



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Memorial Day Complications

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

May 29, 2011

It's been eleven years since my first Memorial Day sermon and it was memorable. I was serving as the Assistant to the Rector at Christ Church Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills, MI, a very wealthy community north of Detroit. I approached the preaching opportunity with ambivalence. To begin with, I was born on Hunter Air Force Base in Savannah, GA, on the 4th of July no less. So there is an inherent patriotism and connection to the military. But I also grew up in the 60s, the Viet Nam war had come through the television and into our living rooms. War was no longer a distant event sanitized in newsreels. And then I was in college at Ohio State University. I was a freshman in the spring of 1970 when four students were killed less than an hour away at Kent State University. I experienced riots and demonstrations from the inside as they tore through our campus. Dinner at the sorority house was a tense affair as half of the Tri-Delts had spent the day picketing the Administration Building and the other half were in their Angel Flight uniforms. Nothing felt clear.

When I turned 21, I cast my first vote for Richard Nixon, because my family had always been Republican. I remember that the campaign was focused on "we're at war and we have to win this war." There was no possibility of peace talks. Then as soon as he was re-elected, peace talks started and I was crushed. I had been so naïve that I didn't know that governments regularly played politics with lives. And then I saw the way the returning soldiers were treated and I know how many are still broken.

This was all before God had reached into my life and said from now on you will look at all things through the lens of Jesus. That did not make things easier. And then my boss said, "Sharon, you preach on Memorial Day weekend." I prayed and struggled and worked so hard to be honest and authentic, true to the Gospel and respectful of those who serve in uniform. I began with something like, "It's always dicey to ask a pacifist to preach on Memorial Day." That was as far as I got when the wife of the Junior Warden slammed down her prayer book and noisily gathered up her things from the pew and stormed out, huffing and snorting all the way. Christ Church Cranbrook has a very long center aisle so it was quite a production. There was nothing that I could do but go on. I preached my heart out. I think I even sang, "Where have all the flowers gone?" I said something about the best way that we can honor those who have died for their country is to work to see that no one else has to. When the service was over a retired

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Air Force bird colonel came and shook my hand and said, “you got it just right.” I’ve always been grateful for his words, not just because they validated my feelings and hard work, but because they demonstrated the many layered complexity of the situation.

On two Memorials Days, I stood in cemeteries outside of Paris, while ancient French veterans stood silently with their medals, faded flags and banners, paying homage to the young Americans who had come with their fresh faces and courage to liberate them, and died doing it. Regardless of what you hear about the French, they will never forget or ever stop loving those boys. The sight of those white stones covering the hillside was a powerful reminder of Jesus’ words that there is no greater love than to give your life for a friend.

And then in California, I served on the Board of Directors of Habitat for Humanity and we built a neighborhood of houses for veterans. I spent one day with a group of marines from Camp Pendleton as they worked on the houses. They told me that they were about to deploy to Iraq. They were kids and I wanted to grab each one of them, hold them tight and keep them safe.

“If you love me, keep my commandments.” And the central commandment that Jesus is talking about is, “Love one another as I have loved you.” These words from Jesus are never more challenging than when we disagree about big things. But it is during these very times, that we need to be held accountable for our love. Today’s Gospel is the promise of Pentecost, “If you love me, keep my commandments and I will ask the Father to give you another Advocate to be with you forever.” That Advocate is the Holy Spirit and it is called so many things, Advocate, Heavenly Dove, Spirit of Truth, or my favorite, the Comforter.

That Comforter has been slowly working on us and opening our hearts to each other and it’s on days like Memorial Day that you can really see it. When our troops came home from Viet Nam, they were greeted with the full fury of a divided nation and they were abused by crowds who behaved badly because they did not know what to do with their frustration and anger and powerlessness. Jesus’ commandment to love was drowned out.

Mike Dmytriw was a Marine in Viet Nam. He had the full experience, a long tour, dangerous duty, hostility when he came home. He was a member of my congregation in California; a tough guy with a heart of gold. As the Habitat project for the veterans was in the fundraising state, congregations were invited to take a special collection on Veterans Day. As a small congregation we knew that it might not amount to much so we decided to take a different tack. We would take a weekly collection from Memorial Day to Veterans Day and ask everyone to put in a dollar each time the hat came around – and Mike provided the hat. It was his helmet, with the green camouflage canvas covering. All of the battles he’s been in were written on it. On that first day we took the collection, and Mike brought it up with the regular offering plates, I lifted it up and then placed it on the altar. It was a moment of reverence and reconciliation. Mike talked of how something happened in his heart when he saw it there.

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Something happened in mine as well. I will always preach peace but I was so proud of us that day. The story of Mike's helmet was picked up by the newspaper and also by Habitat International. The picture that was run is in my computer and I treasure it. I shared the story with Colonel Seton, who was the Commander of Camp Pendleton, about the Marine helmet on the altar of the pacifist priest and he smiled. He said, "I think we've all grown up some." Thus an unlikely friendship grew between us. I think that the Comforter has been doing her job.

Perhaps one of the ways in which we are moved by the work of the Holy Spirit is in our ability to make distinctions. It may be in the distinctions that we come to that Spirit of Truth and learn how to love those with whom we disagree and even learn to love our enemies. We have learned how to make distinctions between policy and decisions and those sent to fight. We have learned that the distinctions that we make are important to the process of honoring those who have made such a sacrifice and of the direction into which our Christian faith would draw us.

Last week I preached about remembering and how it is such a part of the Christian life. This week we are called to remember our wars and those who died in them. For me the challenge is always to bring those two calls to remembering into the same moment and see what they have to say to each other. I will always hear Jesus first and look toward the time that we learn to do war no more. I truly believe that we will benefit more by the lives of our young people than by their deaths. We should always remember those lying beneath those white crosses on the hills and pray for a time when following the Prince of Peace will not be so complicated.

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