

I Remember.

Sermon Sixth Sunday of Easter

Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

Memorial Day May 25, 2014

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**In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place: and in the sky
The larks still bravely singing fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.**

Those are the opening lines from the poem “In Flanders Field” by Lt. Colonel John McCrae. It is from this poem that the tradition of poppies upon the lapel in remembrance of those we have lost in the far too many wars that history has witnessed was born. I think I have known the poem my entire life. It was taught to me and my brother and sister by my father. You see Memorial Day has long been a tradition in our family, yes, of course, it is the traditional start to summer, although in our family Memorial Day was spent at the cemetery, no matter how beautiful the weather and no matter how much we wanted to be out on the water, we would instead pile into the car with wire brushes and buckets; a variety of plants we had purchased the day before at the nursery, flags and a big picnic basket, winding our way through Mystic to Elm Grove cemetery where we met aunts and uncles and cousins many of whom we hadn’t seen since Labor Day last year and many of whom had traveled some distance to reunite for this annual affair of caring for the graves and honoring the soldiers followed by supper on the ground. I think I may have been well into my teens before I came to understand that our term “supper on the ground” referred to picnicking on blankets not dinner on these hallowed grounds surrounded by the remains of those who had lost their life in the Revolutionary war or the Civil war or World War I or World War II.

With my father the “memorializing” began days even weeks prior to Memorial Day itself. It mattered not where we were if there was a veteran collecting money in exchange for a poppy my father would stop, even if all he had in his wallet was a twenty dollar bill he would gladly hand it over while quoting the opening stanzas

to this poem. And then the conversation between two strangers, individuals' living in the diaspora of war, always created community born of the brotherhood of service, and the promise to always stand together. By the time we gathered for supper on the ground all of our lapels and collars had poppies adorning them and Daddy had the most of all.

The poppies reassure us that those whom we love; those who gave the utmost have not been forgotten; abandoned. But if you have to reassure someone that you're not abandoning them, it may be because they feel you slipping away. In John 14, Jesus is responding to the anxiety of those he loves. "I will not leave you orphaned," he says, but it is not clear how he will keep that promise. In a few hours, his arrest, trial, crucifixion and death will all have been accomplished. It will feel as if he has, in fact, abandoned them, or been torn away from them.

Today's Gospel continues the story of the days after Jesus loses his life. The disciples work to try to understand all that has happened, to find their way in the face of this most unimaginable loss. After his death, they take refuge by hiding. They are isolated from each other and afraid of everything on the other side of locked doors. They are without community, with no one to stand with them in the face of these unimaginable but very real fears.

We rarely think of what happened to Jesus as an experience of combat, but the story of his arrest includes soldiers, weapons and at least momentary hand-to-hand combat as Peter draws a sword to slice off the ear of one of those sent to arrest Jesus. Twenty-four hours later, those who could not remain awake to watch with Jesus in the garden and had no way to save him from the enemy will themselves be lost without him.

And now John recounts for us what have become known as the farewell discourses, Jesus's attempts to comfort the disciples and give them hope as he prepares to leave them for the final time, all the while knowing that there is only one way through their grief, that in the midst of their depression and isolation they must find a way to community; to a place of connection.

Near the end of *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Andrew Solomon writes, "So many people have asked me what to do for depressed friends and relatives, and my answer is actually simple: blunt their isolation. Do it with cups of tea or with long talks or by sitting in a room nearby and staying silent or in whatever way suits the circumstances, but do that" (437).

The promise of the Spirit to the disciples is a promise from Jesus to blunt their isolation. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever” (John 14:16). The word “advocate” means one who stands alongside another. Under threat, we talk about someone having our back. In peacetime, the better image may be that someone is right beside you. You are not alone. To the disciples, Jesus describes the gift of his Spirit with them and says in effect, “It will be as if I am by your side.” Remember, Jesus tells them, I am with you to the end of the ages.

When the disciples experience Jesus as risen from the dead, they recognize his Spirit as gathering them into something new: they become a church, a community of people who are bound together by the Spirit in love for one another. The love of God, given and received in a community like that, offers healing and belonging where there was isolation before.

It is now a bittersweet thing for me to remember all those times and all those places in which my father engaged a band of brothers spread across generations and around the world. I have no doubt that as a youngster it was an irritation as we were trying to get more important things done than talk about some age old war, but at some point I realized that in the midst of the conversations, while telling the stories of the friends he’d made and loved and left behind or listening to the tales that someone else had to tell that the isolation fell away and a community of both the living and the dead was connected and the Spirit of truth, the advocate surrounded them all.

In the days after my father’s death I wandered the house looking at pictures and touching his things as I tried to get my head around this unimaginable loss. At one point I found myself sitting in his closet, finally timidly opening the top drawer of his bureau feeling for all the world as if I was five or six again wanting to play with his cufflinks. There tucked into the corner sat two plastic zip lock bags one with a collection of palm crosses and the other an assortment of lapel pins...poppies. An incarnate message for me: “you are not alone...I am right beside you.” In life as well as in death.

Jesus’s promise to the disciples and to us is that he will be with us, standing with us and that the way we experience that presence and the healing therein is in and through and with community here and now.

AMEN!

