

Memorial Day Sermon 2026
Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
May 24, 2026

At the end of the Civil War, formerly enslaved folks in Charleston, South Carolina chose to bury with dignity hundreds of Union Soldiers who had died in a Confederate camp. Shortly afterward there, on May 1, 1865, the first known Memorial Day observance occurred,¹ to offer dignity to lost soldiers, beloved children of God, every one. Three years later, the first official Memorial Day decoration ceremony was held at Arlington National Cemetery.

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Robert Macabenta Marzan
Nicole Marie Amor
Noah Lee Tietjens
Declan Joseph Coady
Jeffrey Robert O'Brien
Cody Aaron Khork
Benjamin Noah Pennington
John Alexander "Alex" Klinner
Ariana Gabriella Savino
Ashley Brooke Pruitt
Seth Robert Koval
Curtis John Angst
Tyler Hanani Simmons

¹ <https://www.history.com/articles/memorial-day-civil-war-slavery-charleston>

US Military Service members who have died on active duty in 2026 during the war with Iran. ²

1200 Iranian military and 1700 civilians...

—

Robert Dale Kavich died November 22, 1970 in Vietnam.

Our class trip in eighth grade was to Washington, D.C. It was 1988. We expected it to be cold up north so I wore my father's coat, and it was too big for me.

You may recall that in the 80s there was a new memorial in D.C. It was dedicated in 1982. No one from my family had been able to see it. So my cousins took me aside and said: we need you to do something for us.

There wasn't a searchable website back then, to find names. But there must have been a book of some kind, listing all the names on all the panels, because I found the names they wanted me to find, and put my hand out to, and touch, on their behalf. A Kavich from Kentucky. A Hooper. An Allen. Cousins who died on the other side of the world, years before I was born. I found their names.

Some of my classmates did the same thing. We walked along artist Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Wall, tracing our hands over the black granite and we found their names among the 58,000. We touched the engravings. We took pictures. We remembered memories that weren't even ours. These young soldiers died before we were born.

² https://www.wikiwand.com/en/List_of_U.S._service_members_killed_during_the_2026_Iran_war

In eighth grade I knew very little about the complexities of war and peace, protest or patriotism. But I could read grief. And we knew this was a serious pilgrimage.

In some cases, our families had no graves to visit, so a name on a wall had heightened meaning.

As Heather Cox Richardson wrote last Memorial Day, “Thinking about our untimely dead is hard enough, but I am haunted by the holes those deaths rip forever in the social fabric: the discoveries not made, the problems not solved, the marriages not celebrated, the babies not born.”³

I remember very little about that class trip to DC, beyond tending to family memories that weren’t even mine, but that I held carefully.

Every year we wish that no more soldiers would die. And every year, more service members die.

They die in combat, or they die from the after effects of war. Soldiers come home with injuries that irrevocably change their future. Vietnam vets are still dealing with Agent Orange, sixty years later. Veterans of all wars are disproportionately homeless. And veterans’ suicide rates are far higher than civilians. The impact of war does not end with a treaty.

The casualties of war fall disproportionately on those who have no power in deciding between battle and diplomacy, the divides between classes and ranks seem to grow greater in every conflict, and as Jim Wallis puts it, the *beneficiaries* of war “are not the people we

³ <https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/may-25-2025>

remember on Memorial Day.”⁴ I’ve known many young people who entered the military not to fire a weapon nor even for patriotic principles, but to improve their life prospects; their deaths are somehow the hardest to grieve.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in 2007 of going on a retreat during the war in Afghanistan, in which every day, the worship leaders read the names of servicemembers whose deaths had just been reported: “Those who died of war were simply named in the presence of God, along with those who had died of cancer or old age. They were named in the presence of God’s people, who make it our business to note even the fall of a sparrow, trusting that our lives are bound up with all other lives in Christ.”⁵

“To say their names out loud, in the presence of God and God’s people, is not a matter of being for or against the war. It is a matter of remembering that our lives are bound up with all other lives in Christ, as we keep count of those who are worth more than many sparrows.”⁶

So this is what I want to say today, on Memorial Day. Many flags will be waved in joyful celebration this weekend but this should always be an occasion for profound sorrow. This remembrance should make us stop short. The cost of war is devastatingly high. Too high for war to be chosen easily. The nations of the world kill people with too little consideration. A button is pushed and a bomb detonates hundreds of miles away. Soldiers die, and non-combatants in numbers even higher, and injuries we couldn’t have even imagined 50 years ago devastate brains and limbs. And we, in our comfortable lives, are distant from the cost unless we know the dead or live with the injured.

⁴ Jim Wallis, writing in *Sojourners* magazine.

⁵ *Christian Century*, July 24, 2007

⁶ *Christian Century*, July 24, 2007

As the decades pass, we get further and further away from the human toll of war.

In World War II, 12% of the US population served in some way. In Vietnam, nearly 10%⁷. In 2018, 0.4% of the population of the US is active duty military.⁸ The low percentage of the US population serving in the military could mean recent losses feel less like our own kin.

But these are our neighbors and I mean that in the way Jesus meant it - the expansive label neighbor that applies to all human beings of all nations. To lose one human being, one beloved child of God, should cause us *all* to grieve, to remember. Even more so, to lose one human being in combat or conflict - one human being from here or one human being from there - should have us all praying for peace.

This Memorial Day weekend, we remember and name the dead. Once again we try to offer dignity to lost soldiers, beloved children of God, every one. And we pray, once more, for peace.

Amen.

⁷ http://history-world.org/vietnam_war_statistics.htm

⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/11/08/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/> Note that the 2018 figure was from a footnote from previous writing which is no longer available. The trend remains.