

Sermon 052415 Memorial Day
Scripture John 15: 9-17
Sermon Title Section 60

In April of 2014, after Easter, I took a Civil War history trip with some high school buddies. One of the guys, Dennis our host, set the agenda. He put in the agenda a day of hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I had done that years earlier and know how rough the terrain was so I decided to take the day off from the group.

I called my good friend whom I've known almost as long as my high school friends. His name is Neil Shelley. You might recall at the end of the worship service when Val Mason told her powerful story about her and her brother, I came down to do the Benediction and I noticed for the first time a buddy who decided to surprise me and show up for worship. That was Neil.

Let me tell you a little of this guy. Raised in North Andover, he went on to graduate from Holy Cross and Suffolk Law. Every summer of his life, Neil has spent time in the family vacation home in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard. That's where I met him in the summer of 1972. Neil is a Navy man. He was active duty JAG Corps and then in the Navel Reserves until they kicked him out because age. His current professional position is the General Council of the Inspector General's office of the Department of Defense. He is married to Liz whom he met in the Navy before it

was common for women to serve in the armed forces and he is the father of four impressive children, the oldest of whom is in the Navy attending Medical School.

I am proud to call myself a good friend of Neil Shelley. One of the things I love about Neil is that he is incredibly well informed. He's my current events go to guy. Some years ago when they were building the Joe Moakley Court House in South Boston, he said to me, "How about that controversy over the Moakley Court House." I had no idea what he was talking about and I was living in Hull and he was living in Silver Spring, MD. Another thing I love about him is that he's lived in the Philippines, and other parts of this country longer than he was here, yet he is still a dye in the wool fan of the local teams. In fact, when he surprised me in worship that morning he was here to attend the AFC Championship Game; you remember, the Pats and the Colts.

So anyway, I called Neil last April and told him I was breaking away from the Civil War group for the day and I'd like to visit Arlington National Cemetery and would he like to do that with me. I had never been there. He said, "Sure, I'll meet you in front of the visitor's center at 9AM." It was a warm and sunny April Saturday morning when we went in to the visitor's center and it was beyond crowded. Neil grabbed a map and said, let's go. I'm thinking this is what the day will be like dealing with crowds.

We got outside the visitor center in the cemetery and the masses are still jostling us. We came to an intersection and Neil said, "Let's turn left." Suddenly, we were alone. We stayed virtually alone for hours until we arrived at the Lee house and the Tomb of the Unknown (where we saw the changing of the guard *and* The Boy Scouts of America lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown), and of course, the Kennedy graves.

When we were alone for a few minutes, Neil said, "I want to start in Section 60." I asked why and he said, "That's where the new arrivals are." Now, I'll return to Section 60 in a minute. I just need to say that that was one of the most powerful days of touring of my life. Arlington is amazing. There is so much there. I was Mr. Tag-a-long that day. Neil found a memorial to those who died at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. We saw a memorial to Admiral Bird and his discovery of the North Pole.

We saw a Coast Guard Memorial, Beirut Barracks, the Space Shuttle Challenger and Columbia Memorials and on. Did you know that there is a whole section of nurses at Arlington? We were there. Then there were individual graves: Gen. John Pershing, Maj. Audie Murphy, President William Howard Taft, Pvt. Joe Louis, John Foster Dulles, and on and on. Now, let's go back to Section 60. It was the most profound and moving part of the visit and really the whole trip.

For most of the country, the longest war in the history of the United States has taken place largely out of sight, the casualties piling up in far away Iraq and Afghanistan while normal life continues on the home front, with no war taxes, no draft notices, no gas rationing, and none of the shared sacrifice of the nation's earlier conflicts.

The one exception has been Section 60, a corner of Arlington National Cemetery where more than 900 men and women have come to rest in the last decade. Other than, of course, the homes of those with family and loved ones who are and have served, Section 60 is one of the few places you'd know we've had war going on.

Rest assured, every single grave has a miniature American Flag planted on it this weekend. Section 60 is the most active subdivision of Arlington. It occupies just fourteen acres of the 624-acre cemetery, but this postage stamp of earth represents something much larger. It is a place to mourn those lost in America's latest war, to remember each of those sacrificed, and to recount the journeys that brought them there, a place to consider how their wartime experience compares with that of those who fought in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam, all of whom share space in Section 60.

I've always enjoyed reading history. I try to put myself in the shoes or boots of those I read of wondering what I might have

done or how I might have performed. I learned that day that the study of American history is supercilious unless you walk among those closely packed tombstones, which mark the graves of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen, each of whom earned a birth at Arlington by volunteering, suiting up, and paying the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many come home in pieces, dismembered by signature weapons of our latest conflict- suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which often cheated families of seeing their brothers, fathers, sons, and daughters one last time.

I won't try to list here the creative ways our military personnel can be killed in modern warfare or even those who survive yet are broken by both physical and invisible injuries.

Section 60 has a liveliness to it in that the recent dead have visitors on birthdays and anniversaries and holidays usually bearing gifts... kids bringing report cards for parental review, wives bringing sonograms of yet to be born offspring, fiancés come with love letters. Comrades who were present at a friend's death leave a quarter to commemorate the moment, or a penny to show they were in boot camp together. There were a few bottles of beer propped up on tombstones. I saw a package of sugar cookies, no doubt a favorite of the fallen.

There are, of course, the religious designations on most of the tombstones. The designations are mostly Christian, but many Jewish, and many Muslim, Hindu, and even a few Wiccan stones. Any American who holds suspicion and contempt of any other religion should go to Section 60. See how you feel about them, then.

There may be some of you here who think that I'm glorifying war in this sermon. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I stand before you as someone who hates war. Along with genocide and slavery it is the worst of human endeavors. I am not a pacifist and if you read Scripture you will see that God isn't either. Evil must be challenged and defeated. Granted, our understanding of who and what is evil can be flawed.

Now back to the soldiers. Not all soldiers sign up for this reason but plenty do. They love freedom so much that they are willing to give up their own to fight and die so that others might be free. There is no nobler act. Soldiers are to be honored and this weekend we take time to honor the fallen. In the words of Lincoln, "It is fitting and proper that we do this." We often say that we hate the sin but love the sinner. We can hate the war but love the warrior.

Arlington National Cemetery is a holy place. It is easy to be humbled and overwhelmed with gratefulness for the fallen while

there. But there is more. I have spoken to you of Irish mysticism having ‘thin places’ where you can feel God’s presence more readily than in other places. Mountaintops are my favorite examples. Well, Arlington is about as thin a place as you will find. Neil and I are wise cracking Irishmen who laugh a lot in each other’s presence. Not that day... we spoke in measured and even hushed tones.

As someone who never served in our armed forces, and yes, I was of age during Vietnam, I have never been so deeply moved as walking among those graves at Arlington. I told Neil while there of when I do a military gravesite burial. The American Flag is carefully and reverently removed from the casket. The honor guard takes painstaking care in making the trifold, often unfolding and refolding until it is exactly right. Then the ranking member of the color guard goes to the widow, or widower, or mother, or daughter, or son, or once a grandson and said the words that never fail to choke me up, “On behalf of a grateful nation...”

I consider it a privilege to stand before you each week and offer my views on faith while you listen respectfully. Not a lot of people have such a forum for public speaking. On this day, I forgo my lessons on discipleship so I can simply say to those who ‘gave the last full measure of devotion’ and to their grieving loved ones,

“Thank you.” And I say to each one of us, people die only when we forget them. AMEN