

Memorial Day
John 17:1-11
Colebrook Congregational Church
May 28, 2017 / 7th Sunday of Easter / Memorial Day

This is the last Sunday of Easter, so this year, Memorial Day observance falls within this season. Both of these recall sacrifice: One, that of Jesus for us all; and the other, that of all those who have served our country.

Today's selection from the Gospel of John is a prayer, Jesus' last prayer with the Disciples before the Passion where Jesus sacrifices Himself; and that Jesus offered after His Farewell Discourse at the end of the Last Supper. Jesus knows what is coming and has spent the previous four chapters essentially saying goodbye to them.

This sort of thing was common in religious literature in that region, especially in Judaism, to give a farewell speech followed by a prayer.

But with Jesus, the Farewell Prayer is not conventional. It is not a deathbed prayer, nor one because of a permanent parting of the ways; But the cap on His Farewell Discourse. It underscores not just His death, but the fullness of what Jesus is about to go through that we celebrate during Easter: Death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

This prayer shifts focus from the Disciples to God, but it is us who are the recipients and beneficiaries of Jesus' intercessions. It is the theological climax of John's Gospel, echoing all Jesus said before; this is the pivotal moment, where it is a prayer of someone on the verge of willingly sacrificing oneself for the sake of all people.

Every Sunday, we celebrate that sacrifice that Jesus made for us all, but this weekend, we also celebrate Memorial Day, which started as a consolidation of many similar holidays that commemorated the Civil War, remembering the sacrifices made of those on both sides.

On August 4, 1862, after the Union disasters of the Peninsula Campaign, President Lincoln called for more troops. In response, my great-great-great-grandfather, Sanford Alvah Smith enlisted in the 16th Regiment of the Vermont Volunteer Infantry as the Drummer Boy of Company B. It was a nine month regiment, serving from October 1862 to August 1863, serving primarily in the defense of Washington, D.C. However, in late June, they were ordered to chase after the Army of Northern Virginia to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

On the second day of the Battle, the 16th was deployed as skirmishers on Cemetery Ridge, facing off against General A. P. Hill, outnumbered five to one. They were sent to reinforce the Union troops and retake the skirmish line. Sanford's Company was then ordered to go plug a hole in the line and they stayed out in a ditch between the two armies, miraculously surviving repeated attacks.

Then on the third day of the Battle was Pickett's Charge. As soon as it was light, the Confederate artillery started to fire at the Union lines. At around 1pm, hundreds of cannons in a line over 2 miles long opened fire, all aimed at the same point on the Union center, a copse of trees...right where Sanford's Company was positioned in support of a Union battery. Imagine what that would have been like for them.

Sanford's Captain wrote about that in a letter:

“Imagine the heaviest thunder you ever heard, and have it continued for about six hours without a moments cessation, and added to that the crash and whizzing of showers of solid shot and shells that were bursting and cutting the air just over our backs as we lay on the ground, each one expecting that his turn to be hurried out of the world would come next, and you will have but a faint idea of the suspense we were in lying there with a boiling sun pouring down upon us to add to our troubles.”

After that, the Charge began. 12,500 soldiers started marching out in a mile-long front, across a field three quarters of a mile long, all focused on that one spot. Right where Sanford was. While he watched thousands of soldiers march right at him, he probably saw his comrades from the rest of the Regiment march out into the field between two Confederate brigades and flank them both. And then Armisted's Brigade broke the Union line at the Angle. Positioned by the Copse of Trees, Sanford was right there at the High Water Mark, and his Company was among the units that charged into the breach.

After the Battle, they returned to Vermont and mustered out. Stories passed down in my family tell of how he was a different person when he came back. One can only imagine what he saw and endured. But Sanford came from a large family, having nine siblings, so he did have a support system. He returned to woodworking in Guilford, got married, and then he started his own factory, the S. A. Smith Company, where he spent the rest of his life building children's toys.

It is not only life that is sacrificed by our country's servicepeople. Innocence. Health. Sanity. Family Stability. Sanford was lucky, but other veterans are not so lucky. Not just on this day of remembrance, but every day, as we remember the sacrifice of Jesus and what it means for our life, we should remember those, past and present, those veterans who have sacrificed for us, and do what we can, when they are in need.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

We come before You, God, not to glorify conflicts, but to honor and celebrate those who walked into the chaos and evil that is war: those who were civilians and those who were military; those who survived and those who did not; those who were friends and those who were enemies. None who have waded through evil and sorrow are untouched in body, mind or spirit; and yet they are all beloved of God. We all were affected and changed by conflicts and all are in need of Your comfort and healing. Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for each breath we take; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who have sacrificed of themselves for us.

Loving God, When we see life only for ourselves, please forgive us. Help us to hear your transforming love speaking to us of respect, dignity and worth, telling us that we are loved and that we are to love one another.

We pray for those around us who need your care. We pray for those who hunger or are homeless. We pray for those in pain—the abused, broken-hearted and lonely. We pray for the sick in body and in mind, and for those who grieve. We pray for the caretakers who bring comfort to those in need. We pray for all who put themselves between us and harm in this chaotic world. We pray for the victims of terrorist attack and for their families.

Help us to see Your presence burning in the hearts of others; grant that we may all be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; give us the courage to pick up our cross and respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We especially pray for:

The Suddath Family
Sean Larose

Deanna Muzzulin Sue Kenny
Family of Greg Roberts Becky Bodycoat

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 68:1-10

Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, let the wicked perish before God. But let the righteous be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy. Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds--his name is the LORD-- be exultant before him. Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land. O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, *Selah* the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain at the presence of God, the God of Sinai, at the presence of God, the God of Israel. Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad; you restored your heritage when it languished; your flock found a dwelling in it; in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.

John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.