

Sermon – Memorial Day Sunday 2019 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

John 14: 23-29

In 1882, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem called “Decoration Day.” The poem pays tribute to what was then a new form of civic observance: a day set aside to commemorate those who had perished in the Civil War by placing flags and flowers on soldiers’ graves. It was a custom that gradually gave rise to our modern Memorial Day, honoring all who give their lives in military service. Here are his words:

Sleep, comrades, sleep and rest
On this Field of the Grounded Arms,
Where foes no more molest,
Nor sentry's shot alarms!

Ye have slept on the ground before,
And started to your feet
At the cannon's sudden roar,
Or the drum's redoubling beat.

But in this camp of Death
No sound your slumber breaks;
Here is no fevered breath,
No wound that bleeds and aches.

All is repose and peace,
Untrampled lies the sod;
The shouts of battle cease,
It is the Truce of God!

Rest, comrades, rest and sleep!
The thoughts of men shall be
As sentinels to keep
Your rest from danger free.

Your silent tents of green
We deck with fragrant flowers
Yours has the suffering been,
The memory shall be ours.

This poem reflects on what we might call the peace of death. In death, the sounds of battle cease and Longfellow calls it the “truce of God.” “All is repose and peace … Rest, comrades, rest and sleep!” he says.

Memorial Day is a day when we collectively as a nation, pause to remember those that have died in the service of this country and in the seemingly unending world struggle for freedom and peace. We remember the men and women who served their country, and especially those whose lives were sacrificed for causes that they deemed important enough to serve and die for.

We don’t know what percentage of people in the country will stop to remember those that have died for peace nor what percentage will just see tomorrow as a holiday and

the start of the summer season. The further we are from the terrible events of war the less they resonate with us.

For those families though that have lost loved ones in war, or from the effects of war, the memory hardly dims because it is the personal story, the personal sense of loss and grief that keeps the flame of memory going.

At the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan I was often heartbroken to read of the deaths of so many young men and women, and to see the pages of their photographs in the newspapers. What struck me were the ages of those that died. Young men and women from their late teens to early 30s, just starting out in life and dying for the cause of peace and freedom.

The nightmare of war terrorizes and traumatizes many, many people. The memory of the battles does not stay in the theater of the war but remains in the mind of those that were there and had to witness so much death and tragedy. Peace does not come easily to those that return from war.

A couple of years ago I was presiding at Grace Church Whitestone. When we were exchanging peace, a woman came to me with tears in her eyes telling me that she had just buried her son the Thursday before. After the service, we talked and she told me that her son was a veteran of the Iraq war. He had struggled to regain his life when we returned and despite the significant family support he had, he just wasn't able to adjust back to his old life.

A week before that Sunday he killed himself. In the depths of her pain she was also able to understand his consideration for the family in how he took his life. He made a "truce with God." That encounter left an indelible mark. The memory of this young man is on my heart and in my prayers this weekend, as are all the others that die because of war, and the lingering effects of military service, and all the families that have been scared.

In a sense, each Sunday is for us Memorial Day. The memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Lord is part of what we celebrate in the Eucharistic prayer that is at the heart of our Sunday worship service. The participation each week signals our willingness to remember Jesus' death and the impact his life had on our world. We are who we are because we choose to remember his life and to be transformed by it.

We must remember that we are still living in the Easter season, the season that remembers the life of the risen Christ as he ministered to his disciples before he ascended to heaven. Jesus' defeat of death began the end times that we continue to live in. The world became different and Jesus' first disciples had to make sense of what it all meant.

In the account we hear today from the Gospel according to John, Jesus is giving what we might hear as a pep talk to his disciples before he leaves them and ascends into heaven. The promise Jesus makes is profound in that it guarantees for those that continue to believe in Jesus, and maintain a love for him, that the Father will send them an advocate, the Holy Spirit, to maintain a presence of Christ in their hearts.

This must have been a very comforting message to hear. To know that even as the religious and military authorities were persecuting them, they would have a guide in their hearts to help them stay the course of life that Jesus had taught them. It is a message that should resonate with us today.

Importantly, Jesus promised his disciples continued peace. Jesus' whole ministry was centered on a new way of life, a way of life that was not of the world but was centered on love and peace, justice and freedom from earthly oppression. Each aspect of his ministry was counter-cultural then and remains so today.

When we speak of peace today we generally come to understand it as a type of truce, like in Longfellow's poem. Not so much peace in death, but peace in life after war. Peace resonates with us as a cessation of armed conflict, where the sides of the battle lay down their arms and come to the negotiating table to find a way to agree on peace terms.

Peace as the world knows peace is easily corrupted. Peace may be declared but often the sin of persecution of one's enemies continues, just in a different form. In the context of this country, it seems to me, coming in from the outside, that old wars are still being waged just with different tools and new media. For some the civil war never ended and young people today want to start the hostilities all over again.

[The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1964, are two pieces of legislation born out of a truce to end the civil rights battles. Those two pieces of legislation brought a truce in the battle over equal rights and new hope, however both have continued to be attacked and watered down as people continue to wage old wars. Lynching might have been curtailed by this truce but it was replaced with the war on drugs and the prison industrial complex that gives cover to continued persecution of people of color. Peace in earthly terms is not something that lasts.]

Jesus said to his disciples that the peace he was leaving them was a peace not of this world. It was a different sought of peace and came from faith in God through his son Jesus Christ. This new peace was a peace of the heart, an inner peace founded on love and justice, first in one's relation with God, and then in one's relation with neighbor.

It is only through faith in Jesus Christ and an understanding of his teachings that we can arrive at an understanding of this new form of peace. Just as Jesus was born to be the cornerstone of this new life, so I feel the peace Jesus left us is the foundation of our life in Christ today. For without a sense of deep inner peace, we cannot hope to be at peace with those we are called to love and minister to.

Jesus didn't just tell his disciples that the peace he was giving to them was the last word. He assured them that God, his Father was going to send the Holy Spirit, the advocate to be the constant presence of God with them. We were never destined to be alone without a sense of God in our hearts. The feeling of being alone would only manifest itself if we closed ourselves off to the Spirit of God.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we remember the sacrifices of those that served the cause of freedom and peace through military and volunteer service in war, and

especially those that died. Peace and rest has come to those that lost their lives. For us who live we can have peace in our hearts today through Jesus Christ, the author of true peace.

As we come to the communal table where we participate in this memorial of Jesus life be reminded of the promise of God to be always with us in this life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen