



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon May 30, 2021 Memorial Day Sunday “Remembering the Faith of Paul” Rev. David Jones

I have been learning this past week that many different towns and cities claim to have been home to the first Memorial Day observances. There are claims made in Pennsylvania and New York, and claims made all across the South. Each place seems to be locked in a competition for who was first to memorialize and decorate the graves of dearly missed soldiers.

It is very complicated to unpack what it means if this ritual and observance began in the North, for fallen Union soldiers and their cause, versus if it began in the South, among those who were still holding onto the awful cause of the Confederacy. It is very different to tell the story of this holiday if it was Rochester, Wisconsin that truly began it. Rochester--like Doylestown, Pennsylvania, like Grafton, West Virginia--claims to have the oldest, continually running Memorial Day parade. I like the idea that this important observance began in Rochester, Wisconsin. Rochester has a very New England sounding name--and that's because the first non-indigenous people to settle there were Congregationalist farmers from Vermont. Notably, all of the original five families that settled it were staunch abolitionists.

There is a certain moral clarity in this particular origin story for Memorial Day--a story where those who fought and died in the Civil War did so unmistakably for the cause of justice and freedom. Such moral clarity is unusual in war. But even in the absence of it, regardless of where our Memorial Day began, we can always be clear that the men and women who have died serving their country must be remembered; their names must be known, the lives that they led and might have led if not for war should be honored and preserved. Whatever grand thing--for good or for evil--is unfolding between nations, there is in every soldier, a beloved child of God, we can be clear of that. And there is a mother and father who may not see their child grow old; or there is a child who may not see a parent grow old, who will have to cling to old photographs like keys to memories. Our holiday tomorrow is the occasion to honor and preserve all who have served and all who serve now, and especially those who have lost their life or been injured in this service. We must remember and tell their stories of sacrifice and suffering.

Sacrifice and suffering are important words around Memorial Day, and they are very important words in Christianity. Like the origin of the holiday, these words' place in Christian faith is also complicated to unpack. The letter from Paul to the early Christians in Rome uses both of these words; in our short reading this morning Paul speaks about the “suffering of Christ”, and calls on the followers of Christ to suffer *with* Christ, and says that to do so is glorious. But this could mean so many different things, it is not at all clear in this passage what Paul means. I imagine it is not only those who gathered for our Bible study this past Thursday who react with discomfort and unease at these words. I think we are right to be wary of the harm that can be done--is done--in Paul's name, in the name of our scriptures, when these words are not given any context. So to understand what Paul does mean by this, to try to hear him more clearly, we need to know a few things about Paul.

Paul was a member of a Jewish diaspora community, and we know from Paul's own words and from the story of Paul told in Acts, that Paul was educated as a Pharisee. Now the word 'Pharisee' means *separated*, which tells us a little about who the Pharisees understood themselves to be. They were a closed community, intentionally separated from the great mass of the Jewish people. We often characterize them as a kind of religious elite, but this is misleading; the Pharisees' unyielding commitment to their religious

laws *did* often mean their community drew from the more educated classes, and from those who were more able to pay the tithe that was demanded by strict adherence to religious law, but, especially in the diaspora, Pharisees were rarely among the wealthy. And in fact, the Jewish people of the 1st century often appreciated the role the Pharisees played in limiting the power and influence of the Sadducees, their more powerful and authoritative rivals. In other words, the Pharisees were both set apart and relatively comfortable, *and* they were more familiar with and representative of the great mass of Jewish people than other leading social movements of the day. It was not wealth that gave them their elevated status, but rather the exclusionary religious practices they adopted--because obviously not all Jews could meet the strict and demanding social and financial obligations of perfectly following all the religious laws of the day. (Jesus, for example, appears to have been too poor to have received the kind of education that Paul did, and too poor to tithe to the Temple at the rates that the Pharisees in Jerusalem did). The Pharisees held that such failure to follow the law as zealously as they did, meant one was not in good standing with the God of Israel, it meant one was living in sin. And the Pharisees also held that no Gentile could ever experience salvation or deliverance by God, because they could never be included in the special covenant that was made exclusively between God and the descendants of Israel.

We also know that Paul was an artisan, and that, despite his association with the Pharisees, despite his education, he had to work around the clock to make ends meet. We know his work was often not enough, that he often went hungry. He lived in the chaotic, rapidly changing world of the 1st century, when the Roman empire was conquering new lands and subjecting nation after nation to their rule; under a banner promising "peace and security," the Romans sold conquered peoples into slavery, and they established a legal order based on ethnic and national discrimination. Jews living in the diaspora in Greek cities, for example, were not legally allowed during this time of Roman rule to own land. Certainly Paul had relative privilege as a freeborn person, he wasn't born into or sold into slavery; he worked in a shop building tents, not in some life threatening mining operation. But as a struggling artisan, he would have worked without rest and alongside all kinds of people, including slaves, workers, and wealthy clients. And later on, when he became a prominent Jewish Christian, often finding himself at odds with both Roman authorities *and* those leaders of the Christian communities in Jerusalem, he was repeatedly arrested, brought before the courts, and even imprisoned.

Perhaps, as someone who experienced such hardship and discrimination, right alongside experiences of relative privilege--perhaps Paul grew frustrated about his dual place in the world, and about a world that seemed to divide people into harmful religious and legal categories. Though he had not been to Rome when he wrote this letter to the Roman Christians, he did have many Roman associates, and he would have known that the inequality and discrimination between people was even more pronounced in the city of Rome. It is very likely that in this city of immense wealth and staggering poverty, that the earliest Christians had no choice but to worship in the poorest and least safe neighborhoods, in shantytowns not so different from the *barrios* of the Americas today.

At some point in his life it seems that Paul began to long for a community where Jew and Gentile, foreigner and Roman, slave and freeborn, poor and rich, could all live and be as equals. This was his hope for the church, that through it, the injustice borne by the flesh could be transformed into the practice of God's justice. Maybe he came to believe that in his very religious world, which seemed to have somehow come to imprison the truth itself in its laws, was totally lost. This is what he understood about the Cross, that Romans had put the truth to death, revealing that Roman law itself was condemned. And this is what he clung to about the Resurrection, that despite the injustice of the law, God would intervene with the new life of grace. That despite what the world tells us at every turn, the Spirit--God's presence within us--will yet throw open the prison doors, and we all can be set free in this life as in the next. That justice is not about hearing the law or reading it or teaching it, it is about *doing* it. Even someone like Paul, who once violently persecuted the Christians he now takes up with, is given to what Elsa Tamez calls 'the amnesty of grace.' For Paul, whether you have been a prisoner or the judge, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, a sponsor of inequality or its victim, we all have a place through our faith in transforming the injustice that *seems* to reign into the justice that truly does. And in this passage today the only criteria, the only key to this faith, is

to cry out to God like a parent, who has the affection and the love of the adoptive parent ready to embrace us. Through our faith, we are all adopted, we are all the beloved children of God, and more than this we are heirs to God, which is to say we are the heirs of love and justice here in our lives today, on earth as in heaven.

It is the spirit within us that knows how to cry, that dares to cry, that reveals to us the divine Spirit; in our cries, in our grief, in our hope for justice, the divine Spirit meets and mixes with the spirit in our bodies. Then if we are willing, like a Union soldier, to not just stand in judgment of others but to fight against the laws and the order of this world today in order to put justice into practice; to make the sacrifice, to endure the suffering if it can free the enslaved and free the truth and the people wrongfully in our jails, then we have suffered *with* Christ who suffered with us, and then we will see and know in our lifetimes the glory of the coming of the Lord, when justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Despite the claims of so many towns and cities across this country, north and south, the truth is, the yearning to commemorate fallen soldiers, to bless the gravesite with the colors and fragrance of blooming flowers, is really an ancient practice, as ancient as faith. As ancient as faith in peace; as ancient as the belief that there is life *after* death, that somehow our spirits will endure even as our bodies die. Whatever happens when we die--whether we gather as ourselves by a lake, or return to the earth as dust, whether we undergo some radical, unending change or find that our soul persists now out-of-time, death is not the end for those of us who still hold onto this most ancient faith. We will arrive at a place, or to a sensation, or to a consciousness that is without sacrifice and suffering. All that has lived, all that has been Created, is destined to ever-lasting life. The young person's life is not lost or forgotten, we do still see them and love them and trust that their spirit lives, both within us and beyond us. And in our grief, in our crying out to God, we might remember Paul, we might remember Christ, and the prophets of Israel before them and the prophets since them, who entrust us with the faith that where all our spirits meet, the divine Spirit brings new life to us not in heaven alone, but right here and right now on earth.

Alleluia and amen.