

# Memorial Day 2018

May 27, 2018

John 14:27

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

Memorial Day is a day of remembering the men and women who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces. Formerly known as Decoration Day, it originated after the American Civil War to commemorate the Union and Confederate soldiers who died during battle. By the 20th century, Memorial Day had been extended to honor all Americans who have died while in the military service.

Memorial Day, like so many of our holidays, is a mixture of solemnity and fun. We will go lay flowers at the grave of a relative, friend, or other loved one who died in a war and then have a picnic and go to rib cook-offs. We shop for furniture, sheets, paint, and cars, and then contemplate the freedoms we have because of the sacrifices men and women have made on our behalf.

I say this without criticism or judgment. A holiday is meaningful precisely for the meaning that we give it. About this Memorial Day, what and whom are we remembering? Why are we celebrating this weekend? Are we swept up in the commercialism or can we produce a memory with deeper meaning?

For me, Memorial Day is significant for the gratitude that it draws to my heart; the gratitude for the sacrifice that others were willing to make on my behalf -- not knowing me, not knowing I would even be around to enjoy the benefits of their sacrifice. That just stops me in my tracks. Anything that causes us to pause and appreciate our blessings is a good thing, to my way of thinking.

One of the ideas that is intertwined within my thinking about Memorial Day is my own willingness to give. If the situation called for it, would I lay down my life for a person or cause that I loved? I think that I would. But would I lay down my life for people that I didn't know or would never meet? Depending upon the situation, for instance – war – I would like to believe that I would.

Of course, fear plays a large part in how we behave and the choices we make. In soldiering, the point is to build in such a deep loyalty and discipline that fear does not play as great a role. Alternatively, the military trains the soldier to use the fear to advantage.

Research shows that fear of personal and familial safety affects our consciousness and behavior. If we feel threatened, we tend toward a more aggressive type of behavior even though it is not our nature to do so. With discipline, this aggression can be beneficial.

Yet, as I think about our behavior as a species, much of what I observe reflects fear, undisciplined fear. Fear is demonstrated by the ways we organize ourselves socially, and how we limit our range of sharing with others and sacrificing for others.

For instance, I thought of gangs ... just the common street corner-type gang: Bunches of youths who collectively decide that they are a 'family' and they will 'watch each others' backs. As a society, we tend to look upon the behavior of gangs as unproductive, and occasionally it is. Sometimes gangs do bad things together; they can make insensitive, self-centered, and destructive choices.

But the act of 'ganging', gathering together in a small group for safety, is a common occurrence at all socio-economic levels of society. When threatened, we tend toward a 'tribal' mentality; an ancient set of behaviors that dominated pre-civilized times.

It seems like the powerful within any society tend to 'gang'. Throughout my life I have observed how 'good ol' boys' meet and cajole. To outsiders, there seems to be an unspoken set of rules that only they know and abide by. They are another permutation of the standard street-corner gang who 'watches each other's backs'.

I think this happens in politics, religions, social organizations, as well as ethnically, culturally ... wherever people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs gather. The tendency to 'gang', is not bad in and of itself, although I think it represents a limited and self-absorbed consciousness. But one of the primary problems I see with a gang of any type is that it minimizes our willingness to make sacrifices for anyone outside of our gang.

If someone is not part of 'us', part of our tribe, our group, our team, neighborhood, our block, or our street, then they typically do

not deserve the benefit of our attention. When we think of ourselves in terms of gangs – some small collection of individuals – we tend to primarily, if not exclusively, only give of ourselves to that small group. Our sacrifice, our giving and serving, is stifled by the size of our consciousness.

The second challenge of a gang mentality is that it limits who we are grateful for. When we see ourselves as only a part of a small group, our hearts are open only to that small group for giving thanks. Good deeds from outside the group can be over-looked or looked upon with disdain.

I believe Christ came to expand our awareness ... expand our social identification. We were to behave like the Good Samaritan and care for those outside our own religion and social circles.

When aware enough, each of us is appreciative for every soul who has lost their life in battle or those who have given their lives in civic duty so that we can live the life that we do today. When we are aware enough, we are thankful that those individuals had the nationalistic view that they did. They gave their life for God and country, and we all benefit for it.

Although official wars are fought by soldiers who are willing to give their lives for every person in their country, there are unofficial battles that are being lived out within our own lives every day. There are opportunities for us to embrace particular situations and concerns that we find pressing upon our hearts and minds; we can either duck them and find a network of ‘good ol’

boys' who will comfort us, watch our backs and defend us, or we can press past the fear and engage the circumstance that lies before us; a symbolic 'laying down of our lives'. We can serve humanity at whatever level required, whether it is with familiar people or people outside our comfort zone. When we are aware enough.

To volunteer or sacrifice our time, money, and abilities for an individual or cause is to wage battle against the morass of apathy that affects many areas of our existence. To accept the sacrifice of another, the gift that they have bestowed upon us, is to fight the good fight for graceful appreciation and self-worthiness.

Memorial Day is a time for me to consider the loved ones that I have lost even if they were not lost on the field of battle. I think of my Dad, what he meant to me, and all that he sacrificed on my behalf. I think of other family members and friends and remember all the good that they brought to me. They may not have laid down their life for me, but I am definitely a recipient of their having lived.

Memorial Day for me not only makes me appreciative of those who have given their lives for my betterment, but for all those I have had the honor to know who have given of themselves on my behalf. My wife, family, parents, friends, members of this church, teachers, co-workers, managers, and total strangers have aided me, supported me, and given of themselves for me.

Many, many people have given of themselves for me. No, it has never been the ultimate sacrifice as that of the fallen soldiers or the

Christ. But still, I am grateful for any sacrifice that has been made on my behalf, most of which I am totally unaware.

Memorial Day for me is a call to attention; a time for self-assessment of what I am giving to others, and a time to re-evaluate my thankfulness levels. It is easy for me to give of myself to my family and friends, to this church and people that I know. Harder for me it is to give to others that I don't know; harder still to give of myself to those that I know but don't really care for.

It is easy for me to succumb to my basest instincts and become tribal, protecting myself from some imagined fear. Colossians 2:8 warns us: *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*

There are times when my human desire for the safe harbor of a 'good ol' boy' tribe shades me from the light of the Christ. It is a hollow and deceptive human tradition, one of the oldest basic principles of the world that I tend to embrace when I am uncertain and afraid – and that is to pull back, to pull away, like a turtle withdrawing within its shell.

I need to remember to look toward God before I react from those base instincts, because it is God's suggestion that I give – in all circumstances – give, love, reach out, and appreciate the blessings of life, including the challenges.

Memorial Day is a time to reflect, be grateful, and give tribute. I think it is also a time to reflect, act, and walk in the light of the Christ. What can we do that would place us on someone's "I Am Grateful for..." list? Can we expand our awareness of tribe just a bit in order to include a few more of God's children?

We may not personally be able to hold the whole of the world in our hearts yet, but can we move just a bit further in that direction? It is, after all, what the Christ is asking us to do – to love our neighbor.

When we put away our reasons for our actions and beliefs, abandon our justifications and become still, we start to feel the tug of Spirit pulling us toward an ever expanding and deepening love and awareness; encouraging us to enlarge the 'gang' that we identify with. Perhaps someday we will see ourselves as God sees us: where every nation is one, where we are all part of one large family, and where every fallen soul regardless of country, is lifted up to God in gratitude.

As we celebrate Memorial Day, we pay tribute to the men and women who have given their lives in our nation's wars.

Benjamin Harrison left us these words:

I have never been able to think of the day as one of mourning; I have never quite been able to feel that half-masted flags were appropriate on Decoration Day. I have rather felt that the flag should be at the peak, because those whose dying we commemorate rejoiced in seeing it where their valor placed it. We

honor them in a joyous, thankful, triumphant commemoration of what they did.

We also pay tribute to the men and women who have given their lives in times of civic disasters and other emergencies; who rescued and served the victims of those adversities in whatever way they could.

May we also turn a thought to the Christ within, and appreciate the supreme sacrifice made for us. May we embrace the love that encourages us to make our own sacrifices for those in need, and to feel the peace from within that eases the troubles of our hearts and calms our fears.

On this Memorial Day may we allow Christ to help us remember. May we increase our feelings of gratitude for every sacrifice made on our behalf by a fellow member of God's family, living or in pure Spirit.

Let us pray....