

Meditation for Memorial Day and Marathon Sunday, 2014

Scriptures: Isaiah 2:2-4; 2 Timothy 4:7-8

Though first designated as a day to honor lives lost during the Civil War, Memorial Day, also known as "Decoration Day," has come to be seen as a day set aside to honor those in military service who have died in every war in the history of the United States.

The roots of this tradition for community gatherings are deep and first grew out of the extraordinary grief that followed the Civil War as communities faced the loss of hundreds from the same geographically based regiments. In preparing for this morning I researched the history of Memorial Day and was touched by the heart-breaking Civil War stories of both loss and pride that are at the heart of Memorial Day.

Do you have childhood memories of Memorial Day? I do.

Memorial Day 1961 stands out for me. I was in third grade. Through the glories of the internet I know that Memorial Day in 1961 was on a Tuesday; and as the day was yet to be set aside as a national holiday, it was a school day. Likely the week or two before, my class had dutifully huddled under our desks during an "atom bomb drill" like the ones Rev. Peter Cook described in a sermon a few weeks ago.

On that Memorial Day, my third grade class walked to the town cemetery from our school to gather with our teachers and parents, community members, town leaders and veterans for a Memorial Day ceremony to honor soldiers from our little coastal Massachusetts town who had given the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

I imagine I was wearing the typical outfit of the day: a tucked in white blouse, a pleated plaid skirt, bobby socks and I know I had on a pair of practical, brown and white oxford saddle shoes because I distinctly remember some significant third grade "Mary Jane" envy.

At that Memorial Day Ceremony, an honored sixth grader stepped up to the microphone to read: "In Flanders Fields."

Do you know it "by heart" as we used to say?

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.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

"In Flanders Fields" was written during the First World War by a Canadian physician, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae. He was inspired to write it after presiding over the funeral of friend, a fellow soldier, who had died in battle. According to legend, soldiers retrieved the poem after McCrae, initially dissatisfied with his work, discarded it.

"In Flanders Fields", first published in 1915 in "Punch" magazine, became one of the most quoted poems from the war. Parts of the poem were later used in efforts to recruit soldiers and to raise money selling war bonds.

That long ago 1961 Memorial Day Ceremony included taps being played over rows of gravestones and a solemn parade into the town center.

Looking back on that day, I picture our bobby-socked group of third graders being a bit confused about what all of this was about as we walked into the town center to toss bright red, crepe paper poppy shaped flowers, made by disabled war veterans to raised funds for the American Legion, into the town harbor to further honor lives lost in war.

The closing stanza of "In Flanders Fields," stands in contrast to the words of Isaiah that we have heard this morning. Where Lieutenant Colonel McCrae urges the listener to "take up our quarrel with the foe ... to catch the torch" of conflict; Isaiah refers to a loving God who will arbitrate for peace for many, telling them to beat swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning-hooks; and calling on nations not to lift up sword against nation and to stop studying war.

I learned about Jesus message of peace in the Manchester-by-the-Sea Congregational Church Sunday School and about the cost and horrors of war at home from conversations with my mother about Anne Frank and WW II and during visits to Gettysburg with my father talking about his Civil War veteran, great-grandfather and Lutheran minister Harvey Washington McKnight, and from weekly pictures and stories in Life Magazine.

Ten years later in 1971, now dressed in aging denim jeans from a thrift store and a dashiki styled top that I had learned to fashion out of imported fabric from India, I left home for college. Like many of my peers, I opposed the war in Viet Nam, protested the drafting of my male friends and classmates into military service and supported the non-violent messages of Martin Luther King and Gandhi.

The passage from Isaiah, written about 2500 years ago, echoes the longing and the hope that instruments of war will be melted down literally and figuratively and be re-fashioned into instruments of peace. To paraphrase, our own Jackie Wintersteen, a native of Belgium, who spoke during a Forum here this past winter as she reflected on both her childhood in war-torn Belgium and the loss and eventual death of her father who was involved in the Nazi-resistance: *"I am against all wars. War never ends up accomplishing anything for anyone, the costs are too high. There are other ways to solve problems within and between nations."*

But can we truly imagine a world without war? A world where justice and dignity are the norm for every person in every nation? A world where children are well fed, have clean water to drink and can go to good schools? A world where no one has heard the sound of guns or bombs or hateful words of prejudice and racism?

Isaiah's dream is carved into stone in the lobby of the United Nations. We all need to be reminded that the dream of peace is as viable today as it was 2500 years ago.

This particular Sunday, the day of the Burlington Marathon, is also a day of community gathering; today is a celebration of the power of the human body, mind and spirit.

This morning, thousands of runners from all over the world, including many from Vermont (some more ready than others), will be propelled forward on our city streets by cheering crowds, encouraging family members and by their own muscles, sweat and sheer force of will. These athletes have dared to dream and will put their dreams into action in an amazing mass of humanity running, some with the hope of winning, and all with the drive to “fight the good fight, to finish the race, and.... to have kept the faith” in themselves and for some, in a loving God.

A fan of racing, Paul includes metaphorical references to running in his letters to congregations. He would be in his element this morning cheering with the crowds as the runners come racing down Church Street.

Paul writes about himself with a confident and faithful voice in Second Timothy saying, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race and I have remained faithful.”

Using his words, Marathon Sunday can become for us, a metaphor for living a good and faithful life both as individuals and as a community of faith.

In the history of the Christian Church, in our communities and in our personal lives, we have had moments of grief or discouragement. Like faithful runners, we sometimes trip or fall and can be bruised, confused or feel worn out. But as Paul reminds us, we are called with hope through God’s love to get back up, to start walking, maybe even jogging and running towards important goals for a world in need.

Through prayer and working together, we can find and follow a faithful path to do God’s work. When we pass through our own walls of doubt, fear or uncertainty, we can run with cheer, supporting each other, our endurance increasing and our hearts and minds working together.

We are invited to see our world through Isaiah’s dream and recognize our yearning to live in peace with ourselves and with one another.

May we, men and women, girls and boys, be believers in Isaiah’s dream of a just and peaceful world. May we run this race in faith with a goal of being the “beloved community” all along the course.

Amen.

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With assistance from Rev. Adrienne Carr, Laura Elder-Connors and Lucy’s brother and Civil War “buff” Douglas MacKnight Black. Doug also recommended an annual ritual that he follows on Memorial Day; reading the poem “Shiloh: A Requiem” written by Herman Melville in April 1862. There are many sources of information about the Civil War battle at Shiloh. This source on youtube, that includes a reading of the poem, may be of interest:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48VfcSXfCMg>.

Shiloh means “place of peace” in Hebrew.

Shiloh: A Requiem

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh—
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church of Shiloh—
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foemen mingled there—
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)
But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim,
And all is hushed at Shiloh.

By Herman Melville