

NO MORE GRAVES

Isaiah 2: 3b-5; 11:6-9, Romans 5: 6-8, John 15: 11-14

Memorial Day Weekend

May 27, 2018

Rev. David S. Cooney

I recently visited the cemetery in which most of my people are buried. I know many names on the stones and have heard stories about dozens of others. Some buried there, such as my grandparents, had died, essentially, of old age. Others, such as my father and brother, had died from disease. Still others, such as a second cousin, by accident. All of these causes are sad, in some cases tragic, but all unavoidable. We do not choose old age or disease, they are just facts of life, and accidents happen. While visiting that cemetery, I stood on the plot of ground in which one day I will be buried. Hopefully this will be later than sooner, but the day will come. I do not say any of this to be maudlin or stark. I am just being openly honest about a truth we all know. There will always be a need for cemeteries because death is a part of life

There are others buried in that cemetery, as there are in most cemeteries, though, that are not there because of old age or disease or accident. It was not an inevitable fact of life that put them there. They died in war. Mostly men, although there are women, mostly young, although some were older; the common thread between them being they died fighting. Those are the graves I want to talk about for a few minutes today.

Memorial Day is observed tomorrow; the traditional Memorial Day is Wednesday. Leave it to us to turn a day of honor and remembrance into a three-day weekend. Whatever day it is observed, as we are doing it today, it is intended to be a time of solemn remembrance that men and women, again mostly young, have died in service to their country. It is a time to give thanks for their ultimate sacrifice. It is a time to honor their courage and patriotism. It is a time to remember that war is not some video game or glorious display of power or a chance to play with big guns. War kills. It kills the soldiers who go into battle at the behest of their country. It kills civilians, including women and children, who are inconveniently in the way of missiles and bombs and bullets. It leaves parents and spouses and siblings and children weeping at the loss of a son or daughter, husband or wife, brother or sister, father or mother. War is a terrible thing.

I don't know. There is a part of me that thinks that every country in the world should have a Memorial Day at least once a month because maybe, just maybe, if we all continually remembered just how much damage war inflicts, the human cost, not to mention the damage to the earth, humans would put a stop to war.

All of this leaves me conflicted on a day such as this. I am truly grateful for the men and women who willingly serve in the military. Even if not involved in war, service people have to be willing to go wherever sent, for low pay, often separated from their families, and always being on call. That is a tremendous commitment. For some it will mean being in what have to be terrifying circumstances with the real chance of dying or being badly injured. I have a deep and profound respect for all who have taken this on or are taking this on. I am 100% for giving the honor to these men and women today that has been so hard won, but I am also sick and tired of digging

graves. I am tired of mothers having to live out their days grieving over the loss of a son. I am tired of young women being widowed before they are thirty. I am tired of children having to be told that their mother will not be coming home. I am tired of it.

I have to think that God is tired of it too. Just a little under 3000 years ago, the prophet Isaiah spoke about the coming of someone from the line of David on whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest. We believe that Isaiah was speaking about Jesus. When he comes, Isaiah told us, he would usher in a time when the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the cow and bear shall graze, and on he goes, ending with God saying, "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

This is the vision God has for creation. This is the desire God has for his creation. God does not delight in watching his children brutalize and kill each other. Just the opposite. Isaiah is telling us that when we fully know and understand God, the hurting and destroying will stop. Surely this is why Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, said blessed are the peacemakers, not blessed are the warmongers. I join God in being so ready to be done with war.

Now you might be saying, great, we all are, but that is pie in the sky. I hear you. The evidence is overwhelming. War has been part of the human experience since Cain killed Abel. People of every nationality and ethnicity have participated in war. Perhaps there have been times, but I cannot name any time, that someone was not fighting someone somewhere in the world. Even those who have built a reputation on being neutral have, in fact, profited from war, and ironically become famous for making army knives. I am not naïve. I think I understand history, and the geo-political realities of today as well as most. I know it is not as simple as saying let's all play in the sandbox nicely together.

But here is another way to think about it, or maybe dream about it. By definition, if not by action, Christians are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is universally acknowledged by his followers to be the Prince of Peace. Well, at the last count in 2010, there were 2.2 billion Christians in the world; 2.2 billion, and we can assume that number has grown. Christians represent the largest religious body in the world. What if every follower of the Prince of Peace, all 2.2 billion of us, stood up and in one voice said no more war? We are not going to be part of it. Would people of other faiths, inspired by our witness, say the same thing? There are 1.8 billion Muslims, over 1 billion Hindus, 15 million Jews, 535 million Buddhists. By the way, Buddhism and Confucianism are the predominant religions in North Korea, both pacifist faiths. What if, instead of political leaders holding summits, all of the Buddhists and Confucianists of North Korea together said, we are not going nuclear, we are not going to attack others? Everyone wants to know what God is going to do about all of this. Well, what are we believers going to do about this?

I know I am dreaming, although it is intriguing to wonder, what if every person of faith stood up for that faith. I suspect, though, that war and violence will stop only when Jesus returns and ushers in the reign of God and God's vision and desire rule, not humankind.

However, I am not willing to absolve us of all responsibility or accountability. Maybe we do not have the power or the know how to make all the world a peaceable kingdom, but it is not

all right to stop for Memorial Day, say what a shame, and then the next day get back to digging graves. If we are going to call ourselves followers of Christ, those committed to the ways of the Lord, then it is incumbent upon us to live for peace and influence for peace in every way that we can.

That begins with the way we think and talk and act within our immediate sphere. Bullying has become a big issue for our younger people, made all the more vicious because of what can be done on social media. This is not restricted to the young. It is appalling what gets posted or tweeted, not just by leaders and celebrities, but everyday folks. It is beyond rude. It is mean and derogatory and anything but peaceful. The old adage of, if you cannot say something nice, do not say anything at all, has been replaced with the new adage of, say whatever you want and post it so you can say it to more people.

Road rage is in fashion. There are bad driving habits and driving mistakes, mostly by other drivers, of course. Frustrating as it may be, those habits and mistakes do not warrant obscene gestures, blaring horns, and certainly not following someone so you can yell and honk some more.

The response to the spate of shootings in schools and public places has not been a national discussion about the prevalence of guns in the country. The response has been a sharp increase in the purchase of guns.

One out of four wives can expect to be beaten by a husband. I don't know that we have accurate statistics of how many children are abused since so many are covered up. Elder abuse is a topic coming more into the light.

I don't want to put together a laundry list here. Surely you get the point. Is it any wonder that nations go to war, when behaviors like bullying and insulting others, abusing family members and friends, shouting at each other on the roads, and arming ourselves, are if not the norm, is also not the exception? So maybe we don't know what to do with North Korea or Syria or Afghanistan. Surely, we can do something in our own families and neighborhoods and workplaces and communities. Surely, we can take a stand for peace in these settings.

After reflecting on this topic, Polly wrote a poem that may sometime become a hymn or anthem. It makes this point better than I can. I have asked her to share it.

No More Graves

Polly Baldrige

May 2018 in honor of David Cooney

**No more graves, no more graves!
I'll not kill another's joy with the hurtful things I say.
May I not speak in anger, keep my bitterness at bay.
Let me speak a word of life, Lord.
No more graves.**

**No more graves, no more graves!
I will not look past the people you put on my path today.
Let me see them as you see them, not ignore and walk away.**

**You're alive in every creature.
No more graves.**

**No more graves, no more graves!
Hurt and massacre surround me; hope can quickly fade away.
Mass destruction starts with little acts – a steady, slow decay.
Turn us back to living waters.
No more graves.**

**No more graves, no more graves.
I see violence and disease near to home and far away.
Life can be such a battle, in the trenches every day.
God is sending reinforcements!
No more graves.**

**No more graves, no more graves.
I feel threatened and defensive, retribution must be paid.
Jesus died for every sinner, paid that price to clear my name.
God, your plan is for redemption.
No more graves.**

**No more graves, no more graves.
In the middle of this chaos, there's a role that I can play.
I will take aim with kindness, target suffering when I pray.
Turn my weapons into plowshares.
No more graves.**

**Dear Lord,
Let me speak a word of life –
You're alive in every creature –
Turn me back to living waters –
God is sending reinforcements!
God, your plan is for redemption –
Turn my weapons into plowshares –**

I believe in resurrection!

No more graves. Let's remember and honor those who have given their lives for our sakes. Let us mourn the fact that they had to. Let's commit to working for the vision God has for our world, commit to being peacemakers in our thoughts, words, and deeds, commit to no more graves.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.