

Tomorrow and the Next Day

Year C, Proper 4 – Luke 7:1-10

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, May 29, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Not everyone remembers that our commemoration of Memorial Day came out of the Civil War. There are a lot of different stories of the very beginnings of this day, at least in part, because the impulse was nearly universal on both sides of that conflict to somehow mark the tremendous loss to nearly every household of our still young Republic. In 1865, shortly after the close of the war, some women in Vicksburg, Mississippi chose May 30th as a day to place flowers upon the graves of their war dead because that one spring date did not mark the anniversary of any major battle in the war. From there and other similar remembrances, the practice of choosing a special day to decorate the graves of the war dead spread quickly both the North and the South, coming to be called “Decoration Day.”

In 1868, a group of women in Washington D.C. asked permission of the War Department to decorate the graves at the newly founded Arlington National Cemetery, and to be allowed to organize a special memorial ceremony to mark the occasion. General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union veterans, lent his support with General Order number 11. “The 30th of May, 1868,” he proclaimed, “is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land.”

The War Department granted permission for the commemoration, but specified that no flowers were to be placed on the graves of the *Confederate* soldiers who were buried in a separate section of the cemetery. The organizers eventually agreed to the restriction and planned their program. From all accounts it was a magnificent day, as General James Garfield, a devout Christian and eventually the 20th President of the United States, delivered the memorial speech among the flags and wreaths and garlands and bouquets that decorated row upon row upon row of the newly dug graves of our nation's fallen laid out beneath the shady oaks of General Robert E. Lee's confiscated estate.

It was later that evening, after the politicians and generals had finished their speeches, after the band had played their final march, after the mothers and widows had completed the rounds of their loving mission, that a storm began to gather over the hills above the Potomac. Before the night was over, it had gathered into what some said was one of the worst windstorms they could remember. In the morning, those that came to tend to the graves of those they had loved found that nearly all of the carefully laid decorations had been swept down into a little used corner of the vast cemetery, the corner in which were laid the remains of the few fallen of the Confederate ranks that had been allowed burial at Arlington.

Now today, Skippy the Weatherman would tell us that the storm was the result of a low-pressure system, or the polar vortex, or El Nino or something. By the end of the 31st of May, 1868, however, most people believed that the storm was a direct result of God's intervention. And in the face of such a message, the order to differentiate between the fallen laid to rest at Arlington has never been repeated.

And so this weekend, we need to take time to remember. We need to remember those that are dear to us, and we need to remember those we know only from their names on this list or that marker or those crosses. In the face of those that would tear us apart by shouting hatred and division, we need to remember those that have fought for what *unites* us. In the face of self-interest and self-preservation and self-aggrandizement, we need to remember those that gave their all to stand up to tyranny and oppression, *wherever* evil raised its head. In the face of seemingly never ending acquisition and accumulation, we need to remember those that lived and fought and sometimes died to share the abundance with which we have been so greatly blessed. In the face of those who would build walls to keep others in their place, we

need to remember those that fought to tear *down* walls and fences and even curtains of iron. In the face of prejudice and bigotry and scapegoating, we need to remember those of *every* race and *every* creed and *every* color who have stood in the gap between us and the violence and the terror that might destroy us. And in the face of indifference and ignorance and contempt, we need to pick up the crumpled pieces and begin again, to remember once again to remember those who, though they never knew us, have loved us with their whole lives.

It's not an accident, of course, that if we have already made it through the Easter season, Pentecost and Trinity the Lectionary provides this reading from Luke that tells about a soldier's faith for this last Sunday of May, during this weekend that one writer has called the most spiritual of our nation's civic holidays. It is clear that the soldier in Luke's story knew exactly where his authority lay. "I say to one, 'Go,'" he said, "and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes." But this soldier knew something else, didn't he? This soldier knew where *real* authority lay as well. "Only speak the word," he said, "and let my servant be healed." Jesus, Luke says in this *non*-accidental Gospel lesson, was *amazed* at such faith, so perhaps that's where we should begin as well.

Let us pray.

Gracious Father, we remember this day, and tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, those who have borne the greatest cost of our common striving for peace and for justice. We remember those who spent their all in the day of their trials. We remember those whose lives were beaten and broken by their ordeals of body and heart. And we remember those who built lives of hope and reconciliation from the ashes of their youth, and built for us *all* the foundations of our peace and our liberty and our hope for tomorrow. We pray that their sacrifice may not be in vain, and that we may be found worthy of such great cost. For we remember them to your grace and mercy, and we remember them in your name. Amen.