Sermon 25 May 2025

I'm unaccustomed to observing Memorial Day as a part of the liturgical calendar; but as I was learning more about the Pilgrim community from Pastor Reebee, I began to think it would be meaningful for us to acknowledge Memorial Day in worship. After all, we are still in Eastertide for a few days more, and even in the gratitude and triumph of Easter, we remember the grief and loss so present on Good Friday. Much as we might want to speed past the sadness of grief into the promise of resurrection, it is right and necessary for us to dwell with our loss. Additionally, as I get to know you better, I've learned that many of you are devoted service-people, both in and out of the Armed Services. On top of this, I've noticed as I drive through the streets of Lexington, I see yard signs that read things like "No King", or "Down with Tyranny". In the town center, I see statues of white able-bodied men who tell a story of revolutionaries against the imperialist rule of England, and I begin to understand how important the history of Lexington as a center of fighting for American democracy is to its current people. So this morning, I invite us to reflect on Memorial Day with a story.

I want to tell you about my friend Esther. Esther is a social worker who lives in Cambridge and works in Boston. Until recently, we were colleagues at MGH together. Esther is the person outside of my department who understands the work of Spiritual Care more than anyone else I met in my time there. She and I worked closely together in the Obstetrics and Labor & Delivery units. Whereas my role was perceived as weirdly mystical and largely unnecessary to many people I worked with, Esther was well-integrated and vital to patients and families. Esther has some of the most painful stories of experience in service of patients, their infant children, and their families. As a social worker, her work is to help families locate and access resources that can enable them to live stable, healthy, and whole: from making sure they have a working car-seat or enough diapers, to helping them find housing where they can get clean and sober, while their child continues to heal from the reality of being born addicted to a controlled substance. Esther helps birthing people live into their faith as a part of their childbirth experience by calling the chaplain for extra support.

She affirms folks who are in situations she might describe as intimate partner violence who want to remain there without judgment or lecturing. She helps folks who are trying to get out of unsafe situations feel protected and make safe choices for themselves and their babies. Esther loves and cares for the nurses who are overworked and underpaid and who struggle with the hardship of the care that they provide that often goes unnoticed by patients and doctors. Esther doesn't work for the government, and she doesn't share the values of the system she's a part of; she's a deeply religious woman, who practices a tradition not widely recognized by our culture or our systems. She has to use her earned time off to observe religious holidays. She has to explain her ritual behavior to people over and over. She sometimes fears for her safety and the safety of her family. She is an American citizen, and trust, she is a public servant. And she lives here in Boston, in the home of political unrest and revolution, in a way that is less free than many of us.

Perhaps you are wondering now why I would choose a story of public service to tell, instead of a story of military service. Why wouldn't I share with you a story about a family member of mine or yours who has given their time, their youth, their devotion, even their life serving in the U.S. armed forces? That's the point of Memorial Day, isn't it? I begin with a story that is as American as our grandfather who served in the Navy, as our cousin who was in the Air Force or Army, as our own record of service. I am grateful for our veterans, our service-people, and our fallen, and I'll say more about that in a moment; and the sacrifice and the giving of Americans takes many shapes. How many of us have a story like this, of someone who gave generously of themselves and helped us navigate treachery and difficulty? How many of us know and love someone whose blood, bravery, and generosity even now is woven into the fabric of our family, community or cultural heritage? To paraphrase Langston Hughes: our social servants, our civil servants, our immigrants and students, our trans folx and disabled folx, too, sing America.

As we commemorate our war dead and our service-people, let us acknowledge that those among us, in this congregation, in our families and

communities, have chosen to use their bodies, their minds, their hearts, and emotions in service of not just the American government, but of **the American people**. America is its people more than it is any government structure, or system of economics, or land mass that has been colonized, fought over, and then colonized again. Our service-people have chosen to use their skills and talents in service of human beings they've never met, to protect a citizenship that is broad, expansive, and engaging. Our service people have served often while armed with weapons, with the power and means of destruction, which invites them to grapple with complex and painful questions of violence, life, and death. This choice requires a sacrifice of peace of mind, of ease and desire and self-determination. Our service-people give themselves over to a system that takes from them with both hands, but only gives back to them with one. They make a sacrifice that some of us do not know. I say both with gratitude and with shame, that it is a sacrifice that I hope never to know. Whether our beloved and our fallen know it or not, whether they like it or not, they make an enormous sacrifice for us. Just as some members of our community serve by teaching our children and grandchildren, or serve by hauling away our trash, or serve by feeding or housing those among us who are under-resourced, or serve by taking in and loving those who need to be held and loved, our service-people give of themselves, and in their generosity and service, they are an integral part of our community.

This experiment that we call America is teetering. Though Congress has its sessions and the Supreme Court is hearing cases, the balance that was built into the design of this government is but a shade of its former self. The head of our Executive Branch has made it clear that he has no interest in the rules and laws that are established to prevent corruption and power imbalance: he continues to consolidate power beneath himself, to work only with those who will help manifest his vision of oligarchy, which is not democracy, and to erase and destroy those on the margins who cannot make him and his friends richer. Pilgrims, it makes me deeply uncomfortable to say these things. While I treasure speaking truth or exhorting justice from the pulpit, I hoped that I would never need to point at the behavior of my own government, of the president of this country, and

name them as so harmful and destructive–to name them as fascist–to a church and community I hold dear. I never imagined that as a burden I would bear on Memorial Day. People of God, because I love you, I sometimes have to say hard things to you in the name of justice and righteousness. Sometimes I have to follow the model of Jesus Christ, and say things that move us outside our comfort zone. There are people in my family, and in yours too, who have sweat, or bled, or who have died, to protect the vision and the idea and the practice of America. We know and love people who have been buoyed and supported and sustained by the idea and the vision of what is possible in America. We know and love people who have been ground into dust, who have been erased and disappeared by the practice of America. And we know, above all, that the America that we are now experiencing is an America that we mourn.

My literary hero, American writer and essayist James Baldwin, once said, “I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” In this statement I hear both Baldwin’s deep gratitude for Baldwin’s right to live as a gay Black man, a writer, a civil rights activist, and to speak his mind as an American, and his deep grief for the way white supremacy continues to be woven into the functioning of this country. His statement points to a statement by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King: “There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.” We love deeply our community members: we love those who were brave enough to flee despotic regimes or policies and laws of persecution, people who dared to dream they could live free and whole in this country. We love those who devote their lives to keeping that possibility alive by serving in systems, conflicts, and atrocities that, let us be clear, are not condoned or sanctioned by our Savior or our faith. So if what I share is uncomfortable because it feels too “political”, I ask for your grace by reminding you that my reflection does not emerge from a place of partisan animosity; it comes from a love of America, and the people, all of us, who make us who we are. America is my home, the only home I have ever known. And because I expect so much from America, on the occasion of our mourning those who have sacrificed for us, I am deeply disappointed in what this country has become.

Like some of you, I am a follower of Christ who lives in a country that was designed to allow me to practice my faith freely, and who made no requirements of how I or anyone else practices faith. America has no official state religion, though many Americans would posit that Christianity is America's default and dominant tradition; and if you doubt this, consider that Christmas Day is a government holiday regardless of what day of the week December 25 falls on, although government offices are generally open on Rosh Hashanah, Vesak Day, or Eid-al-Hada. Like you, I hold close to the idea that my practice of religion is one I can craft in relationship with God, but not with the state: *I get to decide* what it looks like for me to live out the standard of faith that God has given me, not my government. But that freedom is evaporating, it is getting harder to practice, friends. It is vital that in our practice of Christianity, we don't confuse our allegiance to Christ with our allegiance to our country. We can grieve and mourn our fallen heroes, and our courageous ancestors. We can whisper the names of our fallen at our family meals and over their urns and their gravestones, the heirloom objects they gave us, and the young heads of our descendants. We can know that even as we weep, or rage, or despair at what our country is becoming, we are not hopeless, and we are not helpless. Our faith is greater than our nation, and our faith is one that points to a belonging and a caretaking that does not observe national boundaries, that does not ask anyone to show their papers or proof of residency, that welcomes, loves, and receives all. Because we are children of God, beyond any creed, identity, rank, flag, or totem, we can live out this love even when our systems have lost their way: we can live out a radical, transgressive, counter-cultural love that is willing and able to disrupt systems of power in order to connect people with one another.

If you are anything like me, it feels hard to dwell in these feelings. Rather than feel them, you want to know what to do. The president is ignoring the law; many of our representatives have become–I'm just going to say it–toadies and yesmen in an authoritarian regime. What do we do? There are letters to write, and protests to attend. There are hard, necessary truths, truths that we've been avoiding, that we must acknowledge to ourselves,

and share with others. There are boycotts. Use your dollars to communicate your feelings, because at the end of the day, a country like America, built on capitalism, speaks the language of money more fluently than anything else. But today. Today, on this day that is set aside for the remembrance of the fallen in the line of service, we pause. We breathe. We breathe, and we let ourselves soften enough so that the gratitude for sacrifice, and the grief of loss can come to the surface of our hearts. Like joy and sorrow, gratitude and grief are twins who share one soul; let us allow ourselves to feel them. ***Let us make ourselves vulnerable enough to let our gratitude and our grief show.*** Let us allow our tears to flow. Let us say thank you. Let us say I love you. Let us turn our attention and our awareness to those who have sacrificed and remember.

Today, Pilgrims, I invite you to join me in this ritual. When you arrived at worship this morning, you were given a white rose. In just a moment, as the music begins to play, you will take up that rose. I invite you to lift the flower to your face, breathe in its fragrance. While holding the rose, you may want to whisper the name of your family member, your comrade, or your ancestor who has gone before you, that you feel grateful for, that you grieve the loss of, today. This next part could feel a little new, but I believe in your capacity to do new things: Pull the petals of your rose out of the stem. You can pull one at a time, or by a handful. I will come around with this bowl, and you may offer the petals of your rose into this bowl. I will go all around the sanctuary to gather the petals from all of our flowers, and we will bless them on our altar. When the blessing is complete, we will pray the Lord's Prayer together. After service today, I will take them out to our land behind the church, and offer them to Spirit as a gift of our gratitude and a hallmark of our grief. May the God of our ancestors be with us as we acknowledge sacrifice with gratitude, and loss with grief.