

Advocates for Peace
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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Memorial Day is tomorrow, so it got me thinking about the history of Memorial Day. One of the official stories according to the Department of Veterans Affairs is that three years after the Civil War ended, the head of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union veterans, established Decoration Day. Decoration Day was a time to decorate the graves of those who had died in the Civil War with flowers. "Maj. Gen. John A. Logan declared that Decoration Day should be observed on May 30. It is believed that date was chosen because flowers would be in bloom all over the country."^[1]

But what's fascinating is that twenty-five different places have been named in connection with the origins of Memorial Day, some even before Decoration Day was established. One of the first towns is Columbus, Mississippi where on April 25, 1866, there was a group of women who visited a cemetery to decorate the graves of Confederate soldiers who had died in the Battle of Shiloh. According to the VA, "Nearby were the graves of Union soldiers, neglected because they were the enemy. Disturbed at the sight of the bare graves, the women placed some of their flowers on those graves, as well."^[2] In time, Memorial Day would be observed throughout our country and flowers would decorate the graves of all those who died in service to our country.

The story of these women troubled by the bare graves of the enemy and deciding to decorate them with springtime flowers right alongside their heroes is worth remembering. When we hear today's Gospel story, we hear Jesus telling the disciples to keep the commandments as part of his long farewell address. The actions of these women certainly point to loving your neighbor as yourself, to loving your enemy even, that they will know we are Christians by our love. Honestly, look no further than these Southern women disturbed at the bare graves of their enemies to see the love Christ spoke and lived and embodied enacted in our world.

Further, in this small loving act, they behaved as advocates—to honor the dead no matter what side they may have fought for. Perhaps these women recognized that war is horrible and devastating for everyone and in this touching way were unknowingly early advocates for peace. As Pope Paul II once said, "War is not always inevitable, it is always a defeat for humanity."^[3] Advocates for peace always contemplate the human cost of war on all sides. Part of what's so moving is that the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Advocate. The Greek word used is Paraclete which can mean Helper or Comforter or Advocate. The word is actually the equivalent of a defense lawyer. Jesus basically says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Defense Attorney, to be with you forever."^[4]

When we think of the word advocate, we consider someone who speaks or writes in support or defense of a person or cause. People advocate for the rights of immigrants or in favor of same-sex marriage or for higher salaries for teachers or a livable minimum wage. Folks advocate for the care of our environment or against the death penalty, for universal human rights, for racial equality, for women's rights. When we consider advocates, it's often linked to social justice, to causes we can get behind, causes we feel passionate about. Advocating for someone takes courage and tenacity and perseverance and deep love.

Thinking about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the third "person" of the Trinity as our Advocate should give us pause. After all, you have to have courage, tenacity, perseverance, deep love, and so much more to be an advocate in the first place. What does it really mean when Jesus says to the disciples that the Holy Spirit is given to us, to be with us forever, as another advocate?

The Holy Spirit as Advocate brings out the unique nature of the Gospel of John. John is the only Gospel writer who refers to the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete. John presents the Holy Spirit as our Divine Defense Attorney charged with defending Christians from the attacks of the world and also defending Christ's cause of love and justice and peace to humanity. When John was writing his Gospel, his small community was undergoing a painful separation from the Jewish society to which its members belonged. They claimed that Jesus was the Messiah and this was sometimes met with disciplinary action from the synagogue authorities, including expulsion or even violence. John wrote his Gospel to encourage folks to hold fast to their beliefs during incredibly troubled times.[5] Jesus giving them the Holy Spirit as an advocate to be with them would have had so much meaning for this small, embattled community.

Even though Jesus is leaving and will no longer be with the disciples, he reassures them by saying that the Holy Spirit will remain behind. Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." [6] Widows and orphans were the most vulnerable in the highly patriarchal society in which Jesus himself lived. This is part of the reason why in a later passage in John, Jesus makes sure to entrust the care of his mother to his beloved disciple even as he is dying on the cross. He was making sure that Mary would be cared for and defended, that she would have a home and a son to be her advocate in a society where she lacked power.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will be with us forever, that we will not be orphans. These are promises made and promises kept. The call back to the love commandments in Jesus' farewell address is planting seeds for the future, to show us how we will work with the Holy Spirit whom we know and in whom we abide.

It's like the story of a pilgrim who one day set out on a long journey in search of joy, love, and peace. The pilgrim walked for many weary miles and time passed so slowly. The landscapes she passed by were not always happy ones--through war, sickness, fights, rejections, and separations. A land where it seemed the more people possessed, the more warlike they became because they had to defend what they had at all costs. "Longing for peace, they prepared for war. Longing for love, they surrounded themselves with walls of distrust and barriers of fear. Longing for life, they were walking deeper into death." [7]

But one morning, the pilgrim came to a little cottage and something about this cottage spoke to the pilgrim. She went inside and inside was a little shop and behind the counter was the shopkeeper. It was hard to know the shopkeeper's age, hard to even say for sure whether the shopkeeper was a man or woman. The whole place had an air of timelessness about it. With a smile, the shopkeeper asked what the pilgrim would like. The pilgrim questioned what the shopkeeper had to offer in the first place and the mysterious shopkeeper eventually replied, "Oh, we have all the things here that you most long for. Just tell me what you desire."

Well the pilgrim hardly knew where to begin and just blurted out, "I want peace--in my own family, in my native land, and in the whole world. I want to make something good of my life. I want those who are sick to be well again, and those who are lonely to have friends. I want those who are hungry to have enough to eat. I want every child born on this planet today to have a chance to be educated. I want everyone on earth to live in freedom. I want this world to be a kingdom of love." The shopkeeper quietly reviewed her shopping list and gently replied, "I'm sorry, I should have explained. We don't supply the fruits here. We only supply the seeds." [8]

Often I think that God only supplies the seeds. And it's up to us to go out and plant and bring in the harvest of joy, love, and peace--the very things the pilgrim went searching for in the first

place. Thinking of the history of Memorial Day, God supplied the seeds of that call to love your neighbor as yourself, to even love your enemies, the seed of looking at the bare graves of your enemies and feeling disturbed as those women held flowers in their hands to decorate the graves of their heroes. And then it's up to us to plant, to act. It's like John of the Cross once said, "In the evening, we will be judged on love."

Jesus leaves us the Holy Spirit to ensure that we are not orphaned and alone, to ensure that we have the presence of God to be with us forever in good times and in bad. Jesus leaves us with instructions on how to live our lives and be part of our world. But the Holy Spirit can't force us to love God wholly and completely and love our neighbors and love ourselves. We are given the seeds of love, the seeds of peace and then we must go plant them to see what comes next in the realm of God we are trying to create on earth now. After all, as Jesus taught us, "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." [9] Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] "Memorial Day History," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, http://www.va.gov/opa/speceven/memday/history.asp?utm_source=3birds&utm_...

[2] Ibid.

[3] Fernando Franco, SJ, "War is a Defeat for Humanity," February 7, 2003, <http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/War/Iraq-war...>

[4] John 14:15-16, NRSV.

[5] David K. Rensberger, "John: Introduction," in *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, 2011-2013.

[6] John 14: 18-19, NRSV.

[7] "Only the Seed" in *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World*, Margaret Silf, ed.

[8] Ibid.

[9] John 14:21, NRSV.