

Tomorrow is _____.

It is doubly so for tomorrow is both May 30th AND the last Monday in May. Both of these have been observed as Memorial Day at various times in our nation's history and this year they're rolled into one.

So, a little history lesson...

Although there had been a few memorial observances around the country following the Civil War, Memorial Day as we understand it took shape when Mrs. Mary Logan, wife of a Union General, went to Petersburg VA, site of one of the last battles of the Civil War. There in the spring of 1868 she visited an old Episcopal church where the graves of those killed in the Civil War were decorated with flowers.

It is "especially pleasant to know," she wrote, "that the ideal of Memorial Day was unwittingly suggested by the devotion of the South to its heroes..."

You see, Memorial Day was not meant to be "the unofficial beginning of summer" or an excuse for sales or cause of traffic.

It was founded as a sacred obligation not only to *remember* those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country, but to *celebrate forgiveness and reconciliation* -- thanks to the wife of a Union general inspired by daughters of the Confederacy.

Her husband, Gen. John Logan, head of a Union veterans organization, settled on the date of May 30 for two reasons:

1. Flowers would be in bloom in all parts of the country; and
2. It was not associated with any particular battle.

I love that -- flower power trumps military might!
Looking forward with hope matters more than re-fighting old battles.

That's the significance of May 30.

It wasn't until 1971 that a law took effect decreeing that Memorial Day be the last Monday in May, thus transforming it into the three day weekend we know today.

I share this because, as some of you know, I'm a hopeless history geek who can't resist pointing out that this is the rare year when Memorial Day is on the "right" day. But I also think that today's scripture readings speak to the spirit of reconciliation, of crossing barriers to bring people together, which was the original intent of Memorial Day.

Did you catch that in our first reading, from I Kings?
It's from Solomon's prayer of dedication for the Jerusalem Temple.
Even at this pivotal moment in the life of the people Israel,
Solomon pauses to remember the "foreigner",
praying that "all the peoples of the earth" may know God as one.

In the gospel lesson from Luke,
we hear of the healing of the centurion's slave.
Just think of all the different layers of reconciliation there.

There's the centurion,
an officer in the Roman army with about 100 soldiers under him.
He's a leader of the occupying army oppressing the Jews.
He's a gentile. He's ritually unclean and admits he's unworthy,
As powerful as he is,
he's powerless in the face of illness and death.

Then there's the slave – obviously low social status.
However much the centurion may have cared about him (or maybe just needed him),
he's expendable, a nobody.
He too is surely unclean and unworthy.

Then there's the physical proximity or, rather, lack thereof.
Did you notice that the centurion doesn't dare approach Jesus himself
but instead sends others?
That Jesus never touches or is touched by the sick slave,
never even enters the house?

All those things which divide us – all manner of power and status,
feeling unworthy or outcast,
even physical distance,
are reconciled in the love and mercy of Jesus,
whose name -- as we learned from Church School last week –
means *Savior*,
One who heals,
who brings wholeness within, between and among people,
and sends his followers (that would be *us*) out to do the same.

I remember a Memorial Day weekend a few years ago,
with a dear parishioner burying her mother beside her long deceased father
in the State Veteran's Cemetery in Middletown.
It's sacred ground for laying to rest veterans who've served in wartime and
been honorably discharged, and their spouses.

It's a sea of green manicured grass punctuated by
simple white headstones laid out in near-military formation.

As we concluded the service of committal for her mother that late May morning,
off on the other side of the cemetery
were volunteers with the solemn duty of carefully placing
an American flag on each of the nearly 8,000 graves.

Looking out over the apparent orderliness of the scene,
I thought of all those who had likely, well, lost control there
saying their final goodbyes to loved ones,
each so unique to them and precious to God.

But at the same time, each grave like all the others.
Each one quietly visited by a stranger planting a small flag.

Although the rank of each veteran is fittingly engraved on his or her stone,
that's not what you first notice.
Instead, whatever rank one achieved in life,
whether veteran or spouse,
whatever race or ethnic or gender or religious background,
whatever, God help us, political differences,
are subsumed into the greater majesty of the whole.
They are all gathered together on that patch of God's green earth
witnessing, even in death,
to the grace of reconciliation,
of breaking down the barriers between us,
for which our Savior Jesus lived and died and rose again.

May we do likewise in whatever time's given us in this life
into the life to come.

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