Gracious God, pour out your Spirit upon us that we might be sensitive to your presence, attentive to your Word, and faithful always to your way, through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Memorial Day is the unofficial beginning of summer. In some places school is already out—and in the rest of the places teachers wish it was. When I was growing up, we kids loved Memorial Day and hated Labor Day. It had nothing to do with the meaning of the holidays, and everything to do with the beginning and ending of summer vacation.

Memorial Day was originally known as Decoration Day. The observance arose in both the North and the South during the Civil War. It was a day for remembering those who had died in military service by decorating their graves. Memorial Day was officially proclaimed on May 5, 1868, by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, and was first observed on May 30, 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. Today, in our service we remember and honor both those who have given their lives and served, past and present.

Remembering is a powerful act. There are over 2000 uses of the word “remember” in the Bible. Philosopher and novelist George Santayana wrote those often quoted words, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” The remembering we do is to deepen our appreciation of those who have positively contributed to life, and to learn from the mistakes that have been committed. The usual pattern is an act takes place and then is later remembered for its good or ill.

However, in today’s Exodus account we have just the reverse. God speaks to Moses and Aaron and says here is the way I want you to remember what I am about to do. God says “You shall” do this. It is future oriented. The celebratory practice precedes the saving act. A certain kind of blood is prescribed, as well as a certain kind of food, and each family unit regardless of position in society is to have access to the slaughtered lamb and its saving effect. The people are to eat from the lamb, put the blood on their houses, eat unleavened bread, and be dressed ready for travel. The people have endured 400 years of slavery in Egypt and they are to remember in perpetuity, what
God is going to do to free them. God says, “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.” What was it they were to remember? It is that they were once slaves, but by God’s grace have been freed. God has gifted them with freedom. That is what we also remember today, from our own history.

One of the reasons the people were to remember the Passover was that as slaves freed by God they were not to use their freedom to enslave others. They were to remember the liberating acts of God and the sacrifices of their ancestors. However, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, points out that some of those freed, on entering the Promised Land, soon became oppressors. For instance, those who went to the area around Jericho fought and defeated the people who already lived there. However, those who went to the area around Shechem settled and peacefully coexisted with those already in the land.

“This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.” It was during the exile when again the people were oppressed that Isaiah reminded them that they were “to be a light to the nations” (Isaiah 49:6). They were to remember that as God was freeing them once again, they were not to abuse their freedom and enslave others. As we remember today, we give thanks for the sacrifice of all those who have gone before us to win our freedom, but we also remember our call is to seek freedom for others as well. Seeking a just freedom for all is the linking flow from the blood in the chalice to the blood of the battlefield and the blood in our streets.

The writer of The Letter to the Hebrews builds on the Exodus passage. The writer here has been calling to memory great heroes of faith. In our passage he makes a slight change, to make a long story short, cut to the chase, and summarize his point, he dips here and there into history. However, he does take the time to demonstrate a sensitive and inclusive side as he includes “women who received their dead by resurrection,” which is most likely a reference to the widow of Zaraphath (1 Kings 17:17-24) and the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:32-37).

Drawing all these together he says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus.” The people whom he names are double witnesses. They have witnessed to their faith by their faithful living—but now he says they are also witnesses to our living. They are sitting in the balcony of heaven cheering us on as we live. They have sacrificed for us, and now they want to see what we will do with our freedom. Those to whom this letter is written were facing great difficulties and oppression, but the writer wants them to know they are not alone. Others have been there before them and are pulling for their faithful living.

The writer then moves from plunging Hebrew history for heroes of faithfulness, to an image from the secular culture of running a race. Remembering those who have gone before and knowing they are pulling for us; we, like runners, need to have a single focused goal. Our goal is to follow the example of Jesus. The writer is encouraging endurance, perseverance by looking ahead to Jesus, the great example of one who

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endured to the point of his own death. Of course, the ultimate goal is to reach the same goal Jesus experienced, the joy of community with God.

Theodore Roosevelt wrote,

> It isn’t the critic who counts, nor the person who points out how the strong stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by the dust and the sweat and the blood; who strives valiantly; who errrs and comes up short again and again; (because there is no effort without error and shortcoming) who knows great enthusiasm, great devotion and spends himself at a worthy cause; who, at the best in the end, knows the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.

The heroes of the faith are champions in the finest sense of the word. They challenge us to break old records of excellence and thus do what has never been done before. They make us stand on tiptoes and reach and stretch for what we have never touched before. They are pulling and praying for us to do our very best.

The construction of Hoover Dam brought great resources of water and fertility to vast areas in Nevada, Arizona, and California that were once only desert. In the building of the dam there were many who lost their lives in accidents and disasters. Near the end of construction a tablet was placed in the wall of the dam with this inscription: “These died that the desert might rejoice and blossom as the rose.” It could be said of all who have sacrificed their lives in a world often inhospitable to freedom, that these died that our world might rejoice and be glad and that freedom might blossom like a rose.

John Wesley loved to quote from 2 Kings 10:15 when Jehu met Jehonadab on the road and asked, “Is your heart as true to mine as mine is to yours?” “If it is, give me your hand.” Those two leaders who met on the road are from very different cultures and contexts, urban and rural, ruling power and separatist sect, differing on many points; but joining together, for the common cause of defeating Baal worship. For John Wesley and us Methodists, the question, “Is your heart as mine?” means “Do you love God and desire to be in good relation with your neighbor?” In our context today, it means, can we in this nation overcome our many differences, and all join hearts and remember the sacrifices made for us and commit ourselves to seeking freedom for all?

On this Memorial Sunday let us remember those who have made great sacrifice for us, and know they are watching and pulling for us to give our best for the cause of life, liberty, justice and peace for all.


“What Shall We Remember?”