

Sermon Title: "Blessings of Peace"

Scripture: Psalm 29

Theme: Re-remembering those who sacrificed to bring peace to our world.

The voice (*qol*) of the Lord is powerful and full of majesty! (v.4)

"This is my song, O God of all the nations, A song of peace for lands afar and mine. This is my home, the country where my heart is, Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine. But other hearts in other lands are beating, with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine. My country's skies are bluer than the ocean, and sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine, but other lands have sunlight too, and clover, and skies as everywhere as blue as mine O hear my song, thou God of all the nations, a song of peace for their land and for mine." (Jan Sibelius, 1899; Lloyd Stone, 1934).

This is Memorial Sunday! A time of remembering, yes, but a time also for "re-remembering." A time for remembering ourselves again! And we "member" ourselves by drinking of the One Cup, drinking of the One Spirit, God's Spirit! And, especially this weekend, and this Sunday, we honor those, who in serving our country in our military, never made it home, those who gave the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

There is a story about the Tomb of the Unknown that you may remember or may not have heard in the past. Those responsible for planning this monument were given a very special and precise task. They were to search for remains of soldiers to include in the tomb that could never be identified in the future. This was a very solemn and necessary task. No one was to ever know the religion or ethnicity of those identified as unknown. No one was ever to know whether they were recent immigrants or long-time natives. No one was ever to know anything about their backgrounds, anything that would prejudice in any way our memories of them. The eternal purpose of the Tomb was never to surrender this mystery to anyone, to forever celebrate the commonality that we share together, the unity which forged our nation in liberty. The unknown were to be known through the solemn reflection of their common bonds with each other and each of us.

Over 245,000 flags are planted on the graves in Arlington National Cemetery each year by the 3rd U.S. Infantry. Today we call them by name and not by rank. The sound of taps echoes slowly and ghostly across every cemetery in our nation for all the battles in all the wars we have fought. Many bodies bear the spiritual scars of battle, and many more bear the physical scars as well. But those who never took

off the uniform gave their lives for us, for our liberty, and we will never forget their sacrifice

Many have answered the call to serve our country over the many years of our nation's history, volunteering with the words: "Here I am, send me!" Many others were drafted into service, reluctant to sign up, but nevertheless, ready to serve! Boot camp brought them all together under one umbrella. On this Memorial Day, all who have served us are worthy of our honor. Today, we celebrate those who have given their lives in service to our country, drafted and volunteer, alike. And, though proud, we are also humble, **some** made so by life itself, **some** made so by weathering storms, physical or emotional, **some** made so by facing danger, **some** made so in the trenches, waterways, and airways of battle; we now tread lightly in the hallowed halls, on the sacred premises; we guard our tongues and actions, and we honor the words: "beware, those who enter! Tread lightly!" We remember with lumps in our throat and tears in our eyes! To remember one is to remember all. And, though we must be truthful to ourselves and to others, grace overflows to each one in the very name of the bravest of the brave. Today is not a day to mark distinctions; today is a day to unite and heal in our memories.

"To keep our honor clean," those famous words of the Marine Hymn that lie just beyond the center of the first stanza, just beyond the "halls of Montezuma and the shores of Tripoli," in a way of speaking. These words take us past the call of duty, to that narrow space that lies just beyond our patriotism, to that deep inner space where we come to inhabit our nation's story in the context of our own personal lives. "To keep our honor clean," is a personal challenge that goes beyond what is expected, beyond the borders of complacency and decency, beyond the cause of rights and freedom into the rarified air of aspirations. You may remember the qualities of the military man called Cornelius in the Book of Acts: "He was a centurion in the famous Italian Regiment who was at the head of a "devout and God-fearing family, and a man who gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly (Acts 10:1-2)." Cornelius, the Bible says, was a "memorial" before God in his charity and in his prayers (Acts 10:4). It takes a lot to be a "memorial" before God; an extra helping of the "right stuff," in body, mind and spirit; it takes a significant commitment of time and energy to self-discipline and humility. It takes a willingness to face the inner demons that tempt us to give up before we even start, to lay low in falsehood instead of standing up for the truth. We must know the attributes of honor to keep honor clean. We must value honor before we can give and receive honor. The first step in keeping our honor clean is to give honor to others, to be thoughtful of others before we give thought to ourselves. We are re-

mindful of those today who are “memorials” before God, those who have fought and died for the rights and freedoms of others, the best of the best who have “kept their honor clean.” Our memories are full this weekend, today and tomorrow, with the memories of those who gave the ultimate sacrifice for their country and native land.

The act of recognizing those who have kept their honor clean, those who are “memorials” before God, has a much larger context than just what we do each Memorial Weekend. It is more than barbecues and patriotic swimwear, more than political speeches given at graduations, more even than decorating graves and parading on Main Street. We must find our way past these activities to something deeper in spirit and loyalty; we must find the right words and the right stories to honor their lives and their service.

No one story, or group of words, is a 100% perfect fit for everyone, but one story may come close to what we are looking for. It is a story of a Gold Star Mom and her son, Ben, who served in Afghanistan. Ben’s great-grandfather was a World War II veteran, so Ben had a family tradition to honor as he joined the Army Rangers in 2006 and deployed to Iraq after he graduated from high school. When he went to Afghanistan, it was his third (3rd) deployment. Ben received some of the highest honors the Army bestows: Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart, Meritorious Service. In July 2009, his mother received that phone call from a strange number that no one ever wants to answer. But, she was used to receiving calls from her son using strange telephone numbers, and so she answered bravely. It was Ben’s Commanding Officer. He informed her that her son had been shot, that he had made it through surgery and was in recovery in a Washington, D.C. hospital. She rushed to board an airplane and traveled to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, only to find that her son had not ever awakened from surgery. The doctors told her that they believed Ben was brain-dead. She spent five days by his side holding his hand before the doctors finally took him off life-support. As it turns out, Ben had chosen to be an organ donor, but not just any organ donor. Ben had requested that his entire body be used to help others. He wrote on the donation form: “any that are needed.” That meant bone and tissue donations, kidneys, heart and liver. His mother followed his wishes. Dozens of people benefited from his donation. A woman named Judy, who had a congenital heart condition and needed a heart transplant, received Ben’s heart. “It’s an incredible gift in one way,” she said, “but a burden in another, because you know that someone has to die in order for you to live.” Judy remembers getting the phone call that would extend her life on a Sunday morning. She now wears a bracelet with Ben’s name on it that says: “DOW” (Died of Wounds). In speaking with people about organ donation at

different conferences around the country, some nine years after her transplant, Judy engages in a familiar ritual, places the hands of inquiring people on her chest and saying: “Meet Ben Kopp!” It’s a humble story in many ways, going far beyond his 21 years of life. It’s a story of grace and beauty! It’s a modern story of life and honor! It’s a story about the 7,933 names on the Middle East Conflicts Memorial Wall in Marseilles, Illinois, but also about the one name, Ben, that declared: “anything that is needed.”

In the background of the Gospel of John lies a document we sometimes refer to as 1QS. It is part of a set of documents we discovered in the Essene Community at Qumran in a series of eleven (11) caves near the Dead Sea between 1947 and 1953, part of what we call today the “Dead Sea Scrolls.” The 1QS document contains something called the “Manual of Discipline,” or the Community Rule. This document contrasts the Spirit of Truth with the Spirit of Perverseness. If we walk in a Spirit of Truth, it says, we will love one another (1 John 4:1-12), we will confess and believe in Jesus Christ, and we will practice truth by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God and with our neighbor (Micah 6:8). However, if we walk in a Spirit of Perverseness, we will act unfaithfully and deceitfully, we will distort truth and offend people, and we will lead others into confusion and iniquity. By way of example, the prophet Isaiah refers to Egypt as a having a perverse spirit (Isaiah 19:14), what he calls a “spirit of *Avah*.” This spirit of ‘*Avah*’ is variously translated as a spirit of dizziness, confusion, distortion, foolishness, warping, or perverseness. A Spirit of ‘*Avah*’ is full of self-will, hypocrisy and rebellion, while a Spirit of Truth is full of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and reverence (Isaiah 11:2). The challenge presented by this document is as much an inner challenge as an outer challenge. Each person shares in these two spirits; the two spirits constantly strive inside our hearts. According to the theology of the two-spirits, in any particular moment of moral choice, each of us is asked that vital question: Will the Spirit of Truth dominate in our heart or our mind today or will the Spirit of Perverseness dominate instead?

In Proverbs 11:3, the wise one sums up the choice: “The integrity of the righteous guides them, but the hypocrisy (perverseness) of the treacherous and deceitful destroys them.”

Truth is not necessarily a set of facts, but can refer also to a set of relationships with God and neighbor. On this Memorial Sunday, we celebrate the relationships of truth established through forgiveness, trust and generosity inspired by the Holy Spirit. We choose Truth over Perversity in our relationship with God.

If we choose to keep our honor clean, then our choice is clear. Follow the Spirit of Truth which guides into integrity; Follow the Practice of Truth in its clarion call of love and justice, mercy and kindness. Follow the “anything that is needed sacrifice!” Follow the heroic spirit of those we honor for their sacrifice and devotion. Follow the counsel of grace, wisdom and love to find salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord, the once-for-all-sacrifice that gives us life and wholeness and golden memories.

The Unknown Soldier by *Roger J. Robicheau*

You need not ever know my name; This unknown soldier seeks no fame
I'm here to bring out thought from you; May your heart see more than your view
America, we marched with pride; We gave our life, for you we died

How well we knew the time might come; When life could sound that final drum
Please think of us as life moves on; We tried so hard till that last dawn
Do let our spirit fill the land; Pass treasured freedom, hand to hand
God blessed this country with such love; Hold in your heart, abundance of
And when you stand before my grave; Think not of one, but each who gave
Alleluia! Amen!