

DECORATION DAY

May 25, 2008

Burlingame UMC P. David Schlager

Luke 11:37-44

Revelation 20:11-13

A number of years ago I was called by a funeral home to perform a graveside service for a man who had no church affiliation.

One of his children from another state was United Methodist and requested a UM pastor.

I called one of the sons of the man so I could get some information about the deceased. I was told that.

there would be few people attending

He was divorced, and the ex-wife was deceased.

He had five children, only two would be there.

The son was rather blunt.

I hated my father. He was a violent and abusive drunk.

He abused all of us regularly.

He sexually abused my sisters and beat my mother.

He died of liver damage from all the drinking.

I don't care what you say at the service.

Just make sure he is buried.

So there I was. On a hot spring afternoon, on a memorial day weekend.

I was officiating at a graveside service

for a man who in his life who did more damage than good.

I did the service and said a few words about

the mystery of God's grace

and prayed for his forgiveness and the healing of his family.

Normally, when I say the benediction the service is over.

The casket is usually lowered into the grave after the family has left.

But the two children said,

We want it lowered in the ground, We need to know he isn't faking this.

So the casket was *lowered into the grave.*

As it was being lowered his daughter and son cheered.

Dirt was shoveled on the grave.

As the son left, he spit into the grave.

As I walked across the cemetery to my car

*I witnessed a young woman and two little children at a grave
weeping and placing flowers on the grave of her husband.*

I saw Boy Scouts placing American flags

on the graves of all the veterans buried in that local cemetery.

It's Decoration Day, 2008.

When I grew up, *my family didn't call this "Memorial Day" weekend;*

*it was Decoration Day—an occasion of visiting family graves,
decorating them with flowers,*

*maybe planting a small flag at the grave of loved ones
who had served in our nation's armed forces.*

I wonder how many of us

will actually decorate a grave this Memorial Day weekend?

We're more likely to go to a shopping mall.

I suppose there may be lots of factors for this change.

In another era, people lived and died in the places they were born and raised.

*Your kin were buried in a family plot on the edge of town
or at your local church.*

So, on Decoration Day, you might have the noon meal with the folks,

take some flowers to the cemetery,

decorate grandma and grandpa's graves,

maybe an uncle killed in the war,

then come home and take a nap.

It would take Jane and me the better part of a week and a couple of jet flights

and a lot of driving to get around to the graves we'd like to decorate.

My relatives on my father's side are buried in north eastern Missouri.

My Mother's side of the family are buried in St. Louis

My Father is buried in Santa Rosa.

Jane's father's ashes are scattered off a pier in Redwood City
Her step father's ashes are scattered near lake Tahoe.

Of course, having our own cemetery on the grounds
is not an option for a church like Burlingame UMC
It was a struggle just getting permission to put up a sign out front.

But, as a person who has no idea where I myself may be buried,
don't be shocked if someday I come in here
with a proposal to build a columbarium,
That is a vault with niches for urns containing ashes of the dead.
a modern-era equivalent of the old church graveyard.
I like the idea of the congregation offering cradle-to-grave ministry;

I figure such an endeavor could be self-supporting financially.
Consider the possibilities for what the Bible images as the end of days!
Hey, great to see you!

I suspect *there are a lot of people like myself,*
geographically rootless, with no ties to any particular "place,"
who might welcome such an option.

Don't you dare leave here this morning saying, *what a dumb idea!*
Again, we'd be *talking self-supporting,*
and the idea is just a glimmer in my eye.
But you might tuck it away for the future.

Call it *Memorial Day, Decoration Day*— by either name,
this weekend's observance has its roots in the Civil War era.

When the civil war started *neither side had any idea how long the war would last*
nor *how many lives it would cost.*

They didn't have a plan for treating casualties
nor for *dealing with the hundreds of thousands of dead bodies.*

I have been reading a very interesting book entitled,
"This Republic of Suffering" by Harvard Historian Drew Gilpin Faust
She writes

*As late as Second Bull Run, in August 1862, a Union division took the
field without a single ambulance available for removal of casualties,"*

Faust writes.

*"Burying the dead after a Civil War battle
seemed always to be an act of improvisation."
Two and a half weeks after the horrible battle at Antietam,
unfathomable numbers of corpses lay unburied,
stacked in rows a thousand long
or still scattered about the field.
Coffins were practically unheard of;
no provision of any kind had been made by military authorities.*

*A Union surgeon who took upon himself responsibility for burying
"those he could not save" after Gettysburg
had to send out a foraging party to locate a shovel.*

In that war over 40 percent of the dead were never identified
and buried in anonymous graves.

So their families never knew what happened to their loved ones.

*Nor had provision been made for notifying families
of the deaths of husbands, sons, brothers.*

*The chaotic record-keeping led to many heartrending incidents
of survivors of battles erroneously reported dead, or vice versa.*

"I read my own obituary," recalled a Confederate soldier.

Union private Henry Struble,

was misidentified as a soldier killed and buried at Antietam.

*So he laid flowers on the grave of the unknown soldier
occupying his place every year afterward on Memorial Day.*

*Soldiers and families alike tried hard to cling to the Victorian notion
of the "Good Death," so much so, observes Faust,*

*that "letters describing soldiers' last moments on Earth
are so similar it is as if their authors had a checklist in mind."*

*In the mid-19th century, a dying person was expected
to pass away surrounded by family,*

*conscious of and at peace with his impending fate,
reconciled to his Maker,*

leaving inspiring last words to be remembered by.

*War, especially modern war, shattered all those assumptions.
In modern war death was often unpredictable,
excruciatingly painful, absurd and squalid,
the dying departing full of fury and agony.
It came far from home; and when delivered by explosive artillery shell,
it sometimes did not even leave any identifiable remains.
A man could be literally "blown to atoms,"
wrote a Union chaplain at Gettysburg –
a fate, Faust observes, that civilians found incomprehensible.*

My dad loved studying the Civil War.

He felt it was the war that defined so much of us as a nation.

*He spent one whole summer following the route
that his great grandfather's unit took
from Illinois all the way to the battle of Atlanta.*

At the **Battle of Stones River** in Tennessee the North and South met
around the New Year from December 31 1862- Jan 3, 1863.

Both Sides celebrated the New Year by bands playing and singing songs to each other.
They all joined in by singing "**Home Sweet Home**" Together.
Then they went out and killed 15,000 men in the next three days.

At that battlefield most of the graves are marked "**Unknown**".

For decades after the war, well into the 20th century
every so often another body would be found on the old battlefield,
bubbled up out of the earth,
planted back into the ground as another "**unknown.**"

I think of all the **unknown, unmarked, long since forgotten** of the human race,
who were once as alive as I am, but have long since passed, as I must pass,
and I sort of feel like grass myself past halfway in my sixth decade now,
the blowing wind of time sometimes has a distinct chill.

Now, if you came from a culture in which it was customary
to die near home surrounded by loved ones,

what do you do when don't know if your son is dead or alive?

What do you do when you don't have a grave to decorate and to remember?

Following the end of the Civil War Decoration day sprung up all over the south.
Many communities set aside a day to mark the end of the war
and decorate the graves of Confederate War dead.

The first Memorial day was observed in 1865
by liberated slaves at the historic race track in Charleston.
The site was a former Confederate prison camp
as well as a mass grave for Union soldiers who had died while captive.
A parade with thousands of freed blacks and Union soldiers
was followed by patriotic singing and a picnic.

At that same time General Logan the principal speaker
in a citywide memorial observation on April 29, 1866,
at a cemetery in Carbondale, Illinois.
He had been impressed by the way the South honored their dead
with a special day and decided the Union needed a similar day.

Reportedly, Logan said that
*it was most fitting; that the ancients, especially the Greeks,
had honored their dead, particularly their heroes,
by wreaths of laurel and flowers,
and that he intended to issue an order
designating a day for decorating the grave of every soldier in the land,
and if he could he would have made it a holiday.*

Later on May 5, 1868, in his capacity
as commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, a veterans' organization
Logan issued a proclamation *that*
"Decoration Day" be observed nationwide.

It was observed for the first time on May 30 of the same year;
the date was chosen because it was not the anniversary of a battle..

When I studied in Europe I made a pilgrimage to the American cemetery in Normandy
above what is remembered as Omaha beach.

On June 6, 1944, Allied soldiers scrambled out of landing craft into the water,
under intense fire from German artillery entrenched on the high ground.

Those who survived as far as the beach then stormed the cliffs,
taking enormous casualties, but finally carrying the day.

On a bluff above the beach, is the cemetery,
row after row after row of white stone tablets,
marking the final resting place of those killed in the great battle.

In addition to over 9,000 graves, the names of some fifteen hundred others
are written on a wall; men who perished,
but whose remains were either not located or identified.

Same war; different theatre:

Last year, I read a book on Iwo Jima and the famous photograph
that inspired perhaps the best known of all World War II memorials.

I had assumed the raising of the flag signaled the end of the battle,
but in fact, the fighting on Iwo Jima had just begun.

Three of the soldiers in the picture-turned-memorial
were killed in the subsequent battle, among them Franklin Sousley.

Franklin Sousley hailed from a very rural community
in the hill country of Tennessee.

His mama, Goldie, didn't have a telephone;
the telegram announcing Franklin's death came to the Hilltop General Store.
A barefoot boy ran the telegram out to Goldie at the farm.

It is said that neighbors living a quarter mile away
heard her "screaming all that night and into the morning."

In preparation for this sermon I have been reading a book entitled
"Final Salute" by Jim Sheeler

The author spent two years shadowing Maj. Steve Beck,
a marine in charge of casualty notification,
as he delivered the news of battlefield death in Iraq to families.

Sheeler puts readers in Beck's shoes as he walks up to houses,
delivers the knock on the door so dreaded by military families
and tries to comfort distraught spouses and parents.

Sheeler powerfully tells the stories not only of the deaths of the marines,
like Marine Staff Sgt. Sam Holder,
who died while drawing enemy fire away from an injured comrade—
but he also follows the story as the grieving families
try to put their lives back together.

One of the most powerful stories is the notification
to Katherine Cathey of the death of her husband Lt. James Cathey.

*“When the knock came, Katherine 7 months pregnant,
was napping in her bedroom.
Her stepfather saw the Marines in dress uniform first.
“We’re here for Katherine,” the major said quietly.
“Oh, no,” Vic Leonard said.*

*At first her mother thought it was a salesman.
Then she saw her husband walking backward
and the two men in uniform.
And she started to cry, no, wail, a deep primal wail,
no one had ever heard her cry like that.*

*What’s going on? Katherine asked her stepfather.
“It’s not good,” Come with me.”*

*Her own screams began as soon as she saw the uniforms.
She ran back of the living room
and collapsed on the floor holding her pregnant stomach
and thinking of the man who never see their baby.
As the major and the chaplain remained on their on their feet
she glared at them.
She ran to the back of the house and drew a hot bath
For the next hour she sat in the tub, dissolving in tears.”*

The children left behind are often the most tragic figures:
the young son of army PFC Jesse Givens asks
if he can “be a little boy again” when he goes to heaven
so that he can play with his dad.

I read that book and thought of all those graves I had seen in Normandy.

It was such a quiet, tranquil place.

I had tried to image the sound guns and planes and mortars.

Now, I *imagined tens of thousands mothers and wives and children screaming and wailing in their loss.*

I have heard it said that,

our losses in Iraq the American death toll having passed 4,080,

really aren't so bad compared to other battles in other times and places.

From a purely historical point of view, that's certainly true.

**A single day of Civil War fighting, the Battle of Antietam,
claimed 3,650 dead.**

I read about war in my books; I visit the cemeteries.

I'm never sure how to think about the dead.

be it in a battle of 150 years ago, or one being waged right now.

**Are we to think in geopolitical terms, like Abraham Lincoln did when he said
in the Gettysburg Address**

***It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work
which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather
for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that
from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for
which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly
resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation,
under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of
the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.***

Is it enough to say

They died for our freedom?

Is there such a thing as acceptable losses for greater gain?

Or should we think in terms of grief and screams?

**That's what I think when I look at the Vietnam Memorial
with the 50,000 plus names there.**

Or are we to think that
*maybe it is better to have died for something,
rather than the deaths so many will die,
which amount to dying of nothing?*
Maybe we should think all the above?

What I'm sure of is this:

*We are not to think of our war dead as statistics,
but, rather, as children of the living God,
sons and daughters of our nation,
who laid down their lives
believing it was somehow worth it;*

*"No one," said Jesus,
"has greater love than this, than to lay down his life for his friends"
--and then do our utmost to be worth it.*

I have been following an interesting story for the last few years.

It seems that the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology at UC Berkeley
houses the remains of 12,000 native Americans
stored in drawers and cabinets
underneath a swimming pool at the University.

It seems that the University will release the bones
*only if they can be proved to be affiliated
to the particular tribe making the request.*

It seems the University *wants scientific proof*
and the Native Americans
*want all evidence including oral history and oral traditions
to be considered equally with archaeology
in deciding the preponderance of the evidence.*

How would you like your grandmas remains to be kept in a museum?

This situation led me to further reflections on the nature of the resurrection,
and the question the apostle Paul was asked by the church in Corinth,
"How are the dead raised?"

I imagine on the last day, 12,000 native Americans
finding themselves alive underneath a pool at UC Berkeley.

Forgive me, if that sounds foolish.

Paul said the *question of how the dead are raised is itself foolish,*
as in *unanswerable.*

Though that's never stopped me from wondering, myself.

But friends, let's be clear on this,

for it's at the core of the gospel message:

we serve a savior who has no grave, for he is risen.

And the promise made to Nicodemus two thousand years ago
is still promised today:

*"God so loved the world that he gave his only son,
that whoever believes in him might not perish,
but have eternal life."*

I don't pretend to understand the mechanics of how that works;

but I find great hope in the thought

*that even those who have gone into the earth as unknown are known to God
and death is not a period, but a comma.*

That's what we believe.

We read in the last book of Holy Scripture:

*"Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it;
the earth and the heaven fled from his presence,
and no place was found for them.*

*And I saw the dead, great and small,
standing before the throne, and books were opened.*

Also another book was opened, the book of life.

*And the dead were judged according to their works,
as recorded in the books.*

And the sea gave up the dead that were in it,

*Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them,
and all were judged according to what they had done." (Rev 20:11-13)*

On that day, *it won't matter if you rest in a fancy tomb or an unmarked grave,
at the bottom of the sea or a museum warehouse.*

In the scope of eternity,

*It won't matter how many things you had, how long you lived—
these are as the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime.*

Rather, each of us will be judged by
what we did with the life we were given.

In the story told at the start of this message
I wondered how the family decided what to do when their abusive father died.

Were the young man and his siblings
going to attend their father's funeral or not?
Or go just to go to the grave to spit on it.

Found myself imagining a grave bearing the name *P. David Schlager*,
born March 28, 1951, the date of death...fuzzy.

Perhaps you might imagine your own grave site. *Does the thought scare you?
Or can you look upon such an image with inner peace and assurance?*

Are you creating precious memories for *those who will remember you
or troubled ones?*

Are you among the many in this culture so concerned with outer things—
what people think, the size of your bank account—
that you've neglected your interior life.

When *the body has perished, it is the soul that will be judged.*

How's that shaping up for you?

Or have you maybe even forgotten that you have a soul?

Do you see yourself with a life beyond the tomb,

or is the best you can hope for to die in your sleep?

Friends, *our lives are short, like the breath of the buffalo in wintertime.*

Are you using your life to good purpose, or just taking up space?

However you answer any of the above, there is still time to make changes.

Though less now, than when this sermon began.

Amen.