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Grace Bible Church
May 29, 2011

No Greater Love
John 15:13 & Selected Scriptures

The History of Memorial Day

Today is the traditional day for Memorial Day and tomorrow is the observed holiday. Back in 1971 the observed day was changed from the traditional day of May 30 to the last Monday in May. The main importance of the traditional day now is the personal reason that my wife, Diane, was born on that day. As a consequence while growing up, her birthday was always celebrated with a picnic which is something we still try to do.

I suppose for most people Memorial Day has become simply a kick off to the Summer season of barbecues, picnics and outdoor activity. Congress purposely moved it to a Monday so it would make a long holiday weekend. That has been good for business, both recreational enterprises for obvious reasons and industrial concerns since it is less expensive for them to shut down at the start or end the week rather than mid-week.

Sadly, it would seem most people have forgotten the actual reason Memorial Day became a holiday. It was still often referred to as Decoration Day when I was a kid, but maybe that is because I had a great-grandma that was a member of the G.A.R. - the Grand Army of the Republic - but I get ahead of myself.

Our national observance of Memorial Day dates back to 1868, when General John A. Logan, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic named May 30th as a special day to honor the graves of Union soldiers. (The G.A.R. was an organization of Union veterans of the Civil War which existed until the mid 1950's). General Logan's order was that the day was "*designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion.*" Hence, it was also called Decoration Day. The selection of May 30th is attributed to a Virginian of French descent, Cassandra Oliver Moncure, who may have selected this date because it was "*The Day of Ashes*" in France - the day that Napoleon's remains were returned to France from St. Helena.

There is debate as to the location and date of the first observance of a Memorial Day in the United States. Some claim the custom of honoring war dead began in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania. Others claim the custom was originated by some Southern women who placed flowers on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers after the War Between the States. One writer states the first Memorial Day service took place on May 30, 1866, on Belle Isle, a burial ground for Union soldiers in the St. James River, at Richmond, Virginia. The school superintendent and the mayor planned the program of hymns and speeches and had the burial ground decorated with flowers. The Federal Government eventually got into the debate and in 1966 proclaimed that the birthplace of Memorial Day was Waterloo, New York on May 5, 1865 due to the people there honoring soldiers who had died. While the Federal government seems to think it has the power to make final decisions for everyone, the truth is that history is what it is regardless of what government thinks of it or even whether people actually remember it or not. God knows what happened, and according to the book of Revelation He keeps the books on the life of everyone. It is also true that people throughout history have observed days of remembrance for all sorts of reasons including the deaths of those who died in war. My reason in mentioning the history of Memorial Day is that traditions and holidays tend to change over time, and if we are not careful, the reasons for them can be lost all together.

The observance of Memorial Day was started in this country in remembrance of those who died in the War between the States. Since that time, those who have sacrificed their lives in the service of our nation in any war have been added, and since 9/11, there has been more mention of those who have died

in the line of duty in emergency services such as Fire, Police, Rescue and Medical personnel. From my own point of view, those additions have been good and in harmony with the original purpose of setting aside the day. I am glad that all of you have joined us today for our special service of remembrance of those who have given their lives for the sake of others. I also hope that you will take part in one of the local civil ceremonies that will occur tomorrow. We have listed several of them in the bulletin - and be sure to take your children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

The Importance Remembering

I mention this because it is up to us to teach the next generation the meaning of the day. They need to learn our history and the sacrifices that have been made for the freedoms they enjoy - and all too often take for granted. The future of any nation demands that its citizens have a sense of history and their place in it. In my own case, it is part of my family heritage in both the many that have served in the armed forces and those that have died doing so. My uncle, Joseph Jessie Harris, was a Seaman, Second Class, and died 7/27/1944 from wounds received the day before while operating an LST during the invasion of Guam. I never knew him, but my older brother was named after him and his brothers and sisters have made sure he has been remembered by teaching their children and grandchildren about him. I also had three of my direct ancestors as well as many kin die in the War Between the States - those great-great grandfathers were Thomas Allday (10/2/1862), Joseph Jay (12/25/1862) and Benjamin Lewis Harris (8/3/1864). Perhaps my family heritage makes this day more important to me personally, but the reality is that every citizen of the United States shares in that same heritage for the ~667,000 who have died in battle, along with the ~674,000 who died from other causes while in military service and the over 1,500,000 that have been wounded and 40,000+ that are still missing has been the high price paid in gaining and preserving our freedoms as well as protecting and liberating those in other nations.

I will contend that failure to remember and honor the sacrifices by those who have gone before us will of necessity lead to a failure to preserve the very things for which they died. Freedom is not free, and those who recognize its cost will continue to pay its price so that it is preserved while those who do not will not and so will lose it. Ignorance of our heritage plays a key role in the turmoil that is currently shaking our nation. That is why it is good for you to be here today and to take those from the next generation to one of the ceremonies that will take place tomorrow.

It is also important to set aside time to remember the sacrifices that have been made for us for it is also part of our worship of God. When we set aside time and participate in activities that will cause us to think about the past, we gain a sense of the moving of God's providential hand which in turn gives us a greater confidence as we face the future. This is as true for nations now and it was true for the ancient nations. Such a remembrance is even a central aspect of our worship of the Lord Jesus.

Memorials in Scripture

Setting aside days or objects of remembrance are nothing new. There are many of them referenced in both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures for a variety of particular purposes. For example, in Genesis 9:8-17 God established the rainbow as the sign of His covenant with Noah that He would not flood the earth again to destroy all flesh. It was a reminder of both God's judgment in the past and His promise for the future.

In Exodus 12 & 13 the Lord brings about His last plague upon Egypt which resulted in Pharaoh finally releasing the children of Israel from their enslavement. The first born would be killed unless the blood of a lamb was spread on the doorposts and lintel in which case the angel of death would pass over that house. The Lord then established the Feast of Passover as a yearly reminder of this event and the freedom that resulted from it.

Joshua 3 records the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River on dry ground. God directed the Levites to carry the Ark of the Covenant into the river and as their feet touched the river, the water

stopped flowing and the riverbed became dry. A man from each tribe then collected a large stone from the middle of the river bed and these were stacked on the opposite side of the Jordan as a memorial. The purpose was specifically so that when future generations of children would ask about the stacked stones, the story of the crossing could be retold. It was important to remember their history.

The book of Esther records the plot of Haman, a high official in King Ahasuerus' court, to annihilate the Jews living in Persia. The plot was reversed by the efforts of Queen Esther, and the Feast of Purim, which is still celebrated to this day, was established to remember the story.

Graves were a common sign and place of remembrance in ancient Israel and they still are in many societies. Abraham established the cave of Machpelah as the grave site for his family and it became a place of memorial for him and his descendants. Jacob was too far away from the family burial site when Rachel died, so he set up a pillar over her grave to mark it and cause her to be remembered. The Kings of Judah that were good were buried in particular royal tombs in Jerusalem where they would be remembered while those that were evil such as Asa, Jehoram, Ahaz and Joash were not.

Memorials were not just prompted by particular days or sites, but also in what was written. King David wrote both Psalm 38 and 70 for the express purpose of being a memorial of what God had done. The same is actually true in our own society. There are particular days of remembrance such as Memorial Day. There are particular sites of remembrance such as cemeteries, battlefields and museums. There are particular objects to cause remembrance such as monuments and historical signs. And there are songs, ballads, books and poetry about things that should be remembered. We have already done that this morning and will do so again before our service ends.

In the New Testament we find that a central ceremony of worship is done as a memorial. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul explains the purpose and procedure of the Lord's Supper or Communion. He explains its history and its meaning by citing Jesus' very words concerning it. Jesus said that both the bread, which represented His body, and the cup, which represented His blood, were to be partaken "*in remembrance of Me*" (vs. 24-25). This ceremony of memorial is observed by His followers as a proclamation of His death until He comes (vs. 26).

Reasons to Remember

There are multiple reasons to set aside a day to remember those who have died. I have already pointed out some of these. There is the national reason of remembering the high cost of maintaining our political freedoms. This both honors those who have made that ultimate sacrifice and helps encourage people in the present to be diligent to maintain those freedoms. That in itself is enough reason to have a national Memorial Day and even more so for those that did willingly join in the fight for such grand reasons. They yielded their lives to establish and protect political concepts that would benefit others.

We honor the history of the origin of our nation, however, if we are honest about history we quickly recognize that many of those who died were not fighting for or to protect our political freedoms. During the American Revolution there were few that had any clear vision about what future freedoms might arise by taking up arms against Great Britain. Many fought out of simple self-defense of home and hearth as England treated the Colonies more as foreign lands to be invaded and subdued than as fellow citizens. It was much more simple, visceral and pragmatic for them than for lofty ideologies that were still fuzzy concepts to most people.

We must also acknowledge that many that have died in our nation's wars have done so under the duress of being pressed into military service against their will. There have been various drafts over the course of our national history that has forced men into military service. They were not being motivated by high ideals. Should such men also be honored? By all means, yes. These men were someone's relatives - husband, father, uncle, brother, nephew and should be remembered by their family - as is the case with my late uncle Jessie. Society should also remember and honor them. The individuals so drafted may or may not have agreed with the purpose of conflict in which they died, but regardless, they did not

shirk the responsibilities placed upon them. It may not have been something they wanted to do, but they did it anyway and in the process lost their lives and so should be remembered and honored by our nation.

And while American patriotism is a hallmark of Memorial Day, there is another side to this that should be acknowledge as something of high nobility. Many of those who have died in wars our nation has fought have died on foreign soil seeking to provide or protect the freedoms of foreign peoples. In some cases, the enemies we were fighting have not been a direct immediate threat to our nation, but rather ideological and / or long term threat. Because of that there have been strong political views about the wisdom of such wars. However, regardless of political views, those who have sacrificed themselves for the benefit of people in foreign lands should remembered and commended. Frankly, I find it extremely disgusting when people allow their political views about a conflict to be demonstrated with any kind of disrespect to those who have or are serving in our military forces. Such people have my utter contempt and they need to keep their political views in the political arena whether it is about a past or present conflict. Our men and women in uniform in the service should be given respect and honor.

I think I should also point out that 50.2% of military deaths have been from something other than direct battle action. Things such as training accidents, equipment failure, weather conditions, disease and inadequate medical care have been as deadly as the enemy. Those who have died from such things should be remembered and honored as much as those who have died from a bullet or shrapnel from a shell or bomb. The dangers in the rear lines may be statistically much less than those on the front lines, but death and injury are still part of the risk and they have claimed a multitude of victims among those who have served in those capacities.

From my reading of military history for over five decades, I have found another general truth about those on the front lines. Regardless of the grand ideologies, concepts of freedom or even threat to home and hearth, when the shooting starts, the general reason for shooting back is self preservation and trying to protect your buddies that are on the line with you. Jesus Himself commended this type of sacrifice. In John 15:12-13 Jesus said, "*This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.*"¹³ "*Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.*"

The stories of those who have died in demonstrating this kind of love abound. Those who volunteer for dangerous assignments or take up the most dangerous position to give the rest of their unit a greater chance. Those who have shielded others with their own bodies as bullets flew and bombs went off. Those who charged an enemy position to try to protect their friends by eliminating the enemy or drawing fire away from their buddies. Those who have demonstrated a greater concern for those they love than for their own life. There may even be those that are here today only because someone else took the hit and paid the price instead of them. It is this very reason that causes the vast majority of those who have done some heroic deed and survived to down play it as just doing their duty. They were only doing what others were also doing for the same reasons and some of those were not coming home alive.

Jesus' statement is a tautology, a proverbial statement of self evident truth. What is more precious on earth to any sane human than their own life? There is no material gain or position of power that anyone would trade for it since wealth and power are worthless to those who are dead. Some might trade their life to gain a moment of fame to be written into the history books, but that is actually a rather silly effort since such fame would be without benefit to them. The value of human life is so high that the value of other things can only be compared to it and hence Jesus' statement. The great value of a friend is demonstrated when one yields their own life to extend the life of that friend and such action is only generated out of great love.

What is the response of someone who has had someone else lay down their life for them? Extreme gratitude. That is why Memorial Day has always been such a important holiday among veterans and especially those who have served on the front lines as compared to the rest of the general population. Many of them personally know the price someone else paid that has allowed them to live. They desire to remember and honor those who have gone on before them. That is our desire this morning.

As a country we remember and are grateful for the precious freedoms we have enjoyed over the course of our country's history because there were so many who risked it all and those who paid the ultimate price to procure them. As a society we remember and are grateful for the lives we have been able to live in safety because of those who placed life and limb in jeopardy and those who lost their lives to secure that safety for the rest of us. As a nation we remember and are grateful for the harmony we can have with other nations because of the many who have placed themselves in harms way and those who have died in defeating evil rulers and bringing freedom to the people they were oppressing. As individuals we remember and honor family members, friends, loved ones and buddies who have been killed in not only our nation's military actions, but also emergency responders - police, fire, rescue, and medical personnel who have died in the line of duty. We have not forgotten them and we honor them.

The Greatest Love

As great a love as it is for a man to lay down his life for his friends, there is one person that has demonstrated an even greater love. Jesus continued in John 15:14-17 telling His disciples, ¹⁵ “*No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.*” ¹⁶ “*You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and [that] your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you.*” ¹⁷ “*This I command you, that you love one another*”

This statement in itself is wondrous since Jesus, the son of God, is saying this to His disciples who are mere humans. Jesus came to earth and became friends with humans and promised to reveal God the Father to them. Perhaps we can understand Jesus dying on behalf of His disciples since they were His friends for that would parallel what has been seen in the lives of men who have died in trying to protect their family and friends. However, Jesus' love went beyond this.

In Romans 5:7 the apostle Paul stated “*For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.*” This would seem to be a slightly higher level of sacrifice and love, and yet something humans have demonstrated in rare incidents of being capable of doing. This is the theme of Charles Dickens book, “*A Tale of Two Cities,*” in which Sydney Carton eventually takes the place of Charles Darnay at the guillotine in revolutionary France because Sydney values Mr. Darnay as a good man compared to himself. But Jesus' love goes beyond this too.

Can there be a love greater than a man laying down his life for his friends or someone dying in the place of a good man? Yes, but no mere human would do so, it would take God in human flesh to do it. Paul states in Romans 5:8, “*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” There may be the rare individual who might dare die for a righteous or a good man if he could be found, but who would die for sinners? Or let me ask the same question in this manner. What is the treatment that is usually given to an avowed enemy? Perhaps in the general bond that can exist between all soldiers because of common hardships there can be some general respect and kindness shown to a captured soldier, but what about towards an enemy soldier that is still fighting? A good soldier out of love for his buddies might put his life on the line for their benefit, but would he do so for the benefit of his enemy? Yet, that is what Jesus did. His death was not just on behalf of His friends. He willingly made Himself the sacrifice needed to redeem, cleanse and reconcile sinners with God.

Understand that sin is more than just missing the mark of God's perfect will. Sin is also enmity or hatred against God for it is solidly set against God's holy and just laws (Romans 7:12; Ephesians 2:15-16). The Apostle James made it clear that friendship with the world is hostility toward God (James 4:4), and Paul explains in Romans 8 that everyone who is in the flesh cannot please God for the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God. Yet, Jesus came and fulfilled the requirement of the law by becoming the sin offering which would allow all those who believe to be forgiven and walk in His spirit instead of the flesh. That is what the gospel message is all about.

Everyone of us was born in sin and practiced sin bringing us under God's just and holy condemnation to death and eternal separation from Him in Hell for the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). None of us could have any hope of getting an acquittal, a pardon or even a reduced sentence on our own merit for even our righteous deeds are as filthy rags before the Holy God (Isaiah 64:6). Nothing else and no one else could be our substitute for either they stood condemned themselves, as the case for every other human, or they were not of equivalent worth as is the case for every animal sacrifice which is why the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin (Hebrews 10:4). It would take God Himself becoming a man in Jesus Christ to then willingly die as the substitute for us. His life for our life that we might be forgiven and reconciled with God the Father.

This forgiveness is extended to all that will believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to them is given the right to also be called the children of God because they are adopted into His family (John 1:12f). The manner of life of those who believe will change as a result of the work of the Spirit of God enabling them to live according to a new purpose in life. Earlier I asked what the response would be toward someone who laid down their life for their friend and the answer was extreme gratitude. How much more then this same response toward Jesus who laid down His life for you while you were a sinner and at enmity with Him? A Christian strives to live a life of holiness out of honor and respect for Jesus who died for Him as well as a consequence to the truth that comes with believing in Him. God's ways are better than our own ways in the present and it is much wiser to live with eternity in view than just the present time. As Moses expressed in Psalm 90, even if you live to be 80 or more, your life on this earth is still fleeting for it is soon gone and you fly away. Are you ready for eternity?

Those who believe have Jesus' promise of eternal life (1 John 5:11-12), however, those that will not believe remain in their sin and under God's condemnation (John 3:18f). In the end, the only thing that will be important will be your relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ for that will determine your eternal destiny.

Today and tomorrow we give special recognition to those who have died for the cause of freedom or in the effort to protect others. What they have done is noble and should be remembered and honored, and we who have received the benefits of their sacrifice should be thankful. However, we also call on all men everywhere to remember, honor and give respect to the Lord Jesus Christ above all for He demonstrated the greatest love for all men and He extends the greatest benefit to all who will believe in Him. If you do not know Him and have an assurance you will spend eternity with Him in heaven, then talk with myself or any of our church leaders and we will be glad to show you from the Scriptures how that can be possible. The Apostle John stated, "*These things I have written unto you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life*" (1 John 5:13).

I recall a story that came out of the War between the States in which a couple of young soldiers were overheard praying that if there were those in their company that must die in the coming battle, that it would be them for they knew the Lord and were prepared for eternity, and that God would be merciful to spare their comrades in arms that they might yet repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Such is the heart of a true Christian. May each Christian here live with a similar sacrificial mind-set and may God be merciful to grant repentance to those who have not yet believed to be redeemed from their sins and reconciled to Him.

Sermon Notes - 5/29/2011 -
The Greatest Love

The History of Memorial Day

National observance dates to _____ and G.A.R. General Logan's designation of May 30 to decorate graves

There are conflicting claims to the location and date of the _____ observance of a Memorial Day

The Federal government declared Waterloo, NY, May 5, 1865 as the birthplace, but truth belongs to _____

The purpose of Memorial Day has _____ over the years - all wars, emergency service personnel

The Importance Remembering

It is up to each generation to teach the next generation its _____ or it will lose its future

We all share in the _____ of the ~667,000 who died in battle and ~674,000 + who died of other causes

Failure to remember & honor them will result in failure to _____ the causes for which they died

Taking time to remember is part of worship & a reminder of _____ providential hand in history & future

Memorials in Scripture

The _____ established as the sign of God's covenant to never destroy the earth again by flood (Gen. 9)

_____ established as a yearly reminder of God's hand in the Exodus (Exodus 12-13)

The 12 stones set up as a memorial to God enabling them to cross the Jordan on _____ ground (Joshua 3-4)

The book of Esther records the origin of the Feast of _____ - a yearly reminder of God's mercy

Graves and monuments were _____ of those who had died and their importance

Psalms and books were written as reminders and _____

_____ is a ceremony of memorial of Jesus death and promise of return (1 Corinthians 11)

Reasons to Remember & Honor

Nationally - to remember & honor those who have died & encourage diligence to _____ our freedoms

To remember & honor the origin of our nation in the men who fought against England's _____

To remember & honor our _____ and relatives

To remember & honor men of _____ who fulfilled the responsibilities placed upon them

To remember & honor those who have sought to provide or protect freedom of _____ peoples

To remember those who died in battle as well as the _____ that died from other causes

To remember those that died trying to _____ their buddies and other men in their unit

John 15:13 - “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

Jesus’ statement is a tautology, a proverbial statement of self evident _____.

The response toward someone who has made sacrifice on your behalf is extreme _____

We remember & honor those who have died and with _____ acknowledge the benefits they gave us

The Greatest Love

John 15:14-17 - a wondrous statement that Jesus, the son of God, would say this to mere _____

Romans 5:7 -

Romans 5:8 - The _____ love ever demonstrated

Sin is missing the mark of God’s perfect will - it is also _____ against God and His just commands

Jesus fulfilled the law and paid the _____ of sin by His own death on the cross

Man cannot escape God’s condemnation by any effort of _____ - Rom. 6:23; Isa. 64:6; Heb. 10:4

Forgiveness & reconciliation with God is offered to all that will _____ in the Lord Jesus Christ

He who has the Son has _____ life; those that do not believe remain condemned (John 3:16-21)

We honor all those who have died on our behalf, but _____ the Lord Jesus Christ

KIDS CORNER

Parents, you are responsible to apply God’s Word to your children’s lives. Here is some help. **Young Children** - draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. **Older Children** - Count how many times the terms “remember” or “memorial” is used. Discuss with your parents the significance of Memorial Day to the nation, to them and to you.

THINK ABOUT IT!

Questions to consider in discussing the sermon with others. What is the origin of Memorial Day in the United States? In what ways has the purpose of the day changed over the years? Considering the actions of most people, what do they think Memorial Day is about? How many military personnel have died from all causes during the course of U.S. history? What war caused the most casualties? Why is it important to observe Memorial Day and teach the next generation the nation’s history? What are some of the significant memorials established in the Scriptures - including days of observance, places, ceremonies? What is the relationship between Communion and a memorial? What are some of the more significant reasons to observe Memorial Day? Why should those who have died be remembered and honored? Recount or find a story of someone in the military that fulfilled John 15:13. Why is human life so valuable? What should your response be toward those who sacrificed themselves on your behalf? Do you know of any stories in which someone died on behalf of a righteous or a good man? How does Jesus’ love demonstrated to be the greatest love? What is sin and what are its consequences? Can a man make himself right with God by his own means? How or why not? Why did Jesus die on the cross at Calvary? What benefit does this extend to mankind? How can that benefit be applied to you personally? Is it applied? If not, why not and what danger do you face? According to 1 John 5:13 it is possible to know that you have eternal life - do you have it? If not, how can you receive it? What will you do to observe Memorial Day?