

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY MEDITATION: THE FOLLY OF THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18-25

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Remembrance Sunday, November 11, 2018, at the 8:30 a.m. service at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

*‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’*

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

I.

It was in the tenth grade that a high school English teacher introduced those of us in his class to a selection of poems, short stories, novels that offered a critique of the day and time in which they were written. One that I have most vividly remembered ever since is a poem written during World War I by Wilfred Owen. Owen served in the British military for three years. He was killed *one week* prior to the signing of the armistice ending the war at “the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918,” a signing whose 100th anniversary we acknowledge today.

The poem is entitled “Dulce et Decorum Est.” (It appeared in a *Wall Street Journal* column yesterday,¹ but *after* I had written this sermon!) After describing the horror of seeing a fellow soldier gassed, Owen ends the poem addressing the reader:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.*²

“It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.”³

¹ Aaron Schnoor, “The Great War Produced Some Great Poetry,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 11/9/2018, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-great-war-produced-some-great-poetry-1541806343>.

² Wilfred Owen, *Poems* (Viking Press, 1921), available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46560/dulce-et-decorum-est>.

³ Owen attributes this line to the Roman poet Horace.

II.

Every time that I have preached on Remembrance Sunday at Westminster, I have remembered this poem for reasons at opposite ends of the human attitudinal spectrum.

On the one hand, the poem reminds me how sheltered I have been from the ravages of war.

- Like many in our nation my age or younger, the prospect of having to “die for one’s country” has always come with very low likelihood.
- I was old enough to have received draft number during the Vietnam War, but young enough to have fallen in one of those final years of the draft in which people were given numbers but no one was drafted.
- While I was politically aware in high school and college years, what shaped my awareness was the civil rights movement in the city and region in which I was reared, rather than both the Vietnam War and opposition to that shaped a generation just ahead of me.
- My personal acquaintance with those who have been willing “to die for one’s country” has come primarily from several dozen World War II veterans whose funerals I have conducted and from those of you in this congregation who serve our nation with your lives.
- This lack of direct encounter always leaves me feeling inadequate to bear appropriate witness to those among our friends or families who have given their lives, and to you in this congregation who, like Owen, have seen battle-sights as ghastly as those he chronicled and denounced.

On the other hand, it is equally difficult to preach on Remembrance Sunday because of

- The number of people I know in our congregation and beyond who were formed in the 1960s and 1970s by their opposition to and protests against the Vietnam War
- As well as the number of people in the church who when they first think of Jesus, rightly think of him as:
 - The One born to bring “peace on earth”⁴
 - The One, who when a disciple drew a sword to prevent Jesus from being arrested, said, “Put your sword back into its place, for those who take the sword will perish by the sword.”⁵
 - The One who counsels his followers to
 - Turn the other cheek
 - Provide cloak as well as coat
 - Go the second mile.⁶

In many ways, awareness of Jesus’ life and ministry can lead us to Owen’s conclusion that it is anything but “sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.”

⁴ Luke 2:14.

⁵ Matthew 26:52.

⁶ Matthew 5:38-42.

III.

Despite my inexperience with matters of war and peace, for some reason, known more fully to God than to me, I have long felt – deep within my spiritual and emotional life– that evil is a reality in our fallen world and that we as humans are prone to great infliction of it, one on another.

- As a child I was keenly sensitive to racial prejudice I witnessed around me.
- As a seminary student, I was horrified by the taking of Americans as hostages in the Iranian embassy.
- As a young minister right out of seminary, I early on had to deal with a violent, premeditated murder committed by a young woman who had been in my youth group and whose wedding I had conducted to the man she eventually killed.
- And as an adult, in several segments of immediate and extended family, as well as in pastoral care situations, I have seen first-hand the ravages the evil of addiction to alcohol and more recently opioids can bring to people created in the image of God.

This deeply felt awareness of the power of evil has led me to believe that there are times in which the only way to keep evil at bay is, as a last resort, to use force: personal, police, military. Thus, I have typically been inclined to support the use of arms and the sending of troops as a final but real response into situations in which combating the forces of evil and seeking to ensure some measure of justice has been a significant part of the motivation. In that regard, I believe that the willingness to “die for one’s country” is, if not “sweet and fitting,” at least *absolutely necessary* in a fallen world and a calling for those willing to risk it for the sake of all of us.

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This willingness to die is not unique to military service.

- People from smoke jumpers to security guards to EMTs to Secret Service to FBI to CIA to FEMA disaster workers to police to firefighters to religious relief workers and recently to journalists enter their service – largely by choice or a sense of call – and put their lives on the line to benefit others of us in their community, local or global.
- The most recent public example of this is Sergeant Ron Helus, one of the first officers of the Ventura County Sherriff’s Office to confront the shooter this past Wednesday at the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, and to lose his life in that confrontation.

IV.

On this 100th anniversary of the armistice, the question I would like to address today – more as a minister than a citizen – is this: *Is there a theological reason to remember every year, those who have put their lives on the line?*

I believe there is, and I would like to connect the theology in which we worship with the civic remembrance of this weekend.

(a)

Part of the connection comes in the church's particular understanding of *memory*.

When we speak of *memory* in the church, we cannot help but be guided by our understanding of baptism and communion, particularly of Jesus' words "This do in *remembrance* of me."⁷

The Greek word for *memory* in this instance is *anamnesis*.

- *Anamnesis* is not simply recalling an event or a set of facts.
- *Anamnesis* is *re-experiencing, re-appropriating, entering once again into the mystery* of that which we are recalling in a way that *it becomes present to us and we become present to it*.
 - *Anamnesis* is the memory we experience when we return to our old elementary school and notice the smell is the same it was thirty years earlier.
 - *Anamnesis* is the memory we experience when we return to the high school football field on which we once aspired to greatness and hear the same voice of the same coach bellowing the same words "Jones, don't just wave at the runner; tackle him"; the only difference being the substitution of the name "Jones" for the name "Hayward."
 - *Anamnesis* is the memory we have when, while twirling a daughter around on the dance floor the evening of her wedding, we are taken back to the time we twirled her in fall leaves in the backyard and the time she was placed in our arms in the delivery room when we were afraid to do anything like twirling.
- In the church, when we baptize an infant, we remember, once again, that like the infant, we receive God's love *without* fully understanding it and *without* doing enough to merit it, and that leads us to remember that "we love God because God *first* loved us."⁸
- Likewise, when we partake of bread and wine, body and blood, we remember Christ's willingness to die, and it makes us "tremble, tremble, tremble," even if we are a soldier or a seal who has known many willing to die.

That is the nature of memory in the church. It is not unlike the memory we call forth today of those who have served our nation, given their lives in that service, or both.

(b)

The connection also comes because of the church's understanding of *commitment*.

After attending our choir's presentation of "Five Mystical Songs" and "Dona Nobis Pacem" Friday night, I asked Maggie what she was preaching on Sunday and she said:

The lectionary is the widow's mite.⁹ It fits with Remembrance Sunday. The widow gave everything she had. By giving everything, she put herself at risk. She put her life on the line.

⁷ Luke 22:19.

⁸ I John 4:10.

⁹ Luke 21:1-4.

If our bulletins hadn't already printed, I may have gone with that. Like the widow, those we remember today "gave everything they had."

But the text I had chosen for today fits such commitment as well.

In the Christian faith, the most meaningful way to live our lives is captured by the Apostle Paul's phrase "the foolishness of the cross."

In First Corinthians, Paul writes:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God....

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block [to some] and foolishness [to others], but to those who are the called..., Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Like the widow, like Sergeant Helus, like Wilfred Owen and millions of others who gave their lives in battle, the mystery at the heart of faith is "the foolishness of the cross," the foolishness of giving everything we have, the foolishness of living, and sometimes dying, for the sake of others. It isn't always "sweet and fitting," but neither is it always "a lie."

V.

I have shared with you that this past summer I read, for the first time, William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He published this classic in 1902, during that period of American history in which we were optimistic about the human condition and in which, a follow a century of inventions, progress and prosperity were at their height. Within a few decades that optimism would be shattered by the 8.7 million service people who lost their lives in what was at the time called The Great War, and the seven million civilians as well,¹⁰ the war out of which Owen wrote his poetry. Part of the wisdom of James writing is that he knew there were limits to the human condition and to human progress so celebrated in his day.

In a chapter entitled "The Value of Saintliness," James describes what he calls *asceticism*:

Life is neither farce nor genteel comedy, [asceticism] says, but something we must sit at in mourning garments, hoping its bitter taste will purge us of our folly...

...sentimental optimism...can hardly be regarded by any thinking [person] as a serious solution.

Phrases of neatness, cosiness, and comfort can never be an answer...

[It is] in heroism [James continues], [that] life's supreme mystery is hidden...

¹⁰ Alexis Clark, "In Photos Unpublished for 100 Years, the Joy of War's End on Armistice Day," *The New York Times* 11/10/2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/09/world/europe/armistice-day-100th-anniversary-photos.html>

No matter what a [person's] frailties...if [that person] be willing to risk death, and still more...suffer it heroically...the fact consecrates [that person] forever....

The folly of the cross, so inexplicable by the intellect, has yet its indestructible vital meaning.

...asceticism [is]...the profounder way of handling the gift of existence...

The practical course of action for us, as religious [people], would therefore...not be simply to turn our backs upon the ascetic impulse...but rather to discover some outlet for it [that] the fruits...privation and hardship might be objectively useful.....¹¹

At Westminster, and in this larger metropolitan community, we are particularly blessed with exposure to people who have been called to sacrifice and service, who are in the sense James describes, "ascetics": whether through the quiet ways they devote their working lives to our nation or the way they have given their lives in that service. In many ways, they are "ascetics."

As we remember them this day and weekend, as we listen to their stories or hear accounts of their lives and deaths passed down through family lore or published record, our task is to appropriate the best of what they offered and find, in our own day and time, an asceticism that brings us closer to the foolishness of the cross, that foolishness which is the only true answer to the life's riddle.

Amen.

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¹¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), originally published 1902. These comments come from Lectures 14 and 15, "The Value of Saintliness," pages 270-271.