

"A TIME TO REMEMBER"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 24, 1992

"A TIME TO REMEMBER"

INTRODUCTION

Memory is a very tricky thing and especially as we get older. Three women were overheard talking and the first one said,

"You know...sometimes I go to the refrigerator and forget what it was that I went to get...."

The second woman laughed and responded saying,

"I know what you mean....when I go upstairs, I can't remember whether I'm going up to get something or I'm on my way back down..."

The third woman picked up on what was being said and replied,

"Well....I guess I'm lucky....(knocking on wood)....I don't have that problem. Oh, there's somebody knocking at the door..."

I think it was Bob Hope who once said that he could always find his car out in the parking lot. It was the one with the lights left on. Yes, memory is a tricky thing...for all of us, regardless of age.

DEVELOPMENT

There are some things that we should never forget. And one of these has to do with the sacrifices that others have made in our behalf.

It was a Spring morning in the year 1866, just after the Civil War had devastated the South. A group of Southerners did something that was quite extraordinary. They marched down the streets of what was left of their town out to the town cemetery. And there they decorated the graves of the soldiers. All the soldiers - Union as well as Confederate.

The mothers and daughters and widows had buried their dead. Now they were burying their hatred. The time for healing had come. It marked the first Memorial Day in our land.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why Memorial Day is marked in late May? As far as I know, its time on the calendar has nothing to do with some historic battle or the start of some War or the signing of an armistice. Why, then, the month of May?

For a practical reason. Because it is a time when flowers bloom...flowers with which to decorate graves.

Some of you can still remember when Memorial Day was called Decoration Day and when the cemeteries of our land were filled with people...kneeling to plant a flower or place a garland or unfurl a flag or to say a quiet prayer. I remember Decoration Day or Memorial Day of 1947...45 years ago. As a senior in High School upstate, I was the student invited to give the Gettysburg Address in the Prospect Hill Cemetery. I got to ride with the mayor in the "open car", follow-

ing the high school band out to the cemetery and delivering the address from memory before a thousand people. Few towns and cities still do this sort of thing. Most people can't be bothered for it would take time away from the ball park or the beach or the backyard.

At the National Cemetery out on the Island - one of the nation's largest - it has become necessary to advertise for volunteers to place flags on the graves of veterans as the number of volunteer veterans has decreased and some of those who volunteer have no idea why they're there. A 13 year old boy scout was asked why the members of the local scout troop were placing flags on the graves and he quickly replied, "Sure...in order to get our service hours".

REMEMBER THE DEBT WE OWE TO OTHERS

Memorial Day is obviously not one of our major holidays, but we need to remember. First-off, we need to remember the debt we owe to others.

You and I do not have what we have by our own efforts...alone! There is no greater myth than that of the self-made man or woman. We owe an enormous debt from the moment we come into this world and some of that debt is owed to men and women who shed their blood on a battle field of this nation. Many of them gave their lives because they truly believed that freedom is worth dying for.

To honor their sacrifice is not to glorify war. War is the ultimate blasphemy against God. Still...we live in a cruel world where tyrants would impose their will on others. How nice it would be if we lived in a world where people always played "by the rules"...where no one coveted his neighbor's property...where never again would we have to depend on police and on armies to enforce justice.

But such a world does not yet exist. We do not know what dangers may yet await us.

When the War Between the States flared up, a young Texan enlisted and marched off to fight with his friends. He said to his buddies,

"We won't be gone from home very long....'cause we can lick them Yankees up north with broom sticks."

Four years later when the fighting was finally over, this young man came home to Texas...a beaten and wounded man. One of his neighbors said,

"What happened? I thought you were gonna beat them Yankees with broom sticks..." "We could have" replied the young man..."except we couldn't get 'em to fight with broomsticks".

It would be nice now that the Cold War is over if we could totally eliminate our defense establishment with the knowledge that no nation would ever commit aggression again against a neighbor. Unfortunately, that's not the way the world seems to be.

Winston Churchill used to tell a parable about a zoo in which all the animals decided to disarm. "Peace talks" were arranged to work out the details. The rhinoceros asked for a strict ban against the use of teeth in war. The stag

and porcupine agreed, but the lion and the tiger defended teeth as being honorable weapons. The bear, however, wanted both teeth and horns to be banned, but suggested that all animals be allowed to give each other a good hug when they quarreled. This only served to offend all other animals, and so they never could agree.

Realists know that that's the kind of world we live in, that we have not yet outlived our use for a police force. And thus, through the centuries young men and sometimes, young women, and many others have been sacrificed in the cause of one noble ideal after another. Some of these wars have been senseless and barbaric, to be sure. We know that. We also know that others have been necessary. And so this weekend, we pause to honor the memory of those who have given their lives believing that they were making the world safer, freer and more humane.

OTHERS WHO HAVE GIVEN THEIR LIVES FOR US.

Of course, there are others who have given their lives for us who never wore a uniform and who never carried a gun. Let us remember them, too.

Today's Scripture Lesson from Revelation talks about those who "washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb", and among those stalwart souls are those who have given their lives in the service of our Lord, Jesus Christ. And there have been hundreds of thousands of such sacrifices across the last twenty centuries.... Union Seminary recently celebrated the life and ministry of Bonhoeffer.

In the 16th Century there was a bloody purge of Christians in the country of Scotland. Thousands of ministers and lay persons suffered for the sake of Christ. Many were hanged or slaughtered in cold blood. Some of these believers endured the torture of burning at the stake or being beheaded. Among them was a young man of 24 years, a young Scotsman by the name of Patrick Hamilton. He was sentenced to die. As he was tied to the stake and the fire was burning at his feet, he pulled off his outer garments and handed them to his servant, saying,

"These will not profit me in the fire, yet they will do thee some good, my friend."

Hamilton was taunted by one of his persecutors to deny God, but answered,

"Wickedman! Thou knowest I am not at guilt, and that is the truth of God for which I now suffer."

As the fire burned, the young martyr, Hamilton, called out,

"How long, O Lord, shall darkness overwhelm this realm? How long wilt thou suffer this tyranny of man?"

As he was being consumed by the flames, he prayed like the Biblical Stephen, "Lord, Jesus...receive my spirit!"

While we pause on this weekend to remember those who have died in battle, we also need to remember those committed followers and soldiers of Christ like Patrick Hamilton. They died in a battle, too...a battle between light and darkness.

Their sacrifices remind us how anemic our own witness for Christ at times can be. They gave their all. We dare not forget them. Their lives touch ours.

AND REMEMBER THE LAMB HIMSELF SLAIN...

And there is one more we need to remember this day. It is the Lamb Himself. As it says in Revelation, "The Lamb slain before the foundations of the world". Jesus of Nazareth. "Behold the Lamb of God" said John.

J. Wilbur Chapman used to tell the story of a soldier who was mortally wounded. His buddy, Jim, stayed by him through his long and lonely illness to the very end. "Jim...I'm going to die" Charlie whispered to his friend. Knowing Jim had no family of his own, Charlie added this request,

"But I want you to go back to my mother and take my place there...." "But Charlie", Jim reminded his dying friend, "You mother doesn't even know me and she would never feel comfortable about my coming into her home and living there as a son".

"I will write her a letter and you will take it to her" said Charlie.

And so this letter told the mother of her son's ill fortune - of his wounds, his suffering and how Jim had stuck there with him through night and day. The letter closed like this, "Mother...please receive Him for my sake."

Jim carefully tucked the letter away in an inner pocket and after the end of the war he went to Charlie's hometown and sought out his mother's home. He knocked at the door and for several minutes stood there waiting...ragged...and worn from the ravages of war, a very unsightly looking man.

As the lady opened the door, she looked on him and thought him to be just another beggar passing by. But Jim handed her the letter through the half-opened door. She read it...recognizing, of course, her son's handwriting. When she read the last line, "And mother...please...receive Jim...for my sake" the expression on her face changed, tears of deep emotion welled up inside and she threw the door open wide, receiving Jim, "For Charlie's sake...."

According to what I read in my Bible, that sort of acceptance is the story of the cross. God is accepting us as His own beloved children - never forget that - for the sake of Christ. At times we may not understand why it had to be this way, but as we look at the cross we see there an open door. "For the sake of Christ"...that door at the foot of the cross stands open for us.

AND THUS WE REMEMBER

And thus we remember. We remember first those who died that we may live in freedom in this land. We remember, too, those who died that we may live in faith and so we sing "faith of our fathers living still". We remember, too, the Christ who died on a cross outside a city wall for the sake of all mankind, died that you and I might live and live abundantly. And here the ultimate meaning of this Memorial Day weekend comes into our view. So, let it be for each of us a time to remember...to give thanks... and then to go out and finish what they started.

CLOSING

I once read somewhere that the movie, Yankee Doodle Dandy, was being shot on the day after Pearl Harbor. The cast listened as

President Roosevelt announced on the radio at noon in that historic broadcast that the United States was now "at war" with Japan and Germany. I remember it well...as a seventh grader sitting on a gymnasium floor in the Philip Livingstone Junior High School in Albany...twelve years old...with a thousand other Junior High School boys and girls...

At that point, Director Michael Curtiz came on the sound stage with Jimmy Cagney (who grew up here on 96th Street...in Yorkville). They all listened in silence for the national anthem to finish. And as the women dabbed their tears from their eyes and the men were deeply moved, Curtiz said in his best Hungarian accent,

"Now, boys and girls....we have work to do! We have had news...but we have a wonderful story to tell the world. So, let's put away sad things in this hour...and begin..."

And they did. I like that. That's our challenge, too. Yes, we remember or we should be remembering with gratitude the sacrifices that others have made in our behalf in the history of our land and in the history of our Faith to bring us to this hour...to these moments. And now let us rise and go forth...and through our words, our deeds tell others "our" story!

PRAYER

O God, on this Memorial Day weekend, we would pause to remember.... and to pray for our country and our world. We pray for protection but even more for guidance. For knowledge, but even more for imagination. For power, but even more for grace. For courage, but even more for compassion...to do and to be the kind of people in this land who change the climate and avert the storms of violence and bloodshed before it starts. In the name of Christ, the life-giver, we now pray. Amen.

