

Easter 6A: May 17, 2020

John 14:15-21

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Memorial Day is next weekend. Every year as Memorial Day approaches, my thoughts turn to our fallen soldiers and invariably, I end up watching a video of the guard walking his or her silent vigil at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. The tomb of the Unknown Soldier is guarded and protected by a sentinel soldier every minute of every hour, 24/7, 365 days a year. Even in the rain. Even in the snow. Even during a hurricane. No matter what is happening in the world around it, the tomb is never left alone.

The inscription on the tomb reads, “Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God.”

Memorial Day was originally set aside as a day to honor and remember the fallen soldiers of the Civil War, both North and South. As the years have gone by, it has become a day to honor and remember the men and women who lost their lives in service to their country during any war. Today, we have come to recognize that the effects of war extend beyond the casualty list to the loss of limbs, loss of emotional and mental health, and loss of family stability. Therefore, Memorial Day has also become a day to honor and remember the sacrifices of all soldiers who have answered the call to service. And we have further expanded this day of remembrance to include not just soldiers, but our family and friends that have died as well.

Perhaps it is time to extend the scope of our remembrances on this day to include all the losses in our lives. We have all experienced deep gut-wrenching losses that have left us feeling alone, empty, bewildered, scared, and all kinds of other emotions just like when someone dies. Most of us have lost something in some way during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us have lost our rose-colored glasses that prevented us from seeing the racism that is still so prevalent in this country. Some of us may have lost or are losing a loved one to Alzheimer’s or Dementia. Others have found that their skill set is no longer required and have lost their jobs after long years of dedicated service. Maybe we are moving to a new city or a new school and have to say goodbye to family and friends. There are those of us who have lost an animal companion that gave us unconditional love and filled the emptiness of our heart and home. And still others who have experienced the loss of physical health, leaving us weakened and betrayed by our own bodies. There are also those who have suffered loss through divorce, and those who have lost or are losing a loved one to alcohol or drugs. The list of losses in our lives could go on and on.

But we don’t like to talk about them. We don’t like to share them. We don’t want to appear weak, vulnerable, or needy. We try to minimize our losses by comparing them to someone else’s; thereby fooling ourselves that in the greater scheme of life our loss isn’t worthy of note. Our society tells us to “suck it up” and move on. Why? Because we are uncomfortable with loss. We don’t know how to handle the losses in our own lives much less someone else’s.

So, we entomb our losses. We entomb our pain. We entomb them in our hearts and our souls. The inscription on our self-made tomb reads, “Herein lies the losses and pain in my life known but to God.”

This tomb we create, just like the tomb of the Unknown Soldier is guarded, protected, and never left alone, because Jesus and the Holy Spirit are with us always. Jesus told his disciples on the night before He died that he would not leave them orphaned and alone. He would dwell with them always. He told them that, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate." In the original Greek, the word translated here as 'Advocate', after putting an English spin on it, is 'paraklete'. Not "pair of cleats" like those worn on the football field or "parakeets" as my auto-correct kept trying, but 'paraklete'. Literally, it means called beside, but it is a word full of nuances. It can be translated as Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, Friend, and Helper.

In the face of any kind of loss, we need all of those.

As a community of faith, we are called to be an advocate, a comforter, a counselor, a friend, and a helper to each other and to the world around us. One of my favorite ministries is the ministry of presence- coming beside someone else and just being there, allowing and trusting the Holy Spirit to work through us to provide what the person next to us needs at that moment. Sounds easy enough right? And on some level, it is, but in our rushed go-go-go world it really isn't. It means taking time to stop and really listen, even if it means listening to silence, because sometimes, we just need the comfort of another human being beside us.

Take the question, "How are you doing?" Do we really want an honest answer, or are we just being polite, sort of a verbal handshake? Let's all admit that 90% of the time it is the latter. Our minds are elsewhere, and our body is quick to follow. Stopping and listening to the answer to that question is not written in our day planner. But it should be.

I'll be the first to admit this takes a Herculean effort much of the time. It means narrowing down the world to the person in front of you, ignoring the demands of the rest of the world, and opening yourself as a conduit for the Holy Spirit. It means becoming a sentinel soldier at the tomb of their losses and pain. But it is an effort that can be life changing and soul lifting for both of you. As someone once said, "To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world."

Jesus and the Holy Spirit dwell within us, but we are their face and their hands in the world. Together, we can bring comfort and peace to those around us. Together, we help our brothers, our sisters, and ourselves experience the joy and love of the risen Christ. Take the time to be a parklete to someone- an advocate, a comforter, a counselor, a friend, or a helper. Write it in your day planner if needed to remind you of the importance of being truly present beside someone. When we do this for each other, honoring and remembering the losses and pain in our lives, we allow the Holy Spirit to start spreading seeds of peace. We become Christ, allowing us to feel the loving arms of Jesus enfold us and to know the healing power of His love.

Amen.