and cranked it up to get water—water with a unique taste because of the particular ground from which it came. A taste of that water to anyone who spent growing up years there was to instantly be transported home, and not just to the physical location of the home, but to the home in deepest memory with parents, grandparents, great aunts and uncles and even great-grandparents. David knew that water was a taste of his safe home.

So after David said, “O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!” Then we read, “Then the three warriors broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and brought it to David” (2 Samuel 23:16). We don’t know who the three warriors were of the Thirty but we do know when you go fourteen miles two ways through enemy lines that you have put your life on the line. These guys had fought side by side with David, honored David as their leader and more than those things, they loved David and were willing to put their lives on the line for him. David got that. Instead of drinking the water that these three men have gone through so much risk and effort to get, we read, “But he [David] would not drink of it; he poured it out to the Lord, for he said, ‘The Lord forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?’ Therefore he would not drink it” (2 Samuel 23:16b-17).

These men were filled up and poured out. Filled up with love and loyalty for David, they poured out their lives at great personal risk to get water for David. David in turn knew that water was now more than water, it was of the very value of the blood of these men offered for him and he in turn pours it out to the Lord—not to waste it but to show his deepest respect, appreciation and love for them. So he too was filled up—filled up by their love and sacrifice—and poured out in honor of them.
Henrietta Mears, one of the great Christian leaders of the Twentieth Century, took a trip to Europe just after the ending of World War II. She came home having learned the stories of young soldiers on the front lines during the war, who had been sent on missions from which they were not expected to return. Their stories profoundly touched Henrietta. She went on to be the keynote speaker at a conference of one thousand Christian leaders and said, “During the war, men of special courage were called upon for difficult assignments; often these volunteers did not return. They were call ‘expendables.’ We must be expendables for Christ.” An expendable for Christ is a person who says to Jesus, “My Lord, You expended yourself fully for me, your life for my life, you were filled up and you were poured out for me—now may I also be filled up with you and poured out in your service—an expendable for you even as you considered yourself an expendable for me.”

This Memorial Day weekend, I am thinking about Wayne Alderson, a friend of mine who died last year. He was the first GI to cross the German Siegfried Line of defense, where he suffered a devastating wound as he won the Silver Star for valor. One Sunday morning, I was preaching before the congregation received the Sacrament of Communion. I was standing right behind the Communion Table. Wayne was sitting directly in front of me on the other side of the table along with the other elders who would be serving communion. Throughout the sermon he never made eye contact with me a single time. He just kept staring at the cup and the bread on the communion table.

Sometime later, the two of us were talking. I wanted to know if there was some problem between us because of the oddness of that experience during communion. He told me as he stared at the communion table he found himself back on March 16, 1945. He and his squad found themselves in a hostile German trench. Wayne was leading as point man as they worked their way through the zig-zag of the trench, when suddenly a German threw a grenade that went off in Wayne’s face, leaving a wound that left an indentation in his forehead that was there for the rest of his life.

Wayne said, “As I was falling, my friend and fellow soldier, Red Preston, Red with his brilliant auburn-chesnut hair, grabbed me and swung me around so that he was between me and the enemy, and our eyes

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2 Henrietta Mears and How She Did It
locked eye-to-eye. Then Red was hit from behind,” Wayne said, “taking a bullet that would have hit me and as he died I was covered with his blood. My friend gave his life for me.” Then Wayne said, “Because of Red Preston, I understand more deeply the significance of the body and blood of Jesus, which is why I was staring at the communion table and not listening to you that morning.” I was stunned and deeply humbled. It was a significant moment for us both. We shook hands and embraced. Wayne preached reconciliation. He practiced it.³

Wayne’s story brings home to me the line from the Battle Hymn of the Republic, “As Christ died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” On Memorial Day weekend, we honor those who have died on our behalf with grief and with gratitude. Wayne’s experience also brings home to us more deeply the cost of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross on our behalf. Instead of Red Preston grabbing Wayne, looking him in the eye and spinning to take the hit, it is Jesus who grabbed you and me, looked us in the eye and spun, taking the hit on the cross that we deserved to take for our own sin. The Apostle Paul tells us to shepherd the church of God, which God obtained with the blood of His son (Acts 20:28). In Holy Communion we remember Jesus’ body, broken for us, his blood shed for us, an expendable, filled up and poured out for us.

Years ago, I heard an old story of a man by the name of George whose job it was to raise and lower a railroad bridge over a river. The bridge was normally raised so that boats and ships could pass through on the river but when he heard the whistle of the locomotive, George would pull the lever to close the bridge. One day, George was working outside and a short walk away from the building with the lever when he was stung by a bee. George was terribly allergic to bee stings and realized in an instant he’d left his in his car the epi-pen that would save his life. In the same moment he heard the whistle of the train. George knew he had a life and death decision. He could make it to his car for the epi-pen to save his own life or he could make it to the lever, close the bridge and save the lives of the people on the train but he could not do both. George made his decision, headed for the building and pulled the lever. He was filled up with God’s love—poured out in an expression of that love.

³ For more on Wayne’s story see Stronger Than Steel by R.C. Sproul
The part about that story that has stuck with me ever since has to do with the passengers on the train as it raced over the bridge. They were sitting in their seats reading their newspapers, reading their iPads, drinking their coffee, completely unaware that George had sacrificed his life that they might live. Are you fully aware of the history of the person of Jesus and his sacrifice for you? Do you know Jesus said, “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord.” Do you realize through Jesus’ death, the shedding of his innocent blood, and his resurrection from the dead that God, the Father Almighty, offers a full pardon to you when you accept Jesus and follow him? Open yourself to the One who was filled up and poured out for you and ask that you may be filled with him and poured out for him.

On this Memorial Day, when many in our nation, like the people on the train that were unaware of the sacrifice of George, seem unaware of the sacrifices being made on their behalf by citizens of our own country, may you and I, in grief and gratitude, show our honor and appreciation for them.

Let us all be expendables for Christ in our own lives—filled up by him – poured out for him.