

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

Psalm 133:1

For as in one body we have many members and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Romans 12:4-5

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

Matthew 18:20

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Hebrews 10:24-25

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:18

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

1 Thessalonians 5:14

Our Quarrel With the Foe

Memorial Day was originally called “Decoration Day.” The practice of setting aside a special day for decorating graves dates back to 1865. In that year, in Charleston, South Carolina, a group of former slaves went to a place that had been a prison camp for Union soldiers during the Civil War, and they opened what had been a mass grave for the Union soldiers that had died in the camp. There, under the watchful and angry eyes of the citizens of Charleston, this group of men and women who had been freed by the efforts of the northern army dug

fresh, individual graves for the soldiers, then came back each year to decorate the graves, to give testimony by their actions, in order to keep alive the memories of the soldiers who had given their lives to buy the freedom of the oppressed.

Decoration Day was officially proclaimed in 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, and it was first observed on May 30, 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. By 1890 Decoration Day was recognized by all of the northern states, but the states in the South refused to

acknowledge the day, and chose to honor their dead on separate days until after World War I. Several southern states--Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, Texas and Tennessee—still have set aside a separate special day to honoring the Confederate war dead.

John McCrae was a Canadian doctor who was appointed to the Canadian army as a field surgeon in World War I, and after he witnessed a battle in Belgium, in which a friend was killed, McCrae wrote the poem, “In Flanders Fields.” The same year, Moina Michael, the American teacher who

promoted the idea to wear poppies to honor the war dead, wrote a responsive verse to McCrae's poem.

The poem, with her response, goes like this:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

We cherish too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led,
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies

Let's pray together. Father, we thank You for heroes. We thank You for all of those men and women who have fought valiantly, who have given too much, who have known great fear and great courage at the same time and who have pressed on toward glory. Teach us of courage, today, Lord, but also of honor, of truth, of real strength. In all that we say, do or think here, we ask that You would remind us each and all that the glory of our words,

our worship and our very lives is Yours, alone.

Amen.

Our scripture today, from Proverbs, is the spoken voice of Wisdom, thought by many to be the pre-Pentecost nature and character of the Holy Spirit. As the Word became Flesh in the person of Jesus, so it is believed that Wisdom became the Holy Spirit and poured herself out on the earth and God's people. And in this passage from Proverbs, Wisdom declares that She has been with God and of God since before creation, that She has lived and worked side-by-side with God forever, and concludes Her message this way:

when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

Wisdom declares that She has, with God,
rejoiced in this inhabited world and delighted in the
human race. I wonder whether She still delights in
us.

Today is a day set aside to honor heroes, and we
seek to do just that. We sing patriotic music, we
salute the flag, we remember acts of valor and we
decorate the graves of our veterans. We fondly
remember those who have gone before, and it is

good. But is that enough? Are the remembrances of this day sufficient to honor the men and women, boys and girls, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters who have sacrificed their lives for the freedoms we hold so dear?

I've been doing a lot of reading this year about war, mostly from books by Jeff Sharra. Two of the books were about the Revolutionary War, and one told the story of Molly Pitcher. In 1778, the Continental Army, a rag tag group of soldiers determined to bring independence and freedom to the colonies, was engaged in a battle with the British Army at Monmouth, New Jersey. The continentals

had captured some British artillery from a fort in Canada, and the army hauled these cannons from battle to battle through the northern colonies in an effort to match the firepower of what was considered to be the greatest army ever to march on the earth.

Now, it was not unusual, during the Revolutionary War, for the wives of soldiers to appear at the camps where their husbands served; after all, the war was being waged in the farm fields and wooded lands of their nearby neighbors. So it happened that Mary Hays, the wife of John Hays, appeared at Monmouth just as the fierce artillery battle erupted. The continental army had established

a fortified spot next to a creek, and had set its artillery between the British Army and the creek. It was a hot June day, and when the fighting started it got hotter. John Hays was a part of an artillery crew, and it was his task to ramrod the cannon after the powder and shell had been loaded to insure that the cannon would fire and send its fiery load into the heart of the advancing British. Seeing the difficulty of the conditions in which her husband and the others were working, Mary began running back and forth between the creek and the cannons, carrying water in a pitcher so that the men might drink it and maintain their strength. On one of these trips, Mary

looked over to see that John was lying across his cannon, having been struck down by musket fire from the British. And so this woman, untrained in war and its weapons, nonetheless picked up his ramrod and took up her husband's task, helping the crew fire the cannon until the British Army had been routed from the field. Legend has it that the commanding officer for the continentals rode up to her and, having seen all that she had done, bowed to her from his horse and proclaimed, "God bless you, Molly Pitcher, for your service to your country."

The story of Molly Pitcher may be true or it may be pure folklore; there is probably at least some truth

to the tale. But it provides a wonderful example of faithfulness to the call of our heroes to “take up our quarrel with the foe.” The cause of freedom stood in the breach, and this woman stepped into the shoes of her hero-husband to see the cause to at least a partial conclusion. We all can do that—we all are called to do it—and yet we are not required to take up arms to accomplish our task.

The United States of America is a story that is never completely written. The founders of our country were fearless, so fearless that they established a new form of government, one that guaranteed not only the right but the certainty of

continuous revolution. Our manner of government provides for ongoing revolution through regularly-scheduled elections of our leaders, through access for all people to the court system, and through the right of all people to express their opinions on the issues of the day. Periodic changes in direction and policy, in goals and in approaches to those goals, are to be expected. All voices are to be heard, disagreements aired, and then the decisions that have been made under the rule of law are to be honored.

There is an honor system to our government.

The freedoms we enjoy are bound up with responsibility not only to exercise them wisely but

also to safeguard them for others, even those with whom we disagree. For we understand, or ought to understand, that freedom denied to others will eventually result in freedom denied, period. And it is not just the government, but citizens, who can threaten these freedoms.

You see, what's bothering me today is the way that we Americans discuss the issues of the day; it is the way that we talk to and about each other. I wonder if it is delightful to God; I wonder if it honors the memory of our heroes. I've mentioned this before--the way that politics and economics and social issues are talked about, but also how the tenor

of those conversations spills over to other facets of our lives. Harsh and mean-spirited talk courses through the radio waves and over cable television. Attack journalism appears in magazines and on the internet. Some see this as politics-as-usual. Some like it because they hear and read the words of only those with whom they agree. They ignore the harm that flows from endless efforts to demonize those who disagree. Some say that it has always been this way in the United States, but, even if it has, the media today moves so fast and so insistently that every slanderous comment, every negative political ad, every insult, every sound bite is repeated and

analyzed and commented upon dozens of times daily.

I think it is a fair question whether this breakdown of civility in public issues is bad for our country. I am certain, though, that as Christians we must ask whether this incivility, this vitriol, this toxic way of expressing opinions is something in which our God delights. Is it Christian? Is it pleasing to God? Does this tone, this manner of speaking of and to one another, really reflect our attitudes toward each other and especially towards the least, the ones whom Christ favors?

My concern about public conversation in America increased dramatically when I read the remarks of a fellow on television named Glenn Beck. Maybe some of you know who he is. This fellow, a regular on one of the cable networks, has attacked the church and, in doing so, has distorted for his listeners the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Here's what he said on his television show:

"I beg you, look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!"

As he spoke these words, Mr. Beck held up two colorful cards. On one of the cards he had printed the symbol of Communism, the hammer and sickle; on the other he had made had a swastika. And then he said this:

"Communists are on the left, and the Nazis are on the right. That's what people say. But they both subscribe to one philosophy, and they flew one banner. . . . But on each banner, read the words, here in America: 'social justice.' They talked about economic justice, rights of the workers, redistribution of wealth, and surprisingly, democracy."

Social justice and economic justice are two of the fundamental tenets of the United Methodist Social Principles. We openly declare, as United

Methodists, our commitment to social justice and we state very specifically that we are committed to economic justice. And this man, who has a huge audience on a cable news network, says it means we are either communists or Nazis. Now, if anyone is troubled by the United Methodist Social Principles and our position on social and economic justice, please keep this in mind—Jesus is quoted in the Gospels talking about money at least thirty times, much, much more than any other subject He discusses.

I don't care whether Glenn Beck thinks that churches should or shouldn't preach social justice.

He is welcome to his opinion. We should welcome his disagreement with our positions; we should encourage open debate with him and everyone who disagrees with us. The point, though, is that he has used labels and name-calling to intimidate anyone who would disagree with him. These are names that no one in America wants to be called, and certainly not on the basis of our religious faith. It has become an art form in America to deny any legitimate basis for disagreement and to go for blood by attacking the character and the motives of those who disagree.

Name-calling has become the norm; respect for people and respect for ideas and respect for

institutions is lost. As though it is just too much work to really think about issues and ideas and to focus on the points about which we disagree. And after the show is over, then the audiences of these poison-doctors and hate-mongers repeat this slanderous name-calling as though it were the Gospel, itself.

Does it honor our heroes, the ones who have fought and suffered and died so that we might have our freedoms, to use free speech so abusively? Is there no obligation to respect one another and to express our disagreements with the understanding that the people who disagree with us may have

legitimate reasons for that disagreement? Does God delight in the things that are said and in the way they are spoken? Do we, as followers of Christ, have any responsibility to insist on civility and decency in the way that Americans speak to and of one another? Or are we allowed as Christians to divorce our “church” life from the life in which we form and share our thoughts and opinions, living and speaking one way here and another way when we express our opinions on the issues of the day?

The passage from Scripture today, a Proverb of Wisdom, reminds us that the Holy Spirit has been with God and of God since the beginning, and that

we are to pursue Her, to pursue wisdom, to think and

to act and to live wisely with Her guidance, in all

that we do. We are to seek the presence of the Holy

Spirit, not just when we are in church or when we

pray or when we read the Bible. We are to invoke

the Holy Spirit and to allow Her to work within us as

we eat and sleep and play and work. She is to be our

constant companion, even as we watch television or

listen to the radio or read the newspaper or go to the

polls to vote. She is to be woven into the tapestry of

our lives so that we she influences all that we do.

God sent the Holy Spirit, just as intentionally as He

sent Jesus to walk among us, so that we might have a closer connection with Him.

The heroes of our past speak to us through the words of the poet. They call to us:

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep....

Our quarrel with the foe. Our foes, as

Americans, have always been those who hate, those who oppress, those who deny freedom and who sow instead the seeds of slavery, tyranny and inhumanity.

Our foes have been those who denied fundamental truths of equality and of the great worth and sanctity

of each person's life. Our foes have been those who have chosen to dehumanize those with whom they disagree, who have chosen to anesthetize the conscience of the many, who have chosen to annihilate those who remained aware of evil and hatred. If we are to take up the quarrel with the foe, as our heroes have asked us, if we are to hold up their torch, if we are to keep faith with them so that they may sleep in peace, then we must first remember who the foe is. We must not become the foe. We must remember that we are a people of wide diversity, of great cultural differences, of many varying religious beliefs and of divergent opinions

about almost everything. Almost everything. For it is possible to share a common commitment to our nation, to be patriots, to stand side-by-side--in war, in response to natural disasters, in grief over losses—even as we disagree in our politics. We have the great gift of being able to disagree and yet, when we are threatened, to stand together in the name of all that is right about us. I think that God might delight in that.

There are some who would risk our unity, who would threaten our ability to stand together and to put disagreements aside, all in the name of total political victory, or even just in the name of higher

ratings. We must see that they and their perverted thinking do not prevail. Let us not resort to the ways of our foes as a means of winning political power and authority over one another. Let us instead pledge to treat our fellow Americans as partners, as equals, as co-inheritors of the legacy of our heroes, and let us insist that those who speak out on the radio, on television, in newspapers or on the internet--if they want us to listen--do the same. This is the way that we can honor our heroes, and can honor them much more wonderfully than by merely putting flowers on a grave. We can take up their quarrel with the foe. **God has blessed America. Let**

us strive to make our nation one in which He
delights.

Would you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the great gift of the country in which we live. We thank you for the valor of the men and women who have given their very lives that we might continue to live our lives free from oppression, tyranny and slavery.

Guide us, in all that we say or do, to treat one another with respect, no matter how much we may disagree on the issues of the day, and to speak to and one another in ways that are pleasing to You. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.