

Acts 1:6-14  
1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11  
John 17:1-11

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Some of you are familiar with the history of Memorial Day and the symbol of the poppy associated with it. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was accused of tearing the country apart in advocating abolition of slavery, and of course there were heavy losses for families of Confederate and Union soldiers. Reformers are always accused of being divisive instead of healing agents. Martin Luther was told his efforts of church ministry and reform were tearing the Christian church apart ... and this certainly not his goal. The Reformation did result in many splinter expressions of church denominations Has it brought healing to the Body of Christ? I venture we must respond both yes and no.

In Civil War history, the Secessionist States claimed to honor the differences of North and South by separating the nation, but Lincoln insisted a house divided against itself cannot stand, so the Civil War began. After the Confederates were defeated, many angry and grieving Northerners wanted to punish these Southern States, but Lincoln wanted to welcome them with open arms back into the Union, declaring the 600,000 deaths were a sacrificial debt which could never be repaid for the sake of healing our nation. His plans for Reconstruction would likely have gone much smoother had Lincoln not been assassinated.

On the last day of April of 1866, Confederate families honored their dead in Columbus, Georgia, acknowledging the sacrifices to a lost cause, calling it their Memorial Day. It was General John Logan who declared May 30<sup>th</sup> of 1868 as a national observance of Decoration Day to honor the fallen soldiers by decorating their graves. By 1882, some people referred to it as Memorial Day, but the term Decoration Day was more popular up until WWII. Families would gather in cemeteries, bringing picnic lunches to honor loved ones who had died. WWI certainly added many more fallen soldiers, over 50,000 in battle, more than 200,000 wounded.

It was in May of 1915 that Lt. Col. John McCrae of the Canadian forces presided at the funeral of his closest soldier friend, Alexis, noting the poppies blowing in the wind of Flanders Field. He wrote the famous poem which commemorated the sacrifices made by so many dead soldiers, passing the torch of their ideals to the living, asking not to be forgotten or to have died in vain. In 1918, American professor Moina Michael campaigned to have silk poppies adopted as the official symbol of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which quickly became popular. In 1922, the VFW sold poppy boutonnières nationally. It was in 1921 that the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was dedicated in Washington DC and then in 1922, Supreme Court Justice & former President Howard Taft dedicated the Lincoln Memorial. Remembering our history and the sacrificial debt we owe is very important to the soul of our nation and culture.

There would be over 400,000 American military deaths during WWII. When it comes to these staggering statistics and the impact it has made in this nation in very personal ways, we're grateful most people who served in the military came back alive. Consider this historical perspective: In Iraq and Afghanistan, there was one death for every 378 service members who deployed. In Vietnam, the figure was one death for every 58 who deployed, and in both World War I and World War II it was around one per 40. During the Civil War it was one per 5. Back then, everyone knew someone who died and needed to honor the sacrifice in some way.

In 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which established Memorial Day as the last Monday in May in order to create a three-day weekend; the change went into effect in 1971. President Clinton designated 3 p.m. as a National Moment of Remembrance in May 2000. How can modern times best observe such intentions? Gen. Logan's order in 1868 urged: "We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. ... Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic."

Churches honor this Federal holiday because of its spiritual roots and stewardship obligation in sacrificial life and death, the hope of blessing our home communities and descendants, and in confessing the continued struggles of good against evil in personal and global dimensions. How can each of us honor God and Country?

Jesus had shared the last three years of His earthly life with the Disciples and others, often challenging their attitudes and behaviors. He demonstrated the difference between the ways of the world and God's way. Before confronting the failings of others, Jesus did His own battle with Satan. He took time to heal the sick and show compassion to the needy before preaching how others should do the same. When Jesus explained how true leadership was a life of humble service to others, He washed the disciples' feet to show them how to be a servant.

In today's Gospel lesson from John, Jesus is about to be crucified and He prays, not for His own behalf, but for our sake. He talks out loud to God so as to explain His actions to the disciples. Jesus said: "Father, the hour has come ... I glorified You on earth by finishing the work that You gave Me to do."

Many people hope their desires will be fulfilled by praying, instead of reflecting on how we are most fulfilled by doing things God's way. What we discover in scripture is the best satisfaction will be to hear our Heavenly Father say: "Well done, good and faithful servant"

The second observation to make is how intentional Jesus was in articulating His mission, understanding there were specific things for Him to accomplish for God's kingdom. All of us have jobs with our names on it, and it's important for us to figure out what these are. It takes great investment in worship, prayer and Christian community to discern how the Holy Spirit desires us to use our abilities, resources and relationships in Christ's name. Our actions reveal how much we understand when we pray: "Thy kingdom come, Thy Will be done."

Other people aren't going to care about what you think, until they can figure out what it is that you believe. And they're not going to care what you believe, until they experience how much you care. The witness of your mission becomes powerful by a spiritual focus, passion, and sacrifice.

Jesus prayed with passionate intimacy, asking God's personal protection for us as we deal with life's problems, to grant us blessing and strength in unity with our Creator and all the saints of heaven as His legacy. Both Sacraments of Baptism and Communion are remembrances of purposeful life and sacrificial love to remind us who are called to be and whose we are.

As the first disciples stood gazing at the heavens after Christ's ascension, unsure what to do next, the Bible says two men in white robes suddenly stood in their midst, saying "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" I think the modern translation of that is: "Don't be so heavenly-minded that you're of no earthly good . . . get busy! You've got work to do in God's kingdom." We need to embrace life in gratitude to become good stewards.

As disciples in Christ, remember your mission, discover your focus, serve with a passion, and verbalize what you believe. You have a partner in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit will guide you. As you strive to live out this faith, pray for the people in your lives and let them know it. We're living memorials in our witness ... in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.