

Things to Remember

Memorial Day, as the word "memorial," indicates is a day of remembrance, a day for remembering something that has gone before. And, although you will not find this elaboration in a dictionary, I have the sense that a memorial is more than a memory; that is to say, that it is a memory with a purpose. We do not remember just to remember; rather, we remember in a way that is somehow helpful to us in the present and gives direction to the future. For example, we remember the courageous acts of our heroes and heroines in the hope that this remembering will make us more courageous in the face of the challenges and conflicts we face today. Remembering the passengers of Flight 93 that crashed on 9-11-2001, gives courage to airline passengers today to take action against would be terrorists who threaten their safety. We remember places like Auschwitz, Wounded Knee, Waco, My Lai, and Abu Ghraib, as hedges against committing such atrocities in the future. We memorialize the good to give us courage, hope, and inspiration. We memorialize evil to remind and to warn ourselves that without adequate discipline and compassion we all have the potential to become monsters.

Memorial Day is a sober day, a day to quiet our souls, to listen to the lives that have come before us, to reflect, to seek God's forgiveness, goodness, and empowerment. It is a time to remember, to give thanks, to face and find cleansing for our shame, to honor the heroic dead and the living. Memorial Day is a day to reevaluate and to reorient our lives, a time to consider what manner of people we want to be going forward.

Memorial Day is a national holiday, meaning that it has particular significance to us as a nation. What should we memorialize or remember on this Memorial Day 2011? There are three things I think we ought to remember and three things I think God would have us remember. The first thing I think we ought to remember is the promise. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan both quoted Rev. John Winthrop's words written on his 1630 voyage from England to America: Winthrop wrote: "We will be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause Him to withdraw His present

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help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world." President Reagan added this thought of his own, Reagan said, "You can call it mysticism if you want to, but I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage."

There are plenty of skeptics and critics around these days to tell us that the promise of America is all hype and no substance. They will say that America was not particularly founded on Judeo Christian principles, nor has it lived up to those principles. They will deny any claim of Divine destiny or American exceptionalism. They will insist that the idea of America as the special land of the free and home of the brave is just a myth and no more. But those who would say such things miss the point and grossly underestimate the power of a dream, the power of a vision, the power of a promise. It is true that America has often fallen short of it's highest ideals. There are many times that we have failed to protect life, liberty and justice for all. Sometimes it would seem that we have promised too much, as right now we are torn between the promise of Ellis Island "give me your tired and poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free," and the felt and real need to protect our southern border from Mexican invaders.

No we are far from perfect and we have failed as often as we have succeeded, but there is nothing wrong with the vision. The promise of America as a shining light set on a hill, a nation offering life, liberty, opportunity, the pursuit of happiness, and equality for all is still a worthy dream and an inspiration for the hopes of all mankind. We don't need to apologize for the promise; we need to embrace it and allow it to draw us forward, God being our helper. The fact that we have had failures, even some very blatant ones, does not invalidate the promise or erase the dream. It is not an excuse to stop reaching for the vision that has, and will again, make our nation and the freedom it champions "the last best hope of earth."

We see this same principle at work in ancient Israel and in the history of the Christian church. The memory of being slaves in

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Egypt and the vision of the promised land, kept or recalled Israel to it's journey of being the people of God. The promise of being ultimately transformed into the image of Christ calls us forward as believers. Our failures along the path do not change the goal nor do they give us permission to quit. For all of our quirks and miscues, for all of our failures and all of our sins, we are still people of the promise, and we must yet allow the faithfulness of God's promise to shape and define us. As Paul puts it in Philippians 3:12, it's "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." On this Memorial Day weekend, we need to remember and reaffirm the promise, the promise of America and the promise that God has made to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

A second thing we need to remember this morning is the cost; we need to remember the promise and we need to remember the cost. It is no accident that we make national memorials of our military cemeteries and often call ordinary cemeteries "Memorial Gardens." The promise of America has been and continues to be pursued at a great cost. Valley Forge, Gettysburg, Dover, Arlington and many other sacred places remind us of that cost. Brave men and not a few brave women gave their last ounce of devotion for the sake of gaining and preserving freedom. We cannot, we must not, and we do not forget their sacrifice.

But it was not just on the battle fields or in the factories that supported the great wars that sacrifices were made. Many of our heroes were never soldiers. They were farmers, nurses, doctors, mechanics, businessmen and teachers. They were builders, preachers, policemen, firemen, social workers, counselors, coaches, and above all mothers, fathers and homemakers. They were pioneers, frontiersmen, scientists, oceanographers, astronauts, and entrepreneurs. The cost of our freedom is paid for in blood to be sure, but it has also been bought with honest sweat, anguished thought, and with many tears. The American dream is a joint enterprise, requiring the efforts of many to make it succeed, and to all who have done their part, however small or seemingly ordinary, we owe a great debt of gratitude.

As we pause to consider this today, I would remind us that just as the promise of America is not dead the cost is not over. Our soldiers continue to do their brave work often at great sacrifice, and we need to continue to do ours, doing our best to emulate the faithfulness of those who have come before us. The promise of America remains viable, but we also need to pay the price for her success, each one doing his part.

In the church, of course, it works the same way. In Ephesians 4:15-16 Paul says, ". . . speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." It takes all the members working together to make a great church. And it takes all the citizens, working and sacrificing together to make a great nation. We need to remember the promise and we need to remember the cost.

And then finally this morning, on this Memorial Day weekend, we need to remember our Source. The secret of America's greatness and the power of her promise is found in phrases such as, "endowed by their Creator," "in God we trust," and "God bless America." I was driving across the bridge to the Hospital one day last week and took note of the car in front of me: It was a sporty little car all dressed out with special fairings, pinstripes, extra large chrome wheels and exhaust pipes. Much care had gone in to making the car a show piece, but then I read the message written on the back window: it said, "fear no God." Scriptures came immediately to my mind, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," (Psalm 111:10). "The fool has said in his heart, 'there is no God,'" (Psalm 14:1). "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance," (Psalm 33:12).

I was encouraged to hear the responses of the tornado survivors out in Joplin, Missouri. Many of those interviewed spoke of praying and/or reciting Scripture as they waited for the tornado to pass. They spoke of praying for one another and for the missing. They spoke of rebuilding their futures with God's help. I'm sure there must be some who are bitter, but of all those

I heard interviewed by members of the secular media, I heard reverence for God. Even in tremendous heartbreak, faith remains in the heartland of America. The visual representation of this can be seen in a Catholic church building that was completely destroyed except for one thing. A huge bronze cross is still standing up straight amidst the rubble. Those interviewed overwhelmingly agree: Even in the middle of this mess, God is with us.

I don't know what future troubles or tragedies we will have to face as nation in the future, but this one thing I'm sure of, if we will be with God, He will be with us. If we honor God, He will honor us. But, as our Scripture passage from Deuteronomy clearly points out, if we abandon God, He will also abandon us. In Deuteronomy 32:20 we read God's response to the people's unfaithfulness: "I will hide my face from them," he said, "and see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful." On this Memorial Day weekend, we need to remember to stay connected to our Source.

This, of course, is also true for us as a church. As unnecessary as it would seem to be to say it, we as the people of God, need to remember our Source. Unless we continually seek the Lord in prayer and by paying attention to His Word and by seeking the guidance and empowering of the Holy Spirit, we have no purpose for being here and nothing of much value to offer our community.

As Jesus said in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

On this Memorial Day weekend, we need to remember the promise, cost, and Source of America. And, we need to remember the promise, cost, and Source of our faith.

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Things to Remember

Deuteronomy 32:7-21; 36-39; 45-47

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