

Memorial Day, 2014. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

So! Here we are on Memorial Day Weekend! I understand there was a three-hour wait for the Mukilteo Ferry on Friday! Public holidays will do that! But I wonder how many people who will celebrate this holiday will be headed for the graves of the honored dead.....?

This day was originally called "Decoration Day" - started by General John Logan, the national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The date he picked - May 30 - he chose because it wasn't the anniversary of any particular battle. In other words, it wasn't about the war, it wasn't about generals, and politicians, and grand military strategies. It was simply a way to remember and honor those who gave their lives in defense of freedom.

This is an important day for me.

Both my parents, two of my four grandparents served. Three of my four uncles, two of my four aunts, four of my eight great grandparents and innumerable cousins served - that's going back to the Boer War, which began in 1899. They served and fought - and some died - across the world - in South East Asia, Europe, Africa.

They flew, they floated, and they marched.

I have at least two relatives who were at Yorktown - one wore red, the other blue - he served in the French navy (which is a closely guarded family secret - having French relatives!).

So you could say I come from a military family - I'm the first in generations who hasn't put on the uniform.

As best as I can tell, none of them were drafted, they were all volunteers. Several enlisted as a career choice - one, I was told, to escape Irish poverty, another right out of high school other who enlisted in 1938 and stayed in after World War II. The rest volunteered because of war.

It's hard to assess motive for those who enlisted prior to my grandparents - I wasn't able to ask them why, and no one in the family ever told me (except for the ones I mentioned). But I think I'm on safe ground in saying that not one of them - either the career or the war-time volunteers - enlisted because they loved war. A few individuals do love war and killing, of course, but most psychologists will tell you that it's not a normal response to want to kill someone you don't know - that one of the challenges of any military infrastructure is to train human beings to kill.

My family members enlisted because it was the right thing to do - it was in defense of the homeland, the patriotic response - or so they thought, anyway, in 1914; or it was to defeat the evils of fascism and empire-building that violently threatened humanity beginning in the 1930's - all my family's casualties (that I know of, anyway) came in that war.

So it is that Memorial Day always represents a challenge for me. What should Christians say about Memorial Day? What should we say about war.

It is entirely appropriate and absolutely right - and also an immoral act of avoidance - to remember our honored dead on this weekend - and to respect the uniform and those who have worn it, **BUT stop there.**

Our faith calls us, first, to make a distinction between those who served and especially those who gave their lives on the one hand, and, on the other, the societies, nations, individual cultures, and, sometimes, individual people - who by words and actions, actively or passively, brought about war. We must unequivocally honor the former, and always question and challenge the latter

And there's a further distinction: between fighting wars against gas chamber operators and their overlords and fighting wars over oil, or politics, or control. There are different sorts of wars, and the moral imperative placed on us to respond to them differ accordingly.

I want to share with you five statements by the National Council of Churches. The NCC is an ecumenical partnership of 37 Christian faith groups in the U.S., including Mainline Protestant, Orthodox, African American, Evangelical, and historic peace churches - ourselves, the UCC, Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Methodists, Baptists, etc. etc. many cases - the Roman Catholic Church (not a member) joins the statements made by the NCC.

First, “War is contrary to the will of God”. As much as some Christians had hoped otherwise, this isn't a pacifist statement - the World Council of Churches (of which the NCC is a part) recognizes what that there may be circumstances where the use of force is justified **“for the protection of the vulnerable”**. Not, notice, and as an example, for the protection of the oil supply - there's an ethical distinction being made here.

Second: “There are some forms of violence in which Christians may not participate, and which the churches must condemn”. That's not optional language, is it?! The examples given are such as “the conquest of one people by another, or the deliberate oppression of one class or race by another...torture in all forms, the holding of innocent hostages, and the deliberate or indiscriminate killing of innocent non-combatants.”

Third, “Non-violent resistance is central to the way of peace.” Like the Civil Rights movement in the '60's. Going the extra mile and turning the other cheek are both exhortations to non-violent resistance - and, notice, they're not passive; they're defiant actions in the face of the oppressor's fist or boot, designed to provoke thoughtfulness AND the cessation of those actions.

Fourth, “peace is inseparable from justice.” And justice is inseparable from peace. It's not enough to oppose war when it happens, we as Christians have a responsibility toward working for just conditions before the injustices ever reach the level of armed conflict. Historians have argued that if the Treaty of Versailles in 1918 which ended the First World War had been about

reconciliation rather than retribution, then the desperate - and unjust - conditions it created in the Germany of the 1920's and early 1930's would have been avoided. It was those desperate conditions that were the fertile soil for fascism, and the Nazi horrors that flowed from it. But what if the American and British Churches had spoken out about the injustices? Had condemned retribution as un-Christian and worked for reconciliation?

And, fifth: “Reconciliation stands at the heart of the gospel message.” We’re called to engage not only victims but perpetrators, and to participate in the reconstruction of societies that follows wars. This is not about political action, it is, in the words of one statement “to participate in the healing work of God”.

The sanctioning of war by religion - which is really the sanctifying of war by religion, is a risky business. How do we, in today’s world - in a world in which our own government has, under both parties’ administrations, illegally and unconstitutionally violated the privacy of pretty every single American who has ever made a cell-phone call or surfed the internet, and who floods the airwaves with propaganda - how do we know enough to be able to decide if military action is justified or not for us as Christians?

I don’t have the answer to that, but I believe we should be asking the question, we should be saying to each other and to ourselves, “what do we as followers of the Prince of Peace have to say?” when it comes to the violence of military action.

I want to say this morning that this is a very difficult question to answer; that, I suspect, is why we often try to side-step answering it.

And it’s very difficult to answer if we are willing to be honest, open, and to engage those with whom we disagree with respect, openness, and a willingness to admit that we might be wrong.

So, on this Memorial Day Weekend, I believe we should say this: Respect the honored dead, and struggle like heck to bring the peace of Christ to the living.