

Remembering Our Heroes

Hebrews 11: 10-11; 17-19, 24-27, 12:1-2a

Memorial Sunday

Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2021

Hymn No. 696, “America the Beautiful” (vs. 1 & 2)

Sermon, “Remembering Our Heroes” (Scripture is read in context)

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. Originally, Memorial Day was a day set aside to remember those servicemen and servicewomen who had died in the performance of their military duties while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. Decoration Day, as it was once called, had its origins all the way back in the Civil War.

I have never conducted a funeral for a serviceman or servicewoman who died in uniform. And I’m happy about that; I have preached the funeral sermon for 63 veterans, and they all came home alive following their service to our country. And as we continue to withdraw our troops from Afghanistan, I sincerely hope that I will never have to preach the funeral of a serviceman or woman who died on the battlefield—not because I wouldn’t do it, but because I pray for the day when war will be no more.

Since I have never preached a funeral for an active serviceman, I have used this holiday as a time to remember the 63 veterans whom I have laid to rest. One of the ways I remember them is by preparing a simple display listing their name, age, date of death, and branch of service. You may have seen it as you came in for worship.

Eight of the veterans I’ve listed served during the War in Vietnam. Not all of them went to Vietnam; some went to Korea or Germany or Seattle. But they all came home. But the names of some of their comrades who did not come home are undoubtedly included on the traveling Vietnam Memorial Wall that is coming to Aledo this week.

In the spirit of remembering our heroes, I’d like to tell you about three veterans whom I laid to rest.

In 1993, I began the process of transferring my ordination into the United Methodist Church. While waiting for my first appointment, I worked as the editor of the *Cambridge Chronicle* while serving as the interim pastor of the Cambridge Baptist Church.

One of the members of that church was Glenn Sherrard, whom I had interviewed for the *Chronicle* because he was one of the last surviving veterans of World War I. His war stories weren’t particularly exciting, though, because in Glenn’s words, he fought the war from a typewriter; he was an officer’s clerk and didn’t see action. But he did what he was asked to do. Think of it: in order for soldiers to take their positions in foxholes, someone had to be back at the command center, and Glenn was one of those soldiers. Glenn was 100 when he died on June 7, 1994.

Nobody was really sure what was wrong with Lawrence Philips when he went into the hospital, but as he waited for yet another test, he closed his eyes and listened to the angels as they sang. “Do you hear that?” Lawrence asked. “That’s the most beautiful music I’ve ever heard in my life.” But there was no music to be heard in that hospital room—at least nothing that could be heard with ears of flesh. Lawrence was unable to open his eyes, but he could hear the angels singing. Lawrence fought in World War II; he came home, raised a family, lived a good life, and died on July 13, 2001.

During that same war, the Marines asked Tom Garrity if he would learn Japanese so he could interpret the messages they had intercepted. But that’s not what gave Tom his greatest satisfaction. After the war ended, Tom remained in the Marines and accompanied them as they made their way from Pacific Island to Pacific Island. Going from island to island, they found many a cave where a Japanese soldier remained in hiding, unaware that the war was over. Tom was able to speak to them in their language, coaxing them to come out of their caves. Without Tom, they would’ve come out of their caves shooting, and Tom’s comrades would’ve had no choice but to kill them. Tom told me how thankful he was that he was able to save many, many Japanese lives. Tom died on May 20, 2008.

Just a few moments ago we sang, “O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife, who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life.” Those 63 veterans—and many more besides them—have made our country what it is: beautiful.

That verse also tells us what it takes to become a hero: **a hero “more than self their country love[s].**

The Bible has its own list of heroes and they make our faith beautiful. And if the Bible were to have a Hall of Fame, it would be Hebrews chapter 11 with its roll call of heroes. I’m going to pick up roll call at v. 17, and as we go, with each hero I will identify something we are called to **Do** and something we are called to **CONFESS**.

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,¹⁸ even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.”¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death...

God had asked Abraham to do something that was totally unexpected: Isaac was the child of promise. How could Abraham possibly be expected to offer his son as a sacrifice?

Remember Abraham lived in a rather barbaric age; I don’t want to say it was a more barbaric age when our nation has just seen yet another tragic and senseless shooting in San Jose, California. Nine people were murdered before the shooter took his own life. But back to Hebrews 11: Abraham and Isaac lived in a time and in a place where idolators sought to please their gods through human sacrifice. It was a tragic but common practice. But I think that’s one of the reasons for this story: it’s God’s way of saying to Abraham that human

sacrifice isn't the way to please God. And the Gospels would later show us that the crucifixion of Christ rendered animal sacrifice as an obsolete practice.

I'm not saying this story is irrelevant for us today. I believe this story is meant to challenge us even today. So how might Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac relate to us in 2021?

I believe this story asks each one of us, "What might God be calling me to do?" And I believe that God just might be calling you to **do the unexpected**. God might be asking you to make another kind of sacrifice. God might be asking you to reach out to a neighbor. Or participate in a ministry that is completely new to you. God just might be calling you to do the unexpected.

Why would you do the unexpected? Because like Abraham, you believe that God can raise the dead. You believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ—a resurrection which Christ, in turn, shares with us.

Let's read on about another hero of the faith.

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

We forget that Moses was a child of privilege. Let me explain why.

Moses was born at a time when Pharaoh had issued a decree requiring all Hebrew boys to be thrown into the Nile River. When Moses was born, his mother had no choice but to obey Pharaoh, so she tossed (as it were) her son into the Nile and he just happened to land gently and safely in a waterproofed basket that was floating among the reeds of the river. And of course, the reeds kept the baby basket from flowing out to the Mediterranean Sea. Moses was subsequently found by none other than Pharaoh's daughter. And like your daughter finding a stray kitty, Pharaoh's daughter took the baby home and said, "Can I keep him, dad? Can I keep him?"

Dad may have been the ruler of Egypt—and a cruel one—but his daughter had him wrapped around her finger. So she indeed kept the boy, gave him his name, and raised him in the palace as her own. She also just happened to hire Moses' mother to nurse the boy.

As Moses grew up and learned who and what he was—that he was a Hebrew, not an Egyptian, he turned his back on the riches and temptations of Egypt.

We don't live in Egypt. But the writer to the Hebrews calls us to nonetheless follow the example of Moses: Will we embrace what we are? Will we embrace whose we are? We are the children of God. And what are we? We are redeemed by the blood of Christ on the cruel cross of Calvary. And as we embrace our identity as the children of God redeemed by his

Son—“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life”—we will turn our back on the riches and temptations of our world. Why?

Because we are looking ahead to a greater reward, just as Moses looked beyond the wealth of Egypt to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

“America the Beautiful” tells us what it takes to become a hero: **a hero “more than self their country love[s].**

If we back up to Hebrews 11:8, we find yet another hero of the faith, Abraham.

⁹ By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

That verse tells us what it takes to become a hero of the faith: **a hero of the faith loves the kingdom of God more than self.**

Let’s continue with verse 27.

²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

Remember what it was like when you first came to faith in Christ? Remember how exciting it was when you realized that the Creator of the universe loved you and had forgiven you of your sin? Back then, following Jesus seemed like the easiest thing in the world.

Later this summer, Kathleen and I will lead eight young people on a YouthWorks mission trip to Louisville, Kentucky. It will be my 16th YouthWorks mission trip. I love them. But one of the things that I’ve observed is that the easiest thing in the world for kids is to live for Jesus during a YouthWorks mission trip. The challenge comes when they come back home and go to school or college that fall. Living for Jesus isn’t quite as easy then. But here’s the thing: Living for Jesus isn’t a sprint: it’s a marathon. The mission trip is the sprint; school is the marathon. There’s nothing wrong with the sprint; you just have to pace yourself as the sprint turns into a long-distance race. And that’s what Moses and the Israelites had to learn in the wilderness.

It’s easy to follow Jesus when you’re sprinting through the Red Sea on dry ground. But it’s another thing to live for Jesus when you’re out in the desert in a marathon. What do you do when you find yourself out in the wilderness and the miracle of the Red Sea is a distant memory? You persevere.

What do you do when the mission trip is over you find yourself back in school? What do you do when the Walk to Emmaus is over and you head for home? You do what Moses did: you persevere.

What do you do when you've been living for Jesus for forty years and it's just not as exciting as it was in the beginning? You persevere.

So, my friend, what is God calling you to do? Persevere.

And what is God calling you to believe? Let's go back to the text: *[Moses] persevered because he saw him who is invisible (vs. 27)*.

We persevere because we believe in what we cannot see. Does that sound ridiculous? I can't see my voice going out over WRMJ, and yet, my voice is there at 10:30 this morning. I can't see radio waves, but I still believe in radio waves. I can't see the pixels that carry my image to your smartphone or computer, but when you log onto our Facebook page, I'm there. I can't see the pixels, but I know they exist. And I can't see the invisible God, but I still believe in God. And that's why I persevere. That's why I follow Jesus even when I'm not on a YouthWorks mission trip.

Following Jesus is not a sprint; it's a marathon. And we do not run this race alone. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us in chapter 12:

12 ¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

My friends, we are in a marathon. It's not a 5K or a 10K or even a 42K. It's a lifelong-K called "living for Jesus." And like any serious athlete, we put aside every sin and distraction that might impede our progress. And as we run, we look to Jesus, who endured the cross.

And as we run, the old African American spiritual becomes our prayer (No. 2208).

Guide my feet while I run this race.
Guide my feet while I run this race.
Guide my feet while I run this race,
For I don't want to run this race in vain!