

Easter 7A
Memorial Day Weekend
The Rev. Emily Richards
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The Hard and Holy Work of Remembering

My last time home in KY I went and saw my great uncle Frank. I wanted to visit with him and hear stories about him and my grandfather and all the relatives on that side of the family. Like so many among the Faulconers Frank is a great storyteller. All I had to do was prompt with him a couple of questions and then sit back as he'd recall memories of his childhood on the farm with my grandfather and great-aunt or of his long career as a local TV personality –Fearless Frank, the Weatherman-the Hurricane Schwartz of Lexington. At one point in our conversation, he got up quite suddenly and disappeared for a minute, returning with a framed black and white picture of a young man standing in the back of an army truck waving an American Flag surrounded by elated crowds. “The Liberation of Paris,” he said with tears welling up in his eyes. “I was there. I was a part of it. No other experience so shaped my life than that of serving in World War II,” he offered in an uncharacteristically serious and quiet way. I had always known that my great-uncle followed my grandfather into the Army. And I had heard of my grandfather's experiences in the Pacific. But up until this moment I had heard nothing of Frank's service and how it had affected him so deeply. I made that visit to hear more of my great-uncle's story. I never imagined how much he needed to share it with me, how much he needed the opportunity to remember.

This weekend we are invited as a nation to honor the women and men who have served our country like my great-uncle, to remember their lives and their sacrifices. The observance of Memorial Day began in the years following the Civil War. It was originally called Decoration Day, when families and friends would go to cemeteries and place flowers and flags on the graves of the loved ones they had lost. War was not something that happened across the Atlantic for them. It was in their own backyards and between their own countrymen. Due to the sheer number of casualties on both

sides, more than 600,000, this kind of memorialization became an important cultural act to help heal the wounds and divisions caused by such conflict.

A week ago, some monuments from this war, that had become for many symbols of the scourge of racism and our continued divisions were removed from the center of New Orleans. In response to their controversial removal, the mayor of the city, Mitch Landrieu, gave a stirring speech speaking with uncommon honesty about race in our country. He believed that by removing these monuments his city was trying to get rid of a false narrative within their history. "This is about showing the whole world that we as a people are able to acknowledge, understand, reconcile and most importantly, choose a better future for ourselves...Otherwise, we will continue to pay a price with discord, with division and yes with violence. Making straight a wrong turn we made many years ago — we can more closely connect with integrity to the founding principles of our nation and forge a clearer and straighter path toward a better city and a more perfect union." The challenge for us as we celebrate Memorial Day, honoring our fellow citizens who gave their lives for our freedom is also to acknowledge, understand and reconcile the costliness of war for all involved and the struggle for freedom which continues for so many of our sisters and brothers.

In a Memorial Day reflection, David Pyle writes, "The meaning of this day is to remember. It is to remember the price our servicemen and women paid. To remember the price their families pay. To remember the physical and psychic wounds that the survivors of war, on all sides, carry with them till the end of their days. To remember the lives never lived. To remember the horrors unleashed upon civilian populations by the tools of modern warfare." As hard as it may be for us, we must engage in this kind of remembering, as well, in order to forge a clearer and straighter path toward a more perfect union and ultimately toward a more peaceful world.

We gather in this sacred space as citizens of this nation, but more importantly as citizens of another Kingdom, a Kingdom which has no boundaries or borders, which does not distinguish between nationality or race or ethnicity, a Kingdom where people are drawn together under the banner of the Prince of Peace. On the night before the horror of human violence is unleashed upon him, this Prince of Peace breaks bread with his friends, washes their feet and then he prays for them. "Holy Father, protect them in

your name, so that they may be one, as we are one." It's as if he is pleading to God, "May their divisions, their conflicts, the suffering they heap upon another, may it all cease. Make them one!" In the work of the cross, Jesus takes on the sin of human violence and shows us how to live another way. He shows us it is only through love and mercy that we can truly be free.

And so, as we remember and give thanks for those who gave the full measure of their devotion by serving our country, we must also pray for the day to come and to come soon when swords are beaten into plowshares, war is studied no more, and all people will be one as Jesus and his Father are one. Until this day comes, we are called to strive for justice and peace, working to get rid of all the manufactured monuments, boundaries, barriers, and narratives, that breed fear and hatred and make us enemies of one another. There's a saying from the Jewish Talmud, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." May we rededicate ourselves to the work of peacemaking, embodied in the life and death of our Savior, choosing a better future for ourselves and for those who come after us.

Let us pray.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

~Prayer Attributed to St. Francis in the Book of Common Prayer