

“THE REST OF THE STORY”

Acts 10:44-48

preached Memorial Sunday, May 24, 2009

It's the Memorial Day weekend. Memorial Day has changed quite a bit for me over the years. I remember that as teenager I wasn't particularly pleased with Memorial Day. It was nice to have the day off from school but Memorial Day meant parades to cemeteries where long, dry, boring speeches would be made. That would be bad enough for a teenager but then came the realization that I would have to deal with this not once, not twice, but three times on Memorial Day. There were parades in the morning, afternoon, and evening, travel in between along with uniform changes because I was in two different bands in those days. The only thing those uniforms had in common was that they were made of wool and they were not complete without spats and hats. And according to my memory, most Memorial Days had temperatures in the mid 80's with matching humidity. Ah yes, nothing like getting dressed up in a wool suit on a hot day to carry a horn a few miles just for the opportunity to stand in the sun in a cemetery and listen to long, dry, boring speeches. Sure I got the day off but I would have been less restricted in school. And I wouldn't have sweated nearly as much either.

But Memorial Day did mean a lot to my father and I really didn't understand why. I knew he wasn't in the band. He wasn't dressed in wool. He didn't have to be at those parades, and when he was in a parade he was driving or riding in a car. But he would be there at the cemetery, listening to all the long, dry, boring speeches. As a matter of fact, there were quite a few years when he was one of speakers, even the main speaker at the program in the cemetery. But I didn't understand his concern about this time; why it meant so much to him. He didn't recognize the day as simply the beginning of summer. He didn't see this three day weekend as a chance to get away for a brief vacation. To my father, Memorial Day was something special, something important, something that had to be remembered; something that had to be honored.

Over time I began to learn the rest of the story. Memorial Day was not a time to get away from the regular work routine, nor was it a time to get out of town. Memorial Day was a time to remember and honor those who sacrificed life and limb for liberty. At the 1964 Republican National Convention Barry Goldwater said, "Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice." Now I was never a Goldwater fan, especially in 1964, but what he said is correct. It was one way of saying that Memorial Day needs to be remembered. Those who gave the extreme sacrifice for the freedom of their nation, who offered themselves even on to death, in defense of liberty should be honored. And for my father and for many of his generation that was not just a vague principle. It was personal, for they saw their brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, their friends and neighbors die in defense of liberty. They understood the sacrifice.

My generation had a different experience. We, too, saw our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors go off to war but we were unclear of the purpose. We did not see the defense of liberty, but what appeared to us to be senseless violence; the death and destruction of a war that was fought without any intention of winning, without any clear purpose so we would not, could not know if we were winning or losing, or even why any sacrifice should be made. We did not understand sacrifice. As a generation, we still do not understand sacrifice. We do not know the rest of the story and so this weekend, a time when we should remember and honor those who fought and died, those who offered their life for our freedom, for the liberty we share this day, we think not of the journey to the cemetery but of going to the beach or the mountains, thrilled more by a day's vacation than the purpose behind the day. When will we learn the rest of the story?

Particularly over the last couple of years and again this year Memorial Day needs to be honored and remembered. Once again we see the sacrifice of young men and women that freedom might be maintained in this country and established elsewhere. Sadly, in Iraq many more died trying to preserve their personal power rather than allow the population to take control of their lives, to let liberty reign; to let freedom ring. That is what the insurgency has been all about, preserving their power and privilege. They want to control the population and will go to extremes to not allow liberty to come into the land. We see that in Iraq and Iran; in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Because of the battle, it is important for us as a nation, for us as individuals to honor those who are deployed, those who return home, and even more so, those who do not.

There have been a number of voices who have disagreed with the actions of the military and the President over the past few years, and they have a right to do that. But for me, after hearing reports of torture cells, rape rooms, and mass graves, of stonings and beheadings, after hearing the tales from the people of the terror and hostility that has been going on for decades, there is no question of why we should have gone to Iraq and Afghanistan. Iraq may not have been a serious threat to us. But there is no doubt that Hussein was a threat to his own people, as are the Taliban today. And when we see injustice, it is our responsibility to act, for we are our brother's keeper. Others have said that the Iraqi people, that those people cannot handle freedom and democracy. That attitude is so sad. But it reminds of this story found in Acts:

There was a centurion named Cornelius who was devout. That is to say that he and his whole family honored, loved and feared the Lord. He was a kind and generous man who gave to those in need, and he prayed to God regularly. He was known as a God-fearing Gentile, and all the Jews spoke well of him. But because he was a Gentile, because he was different, he was not fully accepted by the Jews. After all, according to their understanding, the law prohibited too much contact with people who were not Jews. They might greet him in the street, but they would not visit his home, or invite him to theirs. But he loved the same Lord that they loved, and the Lord loved him, too.

One day while in the midst of prayer the Lord called to Cornelius. Suddenly he saw an angel before him who said that his prayers and his gifts to the poor had come up to heaven as a memorial offering before God. And because of that, the Lord wanted him to send for Peter. It was a great thought, but it presented a problem because Peter was a faithful Jew and as such, he shouldn't be visiting the home of a Gentile. But before Peter even heard the invitation to come, the Lord prepared him to make the correct decision.

It was about noon when Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell asleep and began to dream. He saw heaven open and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." Well Peter knew the dietary laws of the faith. He knew that meat had to be killed, the blood poured out and the animal blessed before eating and so he said, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." And then the sheet was pulled back to heaven and the vision ended. But as Peter stayed on that roof he saw that same vision 2 more times.

Just as that third vision ended, the invitation to come to the house of Cornelius arrived. Many Jews would have turned away, for many believed that the gifts of grace and fellowship offered by the Lord were for Jews alone. The Gentiles did not deserve that, could not handle that. But Peter, reflecting on that vision, believed that something more needed to be done. And so he went to the home of Cornelius, and there he saw an amazing sight. Right before his eyes he saw the Spirit of God being poured out on these people who were not Jewish. He saw the gifts of the Spirit being given to people who were not like him. And suddenly Peter's eyes, and the eyes of his heart were opened. Suddenly he realized that God's grace isn't meant for just a few, but for everyone; for people of all nations, all ages, all races. He realized that if God had accepted those people, there was no way that he should reject them. And so Peter baptized those Gentiles, even though they were different from him, and made them a part of the Church.

Now that is a very important doctrine that we all need to grasp, that God's grace is for everyone, not just some. The House of the Lord is big enough to accept all comers. But we cannot neglect the rest of the story. Earlier in the book of Acts, we read about an Ethiopian eunuch who was reading the words of Isaiah and struggling to make sense of it all. The deacon, Philip, asked if he knew what he was reading and the man said, "How can I know unless someone explains it to me?" In the same way, we may know that our Lord Jesus died for the salvation of all, but there are hundreds and thousands and millions of people out there who do not. And they will not know unless we find ways to tell them. We are called to sacrifice our time, to offer our talents, to give the best we have to give so the message might be heard, that the gospel might be on display in Manchester and Mt. Wolf, in York City and York Haven; from Saginaw to Shrewsbury and Dover to Dallastown. The message needs to be heard throughout the world. We have to pay the price to help people believe that liberty from sin and death is available to all who believe, to all who receive the grace of Christ. Then we will see the Holy Spirit fall on many, the gifts of the Spirit be manifested among the multitudes; then we will baptize, immerse them in the Spirit of God and God's kingdom will grow in our midst.

Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, liberty from sin and death is intended for everyone but many will not know unless we make the sacrifice to deliver the message to them. In the very same way, God created humanity not so we could rule over one another, not that some would be required to serve for the benefit of others, but that we might live in harmony with one another. We were created to be equal in the eyes of God and of one another. We were endowed with free will and liberty. But even from the earliest times, humanity walked away from the will of God. Oppression and subjugation became the cruel norm because some thought themselves better than others. Some thought that the gifts of freedom and liberty were only to be given to a select few; that not everyone deserved it; that not everyone could handle it. But they were wrong.

Thomas Jefferson was right when he wrote with wisdom and insight, "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." And he did not let it go with just the proclamation of rights. As he wrote, he delivered the rest of the story, "That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government."

From the very beginning God intended freedom and liberty under the love and grace God to be the standard by which we live. And just as they will not know about the grace of God unless we make the sacrifice to deliver the message to them in a way they can understand, neither will millions be able to taste political freedom

“THE REST OF THE STORY” Acts 10:44-48 preached Memorial Sunday, May 24, 2009

unless we make the sacrifice to give them the opportunity to receive it. It is as we sing, "As Christ died to make men holy, let us die [and live] to make them free." This weekend we honor those who sacrificed, who gave the best they had to give, even their very lives to make it happen, both here and through out the world. Many may focus on the picnics and cookouts, the three day weekend and the kick-off for summer, but we must never forget the rest of the story. In your life may it be so. Amen.