

## **Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost**

*Proper 3, Year A*

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In the aftermath of the Civil War General John Logan instituted a day to honor the soldiers who had been killed in the war by decorating their graves with flags and flowers. That war was the bloodiest in our history, claiming the lives of 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers, and while it took a couple of generations it eventually became possible for all the states to agree to mark a day of memory for the devastating impact that war had on so many of the families of our country.

As great as the toll of that war and so many other wars has been in this country, our experience pales beside what Europe has put itself through. The United States was among the last of the nations to contribute troops to the arrogant and misguided war we call World War I, and at its end we had fully unified the North and South at the cost of another 126,000 dead and 230,000 wounded. The European nations, though, spent over 10 million lives on that war, with another 22 million casualties.

After that war this holiday, Decoration Day or as it is now known, Memorial Day, became an annual observance in this country. In England the day was forever connected to the ending of the first World War as Remembrance Day on November 7.

I had the good fortune to spend a year in England while finishing my seminary studies, and two things from that time remain in my memory as incredibly moving. One was in my parish church, located in the midst of a small hamlet to the north of Oxford. Its population was about the same as Mercer Island's. On the Sunday before Remembrance Day I took part in a ritual to recall those who had died in the First and Second World Wars.

This was not a large village by any means, but as we stood in the church yard circling a monument bearing the names of those who had died, I was struck by how fresh this event was. The mourning was palpable. In the circle of us gathered around the stone obelisk were the "spinsters" of the parish, the numerous, now elderly, women, for whom no marriage had been possible because of the decimation of Britain's male population. After prayers began a recitation of the names of men from this small parish who had died in war.

As the names droned on for five minutes I was dumbfounded. At eight minutes I was so choked up I could hardly read any more. At twelve minutes into this recitation, when the final name was read, I felt deeply connected to grief, deeply connected to the cost and sacrifice of generations of families.

The second remarkable memory was from a television program aired on the BBC during that year called "The Nineties." The program was an hour each week of men and women in their nineties talking about their lives, having been children of the century's turn. I especially remember one man, talking about how he had arranged to enlist in the British Army at age 15 to fight in the Great War. His commanders knew he was younger than he claimed, so they kept him out of the most intense fighting. His job was to be in the crew that would go onto the battlefield trenches to collect the dead for burial. I remember that he

said he left his home at 15, and when he came home at 18 he was older than his father. He said, as I remember it, "We no longer had anything in common after that, for I had seen things he could not imagine. It was as if I had gone to a different world, and on coming home could not understand the language that had been my mother tongue."

Even with brass bands and countless flags, holding onto the memory of war is an uneven sacred ground. It rolls with heroism, self sacrifice, devotion, and honor. The sacrifice of a just war reflects the highest ideals and hopes of humanity. Yet its jagged outcrops accuse us with our foolishness, our vanity, our arrogance and inhumanity. The face of war is both angelic and demonic. There are times when war may be necessary, inevitable, or the misfortune of folly. There is never a time it is acceptable. The sacred writings of our faiths may at times condone or seem even to revel in war; but they remind us, too, that war is a punishment of humankind for rejecting what is godly.

Those who have been warriors are haunted by its reality, like the teenager home from years of handling corpses, unable to find the language that could let another understand what they have seen.

Most of the press about Memorial Day suggests that it is the start of the summer vacation season, that it is the primary barbecue day of the year, that it is a day for beaches and for gardening.

It is also a day to take time to spend along the edges of that sacred ground on which the blood of so many men and women has been spilled. There are many opportunities to get in touch with the reality of their sacrifice, with the glory and the profanity of our human history. Memorials are offered in a variety of sites around the county. Numerous books and movies unpack the heroism and tragedy of war. There are lots of ways to spend part of the weekend in recollection, taking a glimpse of what the gains and tolls of war have been.

As a gift to the rest of the world, perhaps we can take some time to offer prayers for peace.