

## MEMORIAL DAY 2010

John 15:12–17

May 30, 2010

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*Prayer: Come, O God, into the quiet of this holiday week-end. In the midst of leisure, may we remember men and women who served their country and died. May we remember, as well, your dream of harmony and peace for your creation. And may we remember your promise to dwell among us and be our God. In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

On Memorial Day, of all days, it is important to remember. But it is easy to let the memory fade.

Frank Buckles hopes the memory does not fade. Do you know that name? This past February he turned 109, and he is the sole remaining American veteran to have served in World War I, often called the Great War. He is the honorary chairperson of a committee to have a monument erected in Washington to honor those who paid the ultimate price of their lives in that war. That war is fading from our memory, says Douglas Martin, a *New York Times* writer several years ago. He writes:

World War I was so vile that nobody ever expected to see anything like it ever again. The lads who marched into fire bombs, mud and poisonous gas, would never be forgotten. Or would they? In tens of thousands of parks, traffic triangles, and cemeteries in every corner of America, World War I memorials are crumbling faster than they can be shored up by people who consider them sacred, even as the events they mourn, praise and implicitly question, fade deeper into the mist.

And then Mr. Martin editorialized:

The Great War solved nothing, proving only that human beings, acting in organized fashion, could kill one another, more efficiently than ever dreamed. Most of the American dead were buried near the fields of battle. So their friends and families built shrines near the fields where they hit baseballs and held the hands of pretty girls. These tributes ... were meant to be eternal.<sup>1</sup>

But the monuments are deteriorating. 116,500 Americans died in the First World War. There were 4.3 million in uniform. One remains.

I will never forget my first visit to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. This was the war that was closest to me and my generation. I went there and looked in the books and found the names of those I knew etched in the black granite wall. There he was—Joe Monaham, who was on the track team with me. Even though he was a senior and I was a freshman, I remember him speaking to me and treating me kindly. He was engaged to be married to a girl in our church.

There was Jon Smith. Sat next to him in English class, along with his twin brother Chris. Identical as any two twins could be. Never could tell them apart. Both names were up there.

It is important to remember.

Tom Are is the pastor of the Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City. He tells of one of the members, a woman named Dusty, who heard that her pastor was going to Washington and intended to visit the Vietnam Memorial. So she cornered him after worship one Sunday. She said “Tom, somebody was in Washington awhile ago and came home and told me that she could not find my son’s name on the wall. She said ‘His name isn’t on the wall.’ Tom, will you look for him?” Tom promised that he would. He and his family walked the wall a few weeks later. They all searched and searched and found the boy’s name. No one in this world was happier than Dusty when Tom was able to report to her that her son’s name was indeed there. He was remembered.

If peace is important—if peace is the highest priority on God’s agenda—and there is no way to argue that it isn’t, then memory of war, the waste, the suffering, the millions and millions of combatants and innocent civilians who have died; the unleashing of the very worst of our humanity: pogroms, massacres, holocaust, genocide—that’s all a part of the memory. But so is the heroism, the self-sacrifice, the nobility, the laying down of one’s life, the highest and best of our humanity.

We must remember *it all*, but it is easy to forget. And when we forget those who fought and died, we forget the ideals that they fought for, and our memories become very selective. We forget that truth is always the first casualty of war. We forget that our motives have not always been pure in going to war. We forget the true costs of war, such as the moral wounds of war. The Rand Corporation recently estimated that 300,000 veterans are currently suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome. One quarter of a million veterans of wars since Vietnam are serving time behind bars.<sup>2</sup> And we forget our nation’s highest and best principles, which come from the Judeo-Christian tradition, of the God-given dignity and rights and liberty of every man and woman in creation.

It is also important to remember that war and violence begins in the mind, and though our forebears fought and died for free speech, even, as one person recently suggested, the free speech of idiots, the kind of angry rhetoric that has been displayed on the air waves and at rallies, and even within the halls of Congress do a disservice to our very best ideals. When a talk show host says “We have to get rid of these people”—and calls them a name unsuitable for a pulpit, he crosses a line between expressing political preferences and inciting violence. When some of our political leaders shout “You lie!” to the President, or “baby-killer” to a strong pro-life Congressman, then sure enough, violent and potentially violent acts begin to happen, and it is not difficult to see the connection between the rhetoric of rage and violent behavior.<sup>3</sup>

Our fragile experiment in republican democracy, which is based upon the God-given liberty of every individual for which hundreds of thousands have died, leans heavily upon the tradition of civil dialogue—and that tradition fades in the midst of shouts and threats of violence, and soon

we find that, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, violent, “nativist extremist groups have increased 80% since President Obama took office.” And soon you have an unhinged believer flying his Cessna into an IRS building in Texas, or a father and a son ready to take down any officers that get in their way in West Memphis.

When we remember faithfully, you see, we can't help but weep—to remember and give thanks for those who laid down their lives for us, to mourn for those we've loved and lost in the prime of life; to grieve for every parent's child who has died on all sides of conflicts. It is then that perhaps our voices might be lowered and we can restore our civic, and civil, discourse.

So we remember, but we must not simply remember those who have gone before us. We also remember those who serve in the armed forces today in terribly harsh conditions, those who go back for three, four or five tours of duty, those who are suffering and dying. This weekend the toll in Afghanistan reached 1,000 casualties. Iraq is over 4,500. We also remember those who are increasingly pawns in a global game of pride and power, innocents who are every bit as precious in God's eyes as our own children. (Has there ever been a more disrespectful and impersonal term used to describe innocent civilians killed as “collateral damage?”)

This is the challenge for many of us, for feelings and convictions about the wars we are currently fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan are diverse and deep. People of good faith, starting at the same place—the security and safety of the nation and the peace of the world—come to diametrically opposite conclusions about what we are doing and how we are doing it, whether we should have invaded Iraq in the first place, whether and when we should leave both countries, and how. And, as is always the case, preachers on both sides invoke the name of God, God's justice and God's righteousness, to support their point of view.

Abraham Lincoln pondered this irony in the midst of the Civil War. North and South read the same bible, he said, pray to the same God, yet God did not answer the prayer of either side fully.

And I am one who has had, and has expressed deep concerns about these wars. But then I remember Father Barkemeyer, a Roman Catholic priest from Chicago. From the start he shared with his congregation reservations and misgivings about what we are doing in Iraq, but he serves as an Army chaplain there. He said “This is not the place I would choose to be, but I'm supposed to be here. This is all about taking care of sons and daughters, not about the justice of the cause.” And so he travels through the dangerous streets of Ramadi by Humvee, to say mass and to visit lonely and frightened young Americans. He administers last rites to dozens of victims of car bombs and roadside bombs, prays with the wounded and dying in the military emergency room, and is available at all hours of the day and night to talk with soldiers troubled by fear and religious uncertainty.

And, oh yes, in his quarters, Father Barkemeyer keeps a supply of children's books and a video camera so parents can read bedtime stories to their children 6,000 miles away.

God bless Father Barkemeyer. God bless those young parents. God bless their children. God bless them all.

“No one has great love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Jesus was saying goodbye to his disciples in that upper room. Later he would be betrayed, arrested, tortured and the crowds’ rage won the day as he was executed.

But this evening he summed it all up:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

“I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you.”

“I am the vine, you are the branches.”

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

But right in the middle, there is there is the most memorable summation:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

As he faced his own death, what Jesus wanted his friends to know and remember was that the whole creation is full of God’s love; that he, himself—his life, his teaching, his death—was an expression, a picture of God’s love; that this human race, with all its amazing diversity, is the expression of God’s love; that all the religious traditions and rituals and theologies and institutions in the world are for the purpose of acknowledging, saying thank you for and pouring that love of God back into the life of the world.

And one more thing, one very personal thing: If you want to live your life fully, every year of it, every week and day and minute of it, you have to lay it down, give it away. You have to find someone or something you love so much that you are willing to live for it, or die for it. This is the Christian secret. To live the very best life you possibly can, you have to give it away—to a child, a beloved, your friends, your faith, your church, or the great ideas and principles of our nation.

So may we remember them all this day with deep gratitude, but also with confession, as we confess our tendency to be more willing to kill than to lay down our lives; more willing to glorify war than to understand the things that make for peace; more willing to cause suffering than to suffer; more willing to take up our weapons than our crosses.

And may we remember the one who taught us and continues to teach us, the one who said “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” and pray that he might

teach us to beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. It is then that we could join in singing that old spiritual, “Ain’t gonna study war no more.”

That would truly honor those we remember.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Martin, New York Times, May 20, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Lucky Severson, “The Moral Wounds of War,” *Religion and Ethics Weekly*, May 28, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> John Buchanan, “Rhetoric and Rage,” *Christian Century*, May 18, 2010, p. 3.

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### **John 15:12–17 NRS**

**12** “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. **13** No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command you. **15** I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. **16** You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. **17** I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.