

The Rev. Cornel Barnett, D.Min.
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21
"Memorial Day and the Ambiguity of War"

A recent Twin Cities Times column called "Off My Rocker" by Ellie Spence carried the headline "Let's remember World War II, and how many died for liberty."

The article begins: "On a recent trip to Hawaii with family members, I experienced my first visit to the Pearl Harbor Memorial. A popular song from the 1940s kept running through my head:

Let's remember Pearl Harbor as we go to meet the foe.
Let's remember Pearl Harbor as we did the Alamo.
We will always remember how they died for liberty.
Let's remember Pearl Harbor and go on to victory."

Spence continues: "Having lived through five wars, I remember WWII as the only conflict where my childhood naiveté convinced me that God was on our side... There was no ambiguity about war in those days."

Spence goes on to describe how people of the day supported the war effort through war bonds and the like.

I was struck by her sentence that there was no ambiguity about war in those days. I ran this by a friend who agreed that there was no ambiguity about war. She said: "War is wrong, even WWII, and God never takes sides in war!"

I'm not going to settle this in this Memorial Day sermon. However, I believe that until the world becomes what we strive for – the realm of God on earth – we need some defense to fend off those who would want to exploit us. I'd rather we settle our differences peacefully around a table.

I'm not a fan of war. I believe when Jesus blessed peacemakers he was blessing those who do everything in their power to avoid war in the first place.

The gospel reading today, given by the lectionary, emphasizes the priority of love. Jesus says: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments... They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

It's hard to love in a person to person relational sense, in a "God so loved the world" sense, and go to war. We can love our comrades but we cannot love the enemy. We can love our country and have an ambiguous love/hate relationship with the country we are at war with.

And yet the circle of love as communicated by Jesus in our passage today is central to who we are as Christians and makes a Memorial Day sermon difficult to preach if we focus on war and war-making.

I learned long ago that Memorial Day is not supposed to deify war. Its purpose is to remember those whose lives were lost in combat and to comfort those left behind.

We empathize with those who serve in the military and whatever their motive we recognize their sacrifice while at the same time empathizing with the people on the other side. Who gains, who loses? That's part of the ambiguity of war.

In my first week of ministry 25 years ago, I was called to be the associate pastor in a large church in Jacksonville, Florida, and I was asked by the United Daughters of the Confederacy to conduct a memorial service for their love ones who died in the Civil War.

I was fresh out of South Africa having been involved in the church's struggle against the system of apartheid. The night before the memorial service for the Daughters of the Confederacy I read the history of the Civil War, the War Between the States, or as the south sometimes calls it, the War against Northern Aggression.

I wasn't enamored with the southern cause. I disagreed with almost every southern position and yet I was on tap to preside at their memorial service the following day. I realized though that the people who invited me were still grieving their dead. Their remembrance of their loved ones and their comfort was the focus. It didn't matter what I was thinking. They wanted me as their pastor to participate in this ritual of healing.

On the day, we walked through the modern, clean-cut cemetery to an overgrown piece of land surrounded by wrought iron railings and containing simple, weather-worn tombstones carrying names faded by time with dates in the 1860s. I prayed for those gone, for those left behind and for a world where brother and sister did not have to fight sister and brother. The daughters were okay with this.

Afterwards, we had the best fish-fry. There's nothing like a southern fish-fry: A big bucket of boiling oil standing outside the car garage and fresh, battered fish dipped into it and placed on a table laden with coleslaw, potato salad and other southern delicacies.

My participation in the service was the best I knew at the time, and the best I know today, of loving these families in spite of what I thought of the causes that took their families and friends to war. So we remember all those who died in combat in all wars and conflicts.

We remember all those who have experiences other losses in wars, a different kind of death, like those back home dealing with the consequences of war, veterans with severed limbs and those with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened.

Traumatic events that may trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat.

How do we keep Jesus' commandments this Memorial Day with regards to veterans and their families dealing with PTSD? The National Institute of Mental Health website has excellent suggestions.

They say that main treatments for people with PTSD are psychotherapy ("talk" therapy), medications, or both. Everyone is different, so a treatment that works for one person may not work for another. It is important for anyone with PTSD to be treated by a mental health care provider who is experienced with PTSD.

Jesus' commandment for us to love has us ask: "What is the most loving thing we can do in this situation." If we know anyone with PTSD or any veteran we can pray for them, call or visit them, go for a walk and let them talk, invite them to church if that seems appropriate (I say that because the church is a great support system), get behind agencies and legislation that help veterans and back peaceful measures of settling conflicts.

Jesus wants us to put mind, heart and feet in the ways we remember and love. As Christians we remember everyone caught in war's vortex: combatants and non-combatants on both sides because we serve a God who loves the entire world.

May God be with us. May God be with grieving families. May God be with those caught in conflicts everywhere, may God be with and bless America and all the countries of the world. Amen.