

Veterans Day Service

“The Greatest Love”

John 15:9-17

November 10, 2024

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

This past week, I toured the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial in downtown Pittsburgh, one of the most historic structures in the city, with our son Michael and his wife Vienna. I wanted them to see it because Michael has now spent the past 13 years in the Navy, serving aboard aircraft carriers while being stationed in Japan. We hadn't seen him in five years but because he's now being transferred to a base on Whidbey Island, just off the coast of Washington State, we're excited that we're now going to see much MORE of them in the future. The Soldiers and Sailors Memorial is an extraordinary museum located directly across the street from the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning. It was originally constructed way back in 1910 as a way of remembering the contributions of our veterans- from the Civil War all the way up the present time including our nation's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The assorted exhibits and artifacts on display provide one with a whole range of uniforms, medals, firearms, artwork and equipment and are intended to help visitors understand the history and experiences of American service personnel.

For me, the HIGHPOINT of my visit came towards the end when I entered the Joseph A. Dugan, Jr. Hall of Valor- a large-paneled room dedicated to honor veterans—both living and deceased--for valor "above and beyond the call of duty" while in action against the enemy. It features the names and stories of eighty-four Pennsylvania Medal of Honor recipients along with other inductees who had earned such awards as the Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross, the Air Force Cross, Silver Star, and the Distinguished Flying Cross. The Medal of Honor is the highest US military decoration our nation can award to members of the armed forces and Harry Truman once famously said while presenting fifteen servicemen with that honor in 1945, “I would much rather have that Medal around my neck than to be President of the United States. It is the greatest honor that can come to a man. It is an honor that all of us strive for, but very few of us ever achieve.”

Of course, the purpose of such memorials is really not for the benefit of those who DIED but rather for OURSELVES for there is much to learn from all their heroism and sacrifice. By hearing their stories and sharing their memories, we gain a front row seat to the triumph of the human spirit. They serve as a witness of how ordinary human beings can accomplish the most extraordinary feats of courage in the face of the most overwhelming challenges- even at great cost to their own life. After viewing such an exhibit, you can't help but ask yourself “if I had been in THEIR shoes and confronted with a SIMILAR circumstance, could I have shown that SAME kind of fearlessness and courage,” but then there's really no way of knowing what's in a person's heart until he or she ACTUALLY FINDS him or herself IN such a situation. That's when you discover what it is you're REALLY made of, when you learn just what kind of strength of mind and character you possess inside.

What's MOST surprising, however, is that most of these individuals were just ordinary and undistinguished folk like you or me and how often such courage was demonstrated in the most unexpected of places. While pastoring in Syracuse, NY, one of my parishioners also happened to be one of the meekest, most mild persons you could ever meet- I never heard him

utter a negative comment about anyone much less a curse word in the almost twenty years we knew each other. And yet during the Second World War, he was so desperate to get into the Army he lied about his age, telling the recruiter he was 18 when in fact he was only 16 years old. Not long afterwards, he was sent to England where he participated in the D-Day invasion of France. It was therefore appropriate that on the 50th anniversary of the D-Day Landing—June 6, 2004--I had him share his military exploits and the lessons he had learned from them from the church pulpit. But his military experience didn't end THERE for immediately after Europe was liberated, in May of 1945, he was then shipped half-way around the world to the South Pacific where he helped end the war against Japan.

Over dinner one evening, I suggested to him that he seek opportunities to share that experience with others, that young people ESPECIALLY needed to be reminded of the importance of courage and valor and honor. Well, he thought about that comment and subsequently, this quiet unassuming man took me up on it. He went on to spend the remaining years of his life visiting local classrooms throughout the Syracuse area, sharing his story with children about what became for him a front-row seat to one of history's most important events.

Touring the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial once again reminded me how there must always be some causes, some ideals worth fighting for, even if by doing so it may cost us our lives. There must be SOME things in life SO important that we'd be willing to die in order to protect them, or else life is diminished and has very little significance for us. There must be some rights, some principles SO basic such as a right to freedom and self-determination, a right to some quality of life and a right to civil justice, that we'd be willing to risk our own lives to safeguard them because the alternative would be so much worse.

In the late 1980's, Taylor Branch won a Pulitzer Prize for his book *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963*. It has since become a standard account of the American Civil Rights movement. One of the most poignant moments in it occurred during the famous Montgomery bus boycott of 1956- when southern Blacks refused to use the transit system in that city due to its blatantly racist policies. A young Martin Luther King, over-wrought with deep doubts, agonized over his participation in that struggle. It wasn't that he didn't think the cause was a righteous one for he did. Rather, he had doubts as to his own ability to lead the boycott; he wondered whether he could withstand the beatings and the jailings that would ensue; above all, he was afraid of the endless stream of threats to his life and those of his family. You see, all he ever wanted was to be a simple pastor and an academic- not a hero and certainly not a martyr for any cause. Yet, as the pressure for him to assume that mantle intensified from WITHOUT, and as the conflict he felt for personal reasons increased WITHIN, Taylor Branch tells us what happened next:

King woke up the next morning to a fresh day of pressure. For him, time was fluctuating too rapidly between moments of deep fear and those of high inspiration. Late the next night, his mind was turning over as he lay in bed. Coretta had fallen asleep. The phone rang again. 'Listen, nigger,' said the caller, 'we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.' King hung up on the angry voice. Hope of sleep receded further. He paced the floor awhile before giving in completely to wakefulness, which drove him to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee...The sensations of the incoming images pressed in upon him--the hatred of the whites, the burdened, offended rectitude of the middle-class Negroes, the raw courage or neediness of the plain folk...There was no idea nor imaginable heart large

enough to satisfy all of them, or to contain them. The limitless potential of a young King free to think anything, and therefore to be anything, was constricted by realities that paralyzed and defined him. King buried his face in his hands at the kitchen table. He admitted to himself that he was afraid, that he had nothing left, that the people would falter if they looked to him for strength. Then he said as much out loud. He spoke the name of no deity, but his doubts spilled out as a prayer, ending, 'I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.' As he spoke these words, the fears suddenly began to melt away. **He became intensely aware of what he called an 'inner voice' telling him to do what he thought was right. Such simplicity worked miracles, bringing a shudder of relief and the courage to face anything.** It was for King the first transcendent religious experience of his life. The moment lacked the splendor of a vision or a voice speaking out loud...For King, the moment awakened and confirmed his belief that the essence of religion was not a grand metaphysical idea but something personal, grounded in experience--something that opened up mysteriously beyond the predicaments of human beings in their frailest and noblest moments.

That moment became for him one of the great epiphanies of his life. Within that terrible crucible of death threats and concern for his family, plagued by a sense of inadequacy and a terrible loss of faith, he helplessly thrust himself upon the mercy of God and God faithfully responded with what was for King the first transcendent religious experience of his life. For the first time, he could hear an "inner voice" ever so plain and unmistakable telling him to do what he thought was "right"- an answer that brought him relief and endued him with a new-found faith and courage that would undergird him for the rest of his days regardless of the consequences.

But if such heroism and sacrifice testifies to the extraordinary triumph of the human spirit and how there must be some causes, some ideals worth fighting and even DYING for if life is to hold any real significance for us, it is ALSO important to remember by honoring them as we do, that we find OURSELVES inspired to CONTINUE the fight, to FINISH the work they had begun. Gettysburg, Pennsylvania remains for me the most sacred plot of ground in all the world. I've visited that battlefield many times throughout the years and every time I return, I STILL develop a lump in my throat. President Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address, delivered several months following the conclusion of that battle, said as much HIMSELF:

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

What Lincoln was saying was that commemorating the dead involves FAR MORE than just festooning City Hall with bunting, calling out the big brass bands, putting little flags on each grave, and then delivering flowery speeches about the bravery of those men who died on battlefields across the world. No, it was more imperative for those STILL living to REMEMBER in order that they might be STIRRED to action, that they might be INSPIRED TO COMPLETE the noble task begun by those who had gone before them, which for Lincoln was to preserve the Union and return to those ideals in which our nation stood and was originally

founded upon. Only in THAT way do we honor the memories of those who died.

And such is the purpose of my topic this morning, to remind us that all those feelings of patriotism and gratitude we experience towards to our servicemen and women for the sacrifice they make on our behalf is not enough; it can't be just sentimental. Our text for this morning comes from John 15, in the middle of Jesus' Farewell Discourse to his disciples. This is where after having their last meal together, our Lord tries to reinforce certain lessons he had shared with them over their previous three and half years. The time has finally come for him to leave. He must confront that which he had spent his entire life preparing himself for- his Passion on a cross. By the same time tomorrow, he would be dead.

However, far from ABANDONING them, he will soon confer upon them his personal spirit- the Holy Spirit, who will take up residency in their hearts and from henceforth will lead them into all truth, even as HE had done during their travels together. Christ will thus make their hearts his NEW home and never again will they be separated from either his presence or his love. And so, in those waning hours in that Upper Room, the bulk of his final remarks are here centered on what has been his main theme since the very OUTSET of his ministry- love and its manifestation in and through his personal relationship with them.

Here in John 15, Jesus establishes HIMSELF as both the MODEL and SOURCE of true discipleship. As the very MODEL of it, he calls his disciples to love even as HE has loved; as the SOURCE of their love, he makes possible their own love for each other as well as to those they minister to through what he has given them. His commandment to his disciples is that they are to LOVE EACH OTHER EVEN AS HE HAS LOVED THEM, and that GREATER love has no one than he who WILLINGLY LAYS DOWN HIS (OR HER) LIFE FOR ANOTHER PERSON. For Jesus, this was never more evident than while in the Garden of Gethsemane and faced with the decision to either go to that cross or return to Nazareth and reopen his father's carpentry shop, he ultimately decides, "NOT MY will but THY will be done." That set in motion his voluntary surrender into the hands of his enemies and his eventual death on that cross for the sins of the world- a sacrifice made NO LESS on behalf of Judas--the disciple who betrayed him--as well as those directly responsible for putting him to death in the FIRST place- the religious and political leaders of that day.

By commanding his followers to adopt and live by that very same ethic in their OWN lives, Jesus is saying that such a love is not unique to HIMSELF. Rather, ANYONE who would claim to be a follower of his CAN and MUST LOVE to the same extreme as HE does. They are his friends only to the extent they are willing to lay down their OWN lives on behalf of someone else even as HE will voluntarily lay down HIS life for the benefit of the ENTIRE WORLD. As the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, it was now THEIR turn to demonstrate that they were a friend TO HIM by doing the same, that the ONLY TRUE LOVE that exists in the kingdom of God is SACRIFICIAL love- all OTHER loves are either counterfeits or pale imitations! Jesus says that if they do what he asks them to do, then they will prove by their actions that they are INDEED his friends.

In fact, the RELATIONSHIP ITSELF is TOTALLY TRANSFORMED so that it is no longer one in which Christ is the superior one and his disciples, merely his subordinate followers. When his followers obey Christ and fulfill his command to love others even as he has loved THEM, that is, with a love that includes a willingness to sacrifice their OWN lives on behalf of others, then he and his disciples become "MUTUAL FRIENDS" and "FULL

PARTNERS” in ministry together! The old relationship between them is no more, that is, where Jesus was their Commanding General who issued them their marching orders and they were his lowly foot soldiers. Instead, it is now a relationship as between equals, as mutual partners in ministry founded upon a depth and breadth of love the world had never before seen.

Friends, what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples on the eve of his own death was that TRUE discipleship was bound up with and evidenced by a love that can only be characterized as SELFLESS AND SACRIFICIAL, and if those chief qualities were MISSING from their lives, they then had no business calling themselves followers of him. This morning, we find OURSELVES challenged to move BEYOND the idea of a Christian as one whose name has been inscribed on some baptismal roll, or the church as a place where we sing the same comforting and familiar hymns week-after-week while listening to some preacher remind us “I’m OK, YOU’RE OK.” Christianity is not intended to be a religion of SENTIMENTALITY but rather it is a SUMMONS- a call “to die to self” and a willingness to undertake the SAME mission his disciples received with a SIMILAR DUTY to perform and OBLIGATION to fulfill. It may involve opening our hearts as well as our pocketbooks FAR MORE towards those who have FAR LESS this Christmastime; it may mean a willingness to SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE in the face of a multitude of lies and deception; it may mean EMBODYING CHRIST’S LOVE when confronted by hatred and hostility; or it may entail DEMANDING JUSTICE when we witness persons being dehumanized and discriminated against, when others are treated as anything LESS than all human beings deserve to be. In the interest of remaining faithful to our Lord, upholding a SIMILAR commitment to love and justice and truth even as HE did will often involve great risk. It might incur deep strains within our families and among our closest friends; it might put at risk our jobs and good reputation in the community; it might even, as it did for Jesus, his disciples, and the Apostle Paul, jeopardize our OWN PERSONAL SAFETY. However, if we’re TRULY serious about being loyal followers of Jesus OURSELVES, then we must be willing to say even as JESUS HIMSELF DID- “THE RISKS BE DAMNED!”

The fact is that as children of God and brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, EVERYONE OF US has been blessed with the SAME capacity and resources to be heroic when the moment requires it, and by doing so, to ACHIEVE MUCH MORE with our lives than we ever thought possible. Whitney Houston sings in her hit song “The Greatest Love of All” that such love is easy to achieve and that it begins by first LOVING OURSELVES. As much as I appreciate the song, I differ greatly from its message because I see the basis of such love to be found NOT WITHIN but rather OUTSIDE ourselves, in a relationship with One who imparts to us HIS very own courage and strength, One who EVEN WHEN FEARS ARISE, calms them with the command, “Peace, be still.” And furthermore, such love does not originate by “loving oneself first” but rather with him who FIRST LOVED US. You see, the GREATEST LOVE OF ALL is ALWAYS SELFLESS and SACRIFICIAL and it finds its HIGHEST AND PUREST expression in the one who voluntarily and sacrificially laid down his life on our behalf, even on behalf of his enemies, that we might eventually become his friends throughout eternity. Such love must always be the FORCE and IMPETUS behind EVERY act WE perform and hence the basis of OUR confidence and of OUR life this morning! Let us pray...

Father, give us the courage to love and care for others even as we have been loved and cared for by you. Help us to take the risks that such faith demands, knowing that that is what Jesus did and what he no less demands from any who would call themselves his followers. In his name we pray. Amen.