

Sermon 052916 Memorial Day  
Scripture- John 16: 12-15  
Sermon Title- Earn It

Today, we are in the long weekend that kicks off the summer. For many, this weekend rekindles their American devotion to grilled meat. For others, the boat goes into the water, or the pool is opened; some might make their first trip to the beach. It is easy to forget, in all of that, what this holiday weekend is actually observing. Tomorrow is Memorial Day, the day set-aside for Americans to remember those who have lost their lives while serving their country in the armed forces.

As stated in the Gettysburg Address, “it is fitting and proper that we should do this.” I think it is important to say that Memorial Day is not a time to celebrate the United States Military, or its might, or its history, or its current situation. Instead, Memorial Day is about citizens, men and women, who believed in something, who entered military service at risk to life and limb, and who went onto die for their country. Those are the ones we remember this weekend; those who we lost in war. It is also a time to remember the families who have lost loved ones in the service and the sacrifices that they have made.

The third oldest chartered military organization in the world is headquartered in MA. It is the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts. These days, they are known as “The Ancients.” They started on the Mayflower prior to the landing in Plymouth. They were a group of volunteers who were chartered to be

the militia that would defend the new colony. If you, by the way, can prove your line of ancestry back to the Mayflower, and you are male, you can automatically be entered into the Ancients, otherwise you have to be sponsored by an Ancient. The Ancients don't engage in military activity these days, which is a good thing, as it is largely a men's club of older, out of shape businessmen who still like to march around and salute each other.

Back in the 1980's, I was in the travel business and escorted the Ancients on a trip to celebrate their 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We visited the two older chartered military organizations in the world, The Honorable Artillery Company of London, and the Swiss Guard, who guard the Pope and handle security for Vatican City. It was an extraordinary trip with many highlights- including going inside Buckingham Palace, watching the changing of the guard from inside the fence at Buckingham Palace, and having a private audience with Pope John Paul II. The then US Ambassador to Italy, former MA Governor John Volpe, led the delegation. It was heady stuff, quite an experience.

The audience with the Pope at the Papal Palace was a profound experience that changed my life, but it was not the most moving experience I had on the trip. The day after the Vatican visit, we took busses down the coast of Italy to visit the Sicily-Rome US Military Cemetery, where 7,861 American soldiers are buried. Ambassador Volpe laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. An Ancient

by the name of David Stands from Wakefield has a brother buried there. I stayed with David as he located his brother's grave in the directory, found the gravesite, and laid flowers on it. I took pictures of David who held a photo of his brother, Private Charles Stands, and knelt by the cross that marked Chuck's final resting place. The photos that I took captured the tears streaking down David's face as he knelt by his fallen brother for the first time, 40 years after his brother was killed in the landing on Anzio Beach.

That is one reason why I never let a Memorial Day pass without pausing to remember David, his brother Chuck, and all those who gave in the words of Lincoln, "the last full measure of devotion." I kind of bonded with David at that time. We spent time at meals together on the trip and communicated a little after our return home. The pride that David had in his older brother, who as it turned out, he didn't know that well, was fierce. David taught me how Chuck's life really meant something. David said that he had his brother to thank for the freedoms and the successes that David enjoyed in his life. Private Chuck Stands was a hero to his brother for very good reasons.

There are 24 US Military cemeteries in foreign lands. I strongly recommend that if you ever get the chance to visit one that you do so. There are few more profound experiences for an American to have while out of our country. When you go there, remember that those war dead did not die in vain. The fact that they are buried there, by definition,

means that their lives had meaning and purpose. They did the right thing, they served their country, and they lost their lives for it.

Remember that each has his own story like Private Chuck Stands had his story.

It is humbling to think of the sacrifices that those men and so many others (including many women) make for us, their countrymen. No, Memorial Day is not about the US military. Memorial Day is about those who made the supreme sacrifice... and it is about their families. Memorial Day is about those who gave of themselves and those whom they gave of themselves for. The families of Chuck Stands and countless other families will never forget, never stop being proud of the fact that their brother, uncle, son, father, grandfather, served their country to the best of their ability. Some returned and some didn't but they are all owed a debt of gratitude. I never served, but my brother fought in Viet Nam and I have a nephew who fought in the Gulf War in 1995 and in Afghanistan in 2008. Thank God, they made it back, but our pride in their service will never diminish.

You might agree or disagree with American military involvement in conflicts round the world. You have that right to agree or disagree with any given administration's policies and decisions. But soldiers don't make policies. They do their duty. They do their duty and might die doing it, and many do. Remember the soldiers, particularly the

fallen, this weekend. We say in church that we hate the sin but love the sinner. Today we say that we hate war but love the soldier.

One of the greatest war movies of all time, heck, one of the great movies of all time, was *Saving Private Ryan*. The movie begins and ends at the American Military Cemetery in Normandy, France. The movie is a flash back to the invasion of Normandy. After the landing, a patrol headed by the character played by Tom Hanks had searched for and saved the character, Private James Ryan played by Matt Damon. Decades later, James Ryan was visiting the grave at Normandy of the man who had died finding and saving him. In the battle scene where the Tom Hanks character died, his last words to Private Ryan were, “Earn this.” The Hanks character died and the scene faded to the Normandy Cemetery where the 60 something James Ryan recollects those words, spoken to him in battle by a dying man a lifetime ago. In tears, Ryan turns to his wife and says, “Tell me I’m a good man.” He had spent his life trying to earn it. He spent his life trying to earn the sacrifices that were made for him. He tried to earn it by being a good man and a good American.

We spend time in church being reminded of how we are to earn the sacrifice that our Lord made for us. The title of Christian must be earned and it must be lived. Today, this weekend, let us remember the sacrifices of those that gave their lives for us, their countrymen. We hold the title of American. This Memorial Day let us resolve ourselves

to earn it. Let us be people who are worth dying for. In the name of  
God let us earn it. AMEN