

Remembering

Each year our country pauses to take some time to remember those who have given their lives for us. This is a day to remember the men and women who made the supreme sacrifice so that you and I can live in freedom. Men and women who lost their lives in the horrors of war, fighting to bring peace. Irony, fighting to bring peace. Death and destruction are the true cost of war. We see it on the TV every day in places like Gaza, Ukraine, and Africa. War is seen as the way to peace by eliminating enemy powers that bring us terrible fear.

War has been a part of human life almost since the dawn of creation. Cain kills Abel in Genesis 4. In Genesis 6, God sees "the wickedness of humans is great on the earth, every inclination of their heart is evil." By the time of Noah, the world is so out of control that God laments, "I am sorry I ever made them."

Things have not changed much. The world is still a scary place. Our fears drive us to violence. We spend trillions of dollars in defense because we are afraid. We build up weapons in order to threaten our enemies. We call it deterrence. Newer, bigger, more powerful Weapons of Mass Destruction are developed in order to scare them into submission. All the while they, too, work on weaponry designed to scare us with their domination. All of that time, energy, money, and lives are spent in the name of peace, yet there is none.

I thought of the words from today's Gospel reading where Jesus addressing his disciples at the Last Supper. He had just given them the new commandment to love each other as he has loved them. He told them he would not be with them very much longer. He then tells them how to remember him. "Peace I leave you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them get afraid." Jesus tells them that true peace does not come from the ways of the world, but from God.

Much of our world makes decisions based upon winning through power and control. Biggest, fastest, strongest, toughest gets us what we want. Domination is the way to peace. But most wars just set the stage for next the war. Fear breeds hatred; hatred brings violence. I am not naive enough to say that all the world will play by the rules of being good. Evil often prevails and need to be addressed. War and threats of war need to be the very last resort to find resolution to our problems. A military is necessary. I am grateful for those who serve, especially for those who died in serving that we remember today.

Christians have wrestled with this tension for centuries. In the 4th century, St Augustine (yes, he was a real person) wrote that Christians could participate in war and still be faithful. He said that war was sometimes a necessity in a sinful world, but must be just. His Just War Theory became the dominant doctrine for centuries in Christianity. His criteria can be summarized in three components. First, the war must be the last resort after all other possible solutions have failed. Second, there must be just provocation. The war must not be motivated by the prospect of profit or power. Finally, the war must be fought with a reasonable prospect of success, must end in peace, and care must be provided for the defeated. A quick look at history shows us that wars are never that clean. There is no such thing as purely holy, righteous war.

In our Second reading from Revelation John of Patmos describes a vision of the City of God that is a very different picture than the city of man. Our reading was missing some verses. These missing verses describe that image of the City of God. It comes down to us from heaven. People are not vacuumed up into the sky, the City comes down to us. The city is enormous, 1500 miles on every side, perfect symmetry. It is large enough to accommodate anyone who wishes to enter it. There is a huge wall around the city, 216' high. There are twelve huge gates, three on each side. Gates are used to keep out undesirables, but these gates are never shut. All are welcome. Why? There is no need to be afraid, because God is at its center and the light of Christ chases away all darkness. This is not meant to be an image of what the future heaven would look like, but rather an image of how life is different when Christ at its center.

The point of the Revelation passage is to remind us that humanity cannot save itself. Not with technology, not with education, not with science, not with power, not with military. We are too worried about saving our selves. We fall prey to our fears. We will do anything to protect our selves and our stuff. We find ourselves easily doing things that we never imagined we could be doing in order to save our selves, even to the point of sin. Remember that Adam and Eve were attracted by the promise that if they ate of the fruit they would be Like God.

But peace from God comes to us as a free gift. It is not ours to earn or buy. We do not deserve it. When we accept that reality, we begin to see everyone as a child of God, just like us. When we accept the fact that we are powerless and need a higher power to guide us, we are transformed. Maybe transformed even to the point that we stop dropping bombs on one another, but begin to drop nourishment. Transformed so that we redefine our concept of justice from giving people what we think they deserve to giving people what it is that they need.

Some years ago, the Red Cross was collecting medicine, clothing, and food for the suffering people in Biafra. Inside one of the boxes was a note. "We have recently been converted. To Christ. Because of our conversion, we want try to help. We won't be needing these things any more. Perhaps you can use them for something." Inside of the box were strips of white sheets cut into strips for bandaging wounds of wounded Africans. The sheets were once used as robes that signaled the hatred of the Ku Klux Klan. Just imagine the sheets of hatred being transformed into sheets of healing. That is the power of God's peace at work when it takes root in us.

Today we remember the sad, tragic stories of valor and bravery of those who have died in service to our country. There are thousands of examples of individual and unit courage, sacrifice, and bravery on the battlefield. But at the same time, we must also challenge the reasons that put them on that battlefield in the first place. General William Tecumseh Sherman declared, "War is Hell!" Indeed it is.

Properly honoring the legacy of those who sacrificed their lives for us, requires that we work hard to see that war never happens again. We are called to work for peace, without threats of violence and possible annihilation. That is not the way of Christ. All creation is the handiwork of God. Every person in the world is a child of God, loved and valued. Viewing the earth from space, we get a God's eye view of our planet. There are no political boundaries and borders. It is just one planet.

We Americans are blessed. Our freedom has brought us wealth and power. How will we use them? For peace? One F22 Raptor Fighter Jet costs \$152 million. We have 183 of them. They are a small part of our Fighter fleet. Watching the Fighter jets approaching the Harrisburg Airport for the air show is an impressive show of force. How many of these weapons do we really need? Could we do with 1, 2, or 3 fewer? How much aid could we offer our country and others with just a few less weapons?

In 1953, Josef Stalin, the Russian ruler, died. Then newly elected President Eisenhower spoke about the Cross of Iron. His speech is often quoted:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 50 miles of concrete highway. We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people.

The best legacy we can give for our fallen heroes is working together for all of humanity to cease the foolishness of war, to put aside our fears, and work together for the peace that God envisions for our universe. Amen.