

**SLD05.29.05 9<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Memorial Day Weekend**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**I John 5:1-5**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Conquering the World”**

According to the liturgical calendar of our church, today picks up where it left off before Lent and Easter with the 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time. On the secular calendar of our country, of course, today marks the Sunday of Memorial Day Weekend, a three-day holiday featuring great sales, pool openings and an enticing opportunity to get out of town. As to which calendar rules, we have only to look around and observe today's attendance.

While it can be argued that as a secular holiday, Memorial Day should not determine the direction of our thought during worship, perhaps we should not draw such a strong line between the secular and the sacred. After all, Memorial Day is about remembering. Remembering those who fought in wars on behalf of our country, of course. But remembering, also, the great cost to all humanity of the destructive and overpowering ways we humans go about conquering the world.

For myself, as both a military brat who marched with the base band every afternoon from the age of five, *and* a disillusioned college student who demonstrated against the Vietnam War, I can tell you that I personally have always struggled with this day of remembering, especially with the romanticism that so often accretes to it. Because the kind of war I grew up with was not an honorable but an ambiguous one - chronic, confusing, mean, slow, soul-staining, confidence-draining. There is precious little glory to remember about Vietnam and those of us who opposed it wanted nothing more than for it to stop. And when it finally did, most of us Americans didn't want to

think much about it anymore, so we didn't. Because the Vietnam War was an embarrassment to this country, when it was over, we not only didn't think or talk much about it, we proceeded to systematically marginalize and isolate those who fought in it as a projection of our shame as a nation.

Listen to this poem written by Denise Levertov in 1966 about the war in Vietnam entitled "What Were They Like?" and see if you don't hear echoes of Afghanistan and Iraq:

**1) Did the people of Viet Nam use lanterns of stone?**

**Sir, their light hearts turned to stone. It is not remembered whether in gardens stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.**

**2) Did they hold ceremonies to reverence the opening of buds?**

**Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom, but after the children were killed, there were no more buds.**

**3) Were they inclined to rippling laughter?**

**Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.**

**4) Did they use bone and ivory, jade and silver, for ornament?**

**A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy. All the bones were charred.**

**5) Had they an epic poem?**

**It is not remembered. Remember, most were peasants; their life was in rice and bamboo. When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces, maybe fathers told their sons old tales. When bombs smashed the mirrors there was time only to scream.**

**6) Did they distinguish between speech and singing?**

**There is an echo yet, it is said, of their speech which was like a song. It is reported their singing resembled the flight of moths in moonlight. Who can say? It is silent now.<sup>1</sup>**

So when several years ago I read an *AJC* article that a Vietnam War monument was being unveiled at Atlanta's History Center, I felt somehow a sense of relief. It seemed important to finally acknowledge and talk about Vietnam again, as a community. The article remarked that "the monument is meant to honor patriotism and remind visitors that the Vietnam conflict hit Atlanta hard, claiming the lives of at least 412 metro-area men."

And then there was the monument wall built in Washington, D.C. built in memory of all Americans who died in Vietnam. A long, long, black, stark marble wall with endless names and endless names over which visitors silently run their fingers, and remember.

Monuments and poems remember the past and stay accountable to it. They help us remember who fought and died in those wars and also to confess the true cost of war: how hard war hits us, how hard it hits 'them,' how hard war is on *everyone* concerned. Remembering and confessing, that's where the secular and the sacred intersect on Memorial Day, at least for us Presbyterians. We believe in examining our past with rigor and honesty, in the context of our faith, and confessing our role in it. This is part of what it means to be a confessional church. For Presbyterians, remembrance and confession go together.

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<sup>1</sup> The Norton Introduction to Literature – Poetry, edited by J. Paul Hunter, Emory University. Norton & Co., New York, 1973. p 14.

But remembering all the truths about war and confessing our brokenness and complicity as individuals and a nation can be a tough and humbling exercise; perhaps not exactly what the secular community has in mind for this weekend.

I used to think the survivors of the two World Wars had an easier time with this kind of remembering - those battles seemed to offer more glory, more honor, more community, less shame. Men and women who fought in those wars came home proud. They were welcomed handsomely as heroes, and told their stories with pride. They still do, and their grown-up children and grandchildren, and now great-grandchildren, still listen patiently, and perhaps with a little envy, to all those tales about a war in which the good guys and the bad guys seemed so much more apparent than in later years.

Yet there are tough and terrifying monuments of those wars, too, other remembrances, not just of the heroic and the fallen but of the horrific and the failed. Some of you may be familiar with Wilfred Owen's renowned poem written in 1917, "Dulce Et Decorum Est":

**Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.**

**Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And floundering like a man in fire or lime –  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.**

**In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.**

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children, ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.<sup>2</sup>

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." It means, "it is sweet and becoming to die for one's country" – a line Owen borrows, sardonically, from 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman poet, Horace. The "old lie" Owen calls it, not because there is no honor associated with dying for one's country – of course there is – but because there is nothing sweet or becoming about it, nor about war in general.

"War is hell." Nobody in their right mind, or heart, dove or hawk, Democrat or Republican, would argue with that. But that war is nevertheless sometimes necessary, well, that is the argument of proponents of the Just War Theory.

"The Just War theory considers war an evil but claims that, under specific circumstances, war is justifiable as **less** evil than the execution of some threat which it wards off or the continuation of some system which it changes."<sup>3</sup> I'll repeat that because it's important for us to understand, especially as it invariably serves as our and many governments' primary justification for invasion of another country. "The Just War theory considers war an evil but claims that, under specific circumstances, war is

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p14

<sup>3</sup> When War Is Unjust, John Howard Yoder, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1984. p17.

justifiable as *less* evil than the execution of some threat which it wards off or the continuation of some system which it changes.”

In contrast to the Just War theory, pacifists argue that violence is *never* a way to show love to a neighbor, including a neighbor who is our enemy. But those who argue for just-war see themselves as equally concerned with such love, the difference being their decision that a particular set of neighbors receives primary attention. Just War proponents want to defend those who may be called the innocent, those who are in need of protection from attack, those who would be defenseless unless someone took up arms on their behalf.<sup>4</sup>

Christians of good faith stand on both sides of this debate, one I raise not to resolve in this sermon, as if I could, but simply to draw you closer into the struggle presented both by the Memorial Day holiday *and* by today’s lectionary text from I John, both of which impinge relentlessly on today’s worship, not to mention my own peace of mind.

In today’s text, the writer of I John is concerned primarily with outlining a confession of the early church regarding the nature of Jesus and his relationship with God. We heard about that last week, how the early church struggled to confirm both Jesus’ divinity *and* his humanity over against those who would had differing interpretations of his nature. In this passage, the writer of I John is reducing the church’s confession of faith to the basics: God’s prior love of humanity enables us to obey Jesus’ commandment for us to love one another. And this commandment is not burdensome, says John, because whatever is born of God conquers the world.

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<sup>4</sup> lbib. P14

By 'the world,' John means our deluded and broken realm of existence that is so in need of redemption. By 'God,' John means the creative, life-giving power of the universe made manifest to his community through Jesus Christ. This is all familiar to us and we believe it, too.

But when John goes on to say that the victory that conquers the world is our faith, well, that's when he leaves most of us behind. I mean, some of us may believe that but few of us live it. Because what you and I see, or want to see, conquering the world is not faith but military superiority, nuclear arms, democracy and basically anything else American.

But that's not what John means. John is talking about how Jesus conquered the world by virtue of his surrender to death, which, of course, is not an argument that would get very far in the War Room. But for John, Jesus' death is not only the ultimate expression of God's sacrificial love but the ultimate demonstration of the bankruptcy of the world's values. A bankruptcy that can be bailed out only by the love of God as expressed in Jesus' resurrection, God's victory over death.

Now, this is a pretty radical construct of victory, I'd say, and not one many of us can salute. When John speaks of conquering the world, he doesn't flesh out any moral strategies or prescriptive commandments. There's nothing in his plan of action about overpowering or vanquishing or decimation, even of bad guys. 'Power *over*' is simply not what conquers in John's scheme – *love* is what conquers. *Faith* is what conquers. In John's understanding, what conquers the world is God's great love through Jesus Christ that achieves its victory not by overpowering the world but by transforming it.

And apparently for John, the example and model of Jesus' life, death and resurrection tell his followers everything we need to know about just and faithful responses to evil in the world. But there's the rub, isn't it. Just what does that Jesus' life reveal to his disciples? How have believers interpreted Jesus' example across the centuries? How are we to interpret it today?

Was Jesus a pacifist, offering no resistance and passively surrendering to the forces of evil, turning the other cheek, leaving the outcome in God's hands? Or, through his disobedience to the religious structure and authority of his day was Jesus a rebel, staging a personal and political protest even unto death. Or was Jesus even more radical than that, acting in full and strategic knowledge of the eventual impact of his sacrifice on a world of believers. Was Jesus a savvy hawk?

Would Jesus argue for or against Just War? Would he have believed that under certain circumstances a sacrifice like his was justifiable as less evil than the execution of some threat which it wards off, say, Roman or Sanhedrin revenge on revisionist Jews, or the continuation of some system which it changes, perhaps a corrupt religious system? I tell you, friends, this is an uncomfortably open question.

And Christians of good faith throughout the ages have interpreted the example of Jesus' life and death in vastly different ways. Some martyrs and leaders of the church, both past and present, have understood and followed Jesus as a model of passive and faithful submission to the evils of the day, trusting in God and the rewards of eternal life. Others have regarded Jesus' sacrifice as a call to assertive non-violence and civil disobedience in resistance to injustice. Still other Christians throughout the ages have seen Jesus' single-focussed passion and path as a call for more aggressive

intervention, even ethnic cleansing. Witness the Crusades. Or the western Christian church during the reign of Hitler. Or the Baltic states. Or Ireland. Or the radical right in our own country.

German Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a rebel in his own church eventually beheaded for his role in an assassination plot against Hitler, asserted before he died that “the church’s task is not simply to bind the wounds of the victim beneath the wheel, but also to put a spoke in the wheel itself.”<sup>5</sup> In short, not just to pray but to act, to assert its values over against the prevailing systems of the day.

But then, of course, most of us are neither martyrs nor heroes, just ordinary, decent people of faith seeking to understand and follow Jesus’s example in an ordinary, broken, sinful world. Which of Jesus’ examples, then, are we meant to follow? What is it we are meant to remember and confess? What is it we are meant to do?

Hear this excerpt from Phillip Appleman’s poem, “Waiting for the Fire:”

**If ever we thought of the wreckage  
of our unnatural acts,  
we would never sleep again  
without dreaming a rain of fire:  
somewhere God is bargaining for Sodom,  
a few good people could save the city; but  
in that dirty corner of the mind  
we call the soul  
the only wash that purifies is tears,  
and after all our body counts,  
our rape, our mutilations,  
nobody here is crying; people who would weep  
at the death of a dog  
stroll these unburned streets dry-eyed.  
But forgetfulness will never walk  
with innocence; we save our faces  
at the risk of our lives, needing  
the wisdom of losses, the gift of despair,  
or we could kill again.**

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<sup>5</sup> All Saints, Robert Ellsberg, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1999, p 160.

**Somewhere God is haggling over Sodom:  
for the sake of ten good people**

**I will spare the land.**

**Where are all those volunteers  
to hold back the fire? Look:  
when the moon rises over the sea,  
no matter where you stand,  
the path of the light comes to you.<sup>6</sup>**

Several years ago I visited the Holy Land with a group of seminary students from Candler, Columbia and Louisville Seminary. While we were in Jerusalem, we visited Yad VaShem, Israel's Holocaust Museum. If there exists a more poignant, heart-rending monument to the depths of human tragedy, I cannot imagine it. In the children's memorial, with its thousands of lights for all the slaughtered little ones, I felt a deep, deep sadness and wonder at our capacity for evil. But as I moved further through the many stories, statistics and pictures of the main hall, I witnessed my poignancy turning to pain, then to horror, and then to...nothing. I went numb, dispassionate, empty of response. The piles of naked, emaciated bodies and their stories no longer moved me. I walked from room to room observing scenes desperate beyond my comprehension but feeling nothing more than a kind of 'professional distance.'

Finally, one little story towards the end, nothing consequential in the larger tragedy, just a tale about two little children absorbed in playing outside the gas chamber, their mother pleading silently with a guard for the gift of just a few more moments, that story helped me cry, and feel again. Shortly thereafter, when I exited the museum, I saw engraved on the wall a quote from 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish rabbi and saint,

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<sup>6</sup> "Waiting for the Fire," by Phillip Appleman from New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996 (University of Arkansas Press). [Read by Garrison Keillor on The Writer's Almanac on April 1, 2003.]

Baal Shem Tov. It read, “forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.”

The secret of redemption, says one wise old Jewish saint, is remembrance.  
The secret of redemption, says one wise old Reformed tradition, is remembrance. The secret of redemption, says one wise old American holiday, is remembrance.

Friends, as Americans, you and I are called on this Memorial Day to remember and honor those who fought in wars on behalf of our country, of course. But for Presbyterians, remembrance and confession go together. So we here in this church are called also to examine our warring past in the context of our faith and to confess the great, great cost to all creation of the destructive and overpowering ways we humans go about conquering the world. And through our remembrance and our confession, may God transform us into a community of redemption, as accountable to Jesus’ discomfiting example as we are to our own unholy acts. For in the end, the only victory that conquers the world is faith.

To the glory of God. Amen.