

## **Let Your Heart Take Courage: Honoring Sacrifice, Seeking Peace**

**Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14; Matthew 28:16-20**

**May 27, 2018**

**Northminster Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**

He wasn't a soldier, not in the traditional sense, though he was a Commander (of sorts). Some have said he was the last casualty of the war that is forever connected with him — Abraham Lincoln.

In her landmark book, *Team of Rivals*, presidential historian and Lincoln biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin includes an account from the diary of that great novelist of the early 20th Century, Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy is spending time in 1908 with a tribal chieftain in the North Caucasus, and they ask him to tell them about the great leaders of history. He recounts stories of Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Napoleon and on and on, Then the chieftain says, "Tell us about the greatest general and greatest ruler in the world...He was a hero. He spoke with a voice of thunder; he laughed like the sunrise, and his deeds were strong as the rock. His name was Lincoln and the country in which he lived is called America. Tell us of that man."

That man, the son of Illinois, despite his Kentucky birth, was the greatest general? The voice of thunder? Not hardly. In his memorial is he astride a horse, charging into battle? No. He sits surrounded by words of commemoration including the Gettysburg Address, memorial words to men fallen in a way that he himself hated but viewed as a necessity to preserve a nation, and an idea to preserve ideals. The Civil War devastated his family. His wife lost three half-brothers on the Confederate side. He took the death tolls of each battle like body blows on his psyche and struggled with depression, not just because of deaths in his own family, but because of his sense of responsibility for the deaths of others, those his actions sent into battle and those who fought for the South.

In a Philadelphia speech 154 years ago, give or take two weeks, President Lincoln asserted, "War at the best, is terrible, and this war of ours, in its magnitude and in its duration, is one of the most terrible." In his Second Inaugural Address Lincoln said, "Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came...Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away." The greatest general viewed war as a scourge. He hated war but believed that it was worthwhile to preserve our nation.

It was the Civil War that gave us Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, to honor the over 600,000 soldiers who died on the Union side of the Civil War, only one-fifth of whom died in battle. Since 1971 it has been a federal holiday.

Memorial Day is a complicated day for people of faith. At least it should be. And the liturgical calendar says today is also Trinity Sunday. Trinity is complicated for people of faith too. And I must admit, I just couldn't tackle two complications in one sermon, so we'll leave Trinity Sunday for next June.

This is a weekend and tomorrow is a day when we are invited to honor the sacrifice of those who served our nation and who lost their lives in military service. And that seems a

right thing to do, to remember those who were called upon to make “the last full measure of devotion.” It seems right to honor sacrifices made by individuals and families on our behalf. But it’s complicated by the fact that increasingly, Americans have had to confront questions about the justness of our country’s role wars, most notably Vietnam, and the largest international war in our history, where we intentionally violated the ancient Just War Doctrine, the War in Iraq.

So, what do we followers of the Prince of Peace say? How do we wrap our theology around honoring the sacrifice of those women and men who died in wars we think were immoral? Do we honor those any less? It would be easy, I suppose, to just say, of course we don’t. We have learned our lesson. We look back at how too many Americans wanted to forget about the debacle of Vietnam and so they projected their ambivalence and anger on the Vietnam veterans, relegating the living, the dead and the missing in action to some lesser status. We say we won’t do that to them again, but why?

By now you may be wondering why, almost 1000 words into the sermon, I’ve not mentioned the text for today yet. Psalm 27 is a psalm of confidence, a psalm of confidence in a God who protects, who in the face of war and evildoers and armies will hide one in God’s shelter, conceal one in God’s holy tent, will set one high upon a rock.

It’s a psalm that is confident in God’s victory, not the psalmist’s. If you’ve ever seen the Civil War movie “Gods and Generals,” you’ve heard the words of this psalm (in the King James Version) on the lips of a pastor preaching a sermon about the certainty of victory — for the Southern Cause. Was the writer of the movie just trying to be ironic, to put those confident words on the side of those who would lose, who would die in a lost cause? Maybe, but I’m willing to bet the writer took it from an actual civil war sermon.

And so, it is perplexing and raises the question: What combatant can faithfully lift up this prayer? Was it indeed written by King David who was threatened with death but survived? Is this only a psalm for the survivor? Does its connection of confidence in victory with God’s sovereignty mean that God is only with those who survive, is only for those who win or make it out of battle? I want to suggest that, with respect to “Gods and Generals,” nothing could be farther from the truth. Let’s remember, what is the psalmist’s fervent hope?

“One thing I asked of the Lord,  
that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord,  
and to inquire in his temple.”

Presence with God, that is the psalmist’s wish. To dwell in God’s presence. What do we know about our seeking God? Before we can do anything, before we can reach out to God, God is reaching out to us. That’s a cornerstone of our Reformed Faith, that God is ever seeking relationship with us and nothing we can do can sever that relationship.

What if Psalm 27 is a psalm of confidence that whatever comes God will ultimately be victorious, that “the goodness of the Lord in the land of living” is God’s ultimate hope for and plan for all humankind? And our warring, no matter how much we try it, will not get

us there. But our warring, no matter how much we try it, can never prevent God's ultimate will for human kind — a place of peace, hope, justice and gracing love — from having the final say?

I want to suggest that Memorial Day Weekend is not a time to buy mattresses. It's a time to somberly remember, to give thanks for lives that ended too soon, and to honor the sacrifice made by countless women and men, to honor them by commending them confidently to God's presence.

Well, okay pastor, but we didn't ask your permission to honor those who've lost their lives in war, so why is this worthy of a sermon, particularly when the holiday is tomorrow? It's because there is something else we need to confront in Psalm 27 and in this idea of Memorial Day. We alluded to it some at the beginning of our Lenten journey earlier this year, when our theme was "no greater love." Greater love has no one than that they would lay down their life for a friend.

Memorial Day brings us face to face with an idea that many struggle with morally, ethically and theologically — that some things are worth dying for and a nation might be one of them.

Well, sure they are, pastor. Jesus died after all. Isn't that all the lesson we need? That he died for us? So, surely when we give our lives for others, there is something noble and good at work there, right?

But Jesus' death was a travesty, a tragedy. It is given context and meaning only through the resurrection. Many would-be Messiahs ended up on crosses, but only Jesus is remembered. Because Jesus, God with us, in his resurrection, demonstrates that sin and death will not have the final say. We say he offered himself because he was God and he could have stopped it all. But he was, in earthly terms, just one more victim in the Roman death machine.

And here's the thing: none of the 6,915 Americans who have died in the global war on terror since 2001 were resurrected, at least not yet anyway. So how do their deaths have meaning for us in any way other than the tragic? Let's think this through for a moment. Jesus' death has meaning because of what came after. We confidently commend those who have died in war to a loving God because of what came after — the confidence that each is in the embrace of a God in whose presence they will dwell for all eternity.

And so, where do we find something to honor that came after the deaths of those hundreds of thousands who have died preserving, defending, or furthering our ideals and our nation? What if it's in what we do with those ideals, with this nation, in response to their sacrifice?

During the Iraq War, I followed with great interest the writings of the late renowned atheist Christopher Hitchens, mostly in *Vanity Fair*. Hitchens was, in the earliest days of the war, decidedly pro-invasion, though his pessimism about the war grew over time. But it was his writings about a soldier who mentioned Hitchens as part of his inspiration for volunteering to serve in Iraq that resonates all these years later. Mark Daly was born on the 4th of July, if you can believe it. He was an environmentalist, an animal rights activist,

and a staunch defender of Native American rights who, to almost everyone's shock who knew him, joined up in 2006, well into the war in Iraq.

On the 15th of January 2007, Mark was on patrol in an armored Humvee and noticed that the truck in front of him had not been properly prepared. It was missing some of the armor that was placed on the vehicles when they went out on patrol. Daly insisted that his vehicle take the point position since it had all the proper armor. But that wasn't nearly enough to protect him when a 1500-pound IED went off under the tire of his vehicle a little while later. At Mark's memorial, 1,600 people from his hometown of Irvine, California, turned out to pay their respects. And letters from friends and soldiers and their families poured in testifying to the impact this young man, just 23 years old, had had on their lives. Most poignant was the letter from the wife of the soldier whose truck had been on point. She said that she felt guilty and grateful, but that their seven children would remember and honor Mark forever for saving their father that day.

In his letters home to his young wife, Janet, Daly wrote, "One thing I have learned about myself since I've been out here is that everything I professed to you about what I want for the world and what I'm willing to do to achieve it was true.... My desire to 'save the world' is really just an extension of trying to make a world fit for you."

Hitchens wrote of Daly just so his readers would know what an amazing young man he was. That's not why I tell his story today, as impressive a young man as he was. From what he wrote, it was clear that Mark Daly laid down his life for the world he hoped would come from his work and, yes, his possible sacrifice. He sacrificed for what would come after.

And that, friends, is in our hands. The greatest Christian response to Jesus' death and resurrection is to gratefully live as though what he announced is true — that love wins, that grace wins, that death doesn't have the final say. The greatest Christian response to the death of Mark Daly and the hundreds of thousands like him, who have been sacrificed for our nation and our way of life, is to live his dream, to make our communities, our nation, and our world fit for those who live on — not just the Janet Dalys of the world but for every generation.

We worship to remember, to gratefully go out into the world to live the gospel, even if it means confronting the powers and systems still enslaved to fear and death — not just for us, but for the world. As citizen Christians we memorialize the brave women and men who have given their lives for us by gratefully going into the world to live our ideals, even if it means confronting the powers that have corrupted and twisted those ideals for their own purposes or who recklessly see war as a strategy, not a last resort — again, not just for us, but for the world.

May God give us the wisdom and the courage...