

Memorial Day 2017

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Romans 13:7

Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Memorial Day is a day of remembering and honoring the men and women who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces. Formerly known as Decoration Day, it began after the American Civil War to commemorate the Union and Confederate soldiers who died in the Civil War. 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 who died in a war and then have a picnic. We shop for furniture 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.

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. As an extension of this thought, we not only remember the soldiers of all the armed forces who have given their lives, but also the police, firefighters and other civil service personnel , and civilians who have paid the highest price keep this country great.

And I think this country is great, at many different levels, and for me part of Memorial Day is remembering why we honor those who gave their lives. There are many things that we can point to that need improvement in this country, that are not up to standards. There are some critics of the United States, and to those critics all I can say is, “We’re not done yet. We are still young compared to any other of the leading nations; we are still learning, growing, and evolving.”

There are many factors I believe that contribute to the greatness of America. One of them is the freedoms allowed by our Constitution and Bill of Rights. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.

Many other rights are delineated in our Bill of Rights, among which are the freedoms to assemble and petition; the right to bear arms and the protection from unreasonable search and seizure. We also have the right to a fair trial by a jury, and are protected against excessive bail and unusual punishment. Yet the ones that set us apart from most other countries in the world are our freedoms of

speech and press. We can pretty much state or write any opinion that we have. We have the right to do things, in some cases, that I don't think are right morally. Two come to mind: We have the right to burn our flag, or invade a funeral service with signs and protests. I believe that all of these freedoms are important to making our country great, but they are not the most important.

There are many other arguments that can be offered as to what makes the United States a great country. The opportunities to make a living, find a career, and make a good life are limited only to our individual ingenuity, effort, and perseverance. Ask the millions of immigrants that continue to flood our nation. For them, perhaps these are among the most powerful reasons to come to America.

Another reason that I think makes America great is our charitable nature. We Americans give more than any other country to the rest of the world. As of April 23, according to the World Food Programme 39.7% of the world food donations come from the United States. We give billions to various causes around the globe annually. We give our time as well as money. We adopt more children than all other countries of the world combined. When there are natural disasters, the U.S. is usually the first country there to help. Americans have giving hearts.

We embrace, encourage, and endorse the creative arts. I think that this spills over into all areas of creativity resulting in significant innovations and advancements in the sciences and technology. We encourage people to think outside the box and appreciate

individualism. We encourage new businesses and entrepreneurship.

There is extraordinary tolerance toward cultural diversity here, perhaps because we may have more diversity than any other country. That is one of the challenges that we have when we compare ourselves in education, intelligence, tendencies, or abilities to other nations. No other country has the variety of heritages sitting in a classroom that we have.

Since abolishing slavery in 1865, in a short 150 we have come a far distance in eliminating racism in all forms. Yes, of course there are still episodes of intolerance, and we can still improve and are improving. But in general the United States is quite tolerant of various ethnicities. There are no laws that prevent any ethno-socio-economic background from attaining a good life or worshipping as they choose. Those obstacles are inserted by closed-minded individuals outside of the law.

All of these things are important and contribute to America's greatness, and this last reason I mentioned leads me to what I think is the most important quality making us great - our consciousness. A story I heard serves as an example.

Several years back, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North was speaking in front the National Rifle Association, adulating today's soldiers and describing their duties, characteristics, and a relayed a story he witnessed.

North explained that he was with a Marine unit in April 2003, fifteen miles outside of Baghdad when the unit was attacked by a Republican's Guard regiment. A battle ensued, and soldiers were injured. He showed a picture of a soldier, a Navy corpsman, who had rushed into the intersection of this battle where three men were laying. With his heavy packs he carried the first two men to safety. At the moment the picture was taken, the corpsman had just placed his own life in jeopardy a third time and had the last man over his shoulder and was stumbling toward a helicopter.

At this same time a group of Australian journalists were setting up their cameras and were videoing the American soldier as he carried the wounded soldier to safety. As the corpsman passed the journalists, one of them said, "Hey mate. What did you do that for?" It was a tone of ridicule, as if criticizing him for being a dumb American. "Didn't you notice that wasn't a Marine?"

The man that the corpsman carried on his shoulder to safety, the man that he had already bandaged amidst the clash of gunfire was an Iraqi soldier. In response to the Reuters news crew, the Navy medic gave them a gesture, that universal gesture of contempt, and said, "Didn't you notice? He was wounded; that's what we do. We're Americans."

This is what makes America great: this sense that despite our differences and despite our duties to our respective countries, everyone deserves to be carried out of harm's way. This is the consciousness that prompts us to come to the aid of the natural

disaster victims, the Chilean miners, and the tsunami and earthquake victims.

Americans know that as individuals, we are endowed with unalienable rights by our Creator. What we are learning is the awareness that we are not only individuals but we are part of something bigger: a community, a nation, a world, the Oneness in God.

And from this awareness comes the Divine whisper to each of our hearts, “Not only have I endowed each of you with certain unalienable rights, such as Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness...but because each of you is a component of something larger, My Family, I have endowed each you with certain unalienable *responsibilities*... such as love your neighbor as yourself, respect and honor each other, serve one another.”

John 15:13 *Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*

Memorial Day for me not only makes me appreciative of the soldiers who have given their lives, but for all those who have given of themselves for my betterment. My wife, my parents, family, friends inside and outside of this congregation, teachers, co-workers and managers, and total strangers have aided me, supported me, and given of themselves on my behalf. 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.

Honestly, this is one of the benefits I receive by coming to church and being around all of you. Together we create an environment of love and peace; there is a communion in Spirit and a Power here, and I am uplifted.

Yes, tomorrow is Memorial Day, when we honor the men and women who have served in the Armed Forces, and especially those who have given their lives so that we can sit here today enjoying our freedom and the rights endowed by our Creator.

John F. Kennedy said this: "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter the words, but to live by them." I pray that we live out our gratitude by accepting our responsibilities as Children of God to love each other, serve each other, respect each other, and honor each other.

Let us pray....