

“To Lay Down One’s Life” John 15:11-13

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, statistics as of the year 2000 inform us that just over 1,100,000 Americans have died in our nation’s wars.

Some 41,800,000 men and women have served in our nation’s armed forces from the Revolutionary War, through the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War - and now, the ongoing war in Iraq. Currently, just over 1,650 American soldiers have lost their lives in Iraq. The number is now at 1,651, as of this morning, I believe.

I have not served a day in the military. I was just a few years too young for the draft in the Vietnam era; though I clearly remember the lottery, and for a while there knowing what my draft number was, when that little white ball with August 15 would pop out and be selected.

I haven’t served in the armed forces, and best as I can figure it, the closest I’ve been to the armed service were in collegiate competitions against Army at West Point, and Navy in Annapolis.

I was also once on a troop transport train- full of Soviet troops traveling through East Germany - while I was living as a mission volunteer in Berlin, but that’s another story altogether.

Today, I want to recount, for you and for me, something of my families’ involvement in the U.S. armed forces - as a testimonial - a way of remembering for myself and maybe for you, what sacrifices have been made by so many for the sake of freedom and liberty, for family and for those untold others, in other land – those for whom Americans have fought and died.

I don’t know if my family has a very different story than yours - in terms of military service. I don’t know all the details of every relative of mine - great uncles and such - I’ll just go through some ... and invite you to listen in to make the connections you are able to.

I’ll share a series of vignettes - some pictures from the past - recollections of images I’ve gleaned along the way.

I can begin from my Uncle Glenn’s attic. After he passed away - about ten years ago now - a small pocket diary was found in a box, which recorded some of the events of the wartime experiences of Conrad Miller - my mother’s great-grandfather. He served in the Civil War - something we hadn’t known before then. The diary is very brief and sketchy - a few words about this and that. He enlisted in mid-1864, in the 76th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, at Easton, PA, where he walked, with his cousin, who also enlisted, and was quickly sent by rail here - to Baltimore, where he then sailed to Wilmington, NC- to occupy that city after the siege of Ft. Fisher (where, interestingly enough, Jackie’s parents now live-- and where her grandfather was the Pastor of the First Baptist Church, downtown.) Conrad and the 76th then marched northwest - to Raleigh - where he was discharged, on June 9, 1865.

Clearly, there’s no outstanding record of achievement - but nonetheless a trail of participation in the great conflict - and there’s also a discharge document - very elaborate/ornate, replete with very large

signatures certifying his service, that now hangs on the wall of my Aunt's farmhouse in the west end of Monroe County.

Next, I need to move along to stories from WWII, recounting the flying exploits of my Uncle, Foster Blair, who piloted a Mustang fighter plane off the U.S.S. Saratoga in the Pacific Theater. Though I don't know all that much about what he did there- he never really talked about it much, I've learned from his son, Foster Jr., that he was an ace; and I recall seeing a photograph of him standing next to his plane on the deck of an aircraft carrier when I used to stay at my grandmother's house. I also learned from my cousin that my Uncle never really recovered - emotionally - from an emergency crash landing he had to make on the carrier, when one of the restraining cables they used on the deck to slow fast-moving planes down, broke - and his plane crashed into another one, killing another serviceman who was working on the deck. Uncle Foster returned stateside and continued in the service as a flight instructor; he died of a heart attack in the late '70's.

But next to his photograph on the shelf in my grandmother's house was another picture - with which I was much more familiar. It was a picture of my Dad - who I never got to know. He died before I was two years old, and had served in the U.S. Army in the 1st Very Heavy Artillery Support Group, part of the 9th Ordnance Battalion - special weapons unit, stationed at Sandia Base, just outside Albuquerque, New Mexico. On May 25, 1953, he and his unit participated in the first and only testing of Atomic Annie - the atomic cannon. This 280 mm gun shot an atomic projectile, which exploded 150 ft. in the air before landing, creating the classic kind of mushroom cloud all too familiar to us - the kind you see in the movies. But this one was real. The 15-kiloton atomic burst created hurricane-force winds that blasted dust and radiation over more than a square mile of desert, enveloping more than 2,600 troops and over 700 observers - including dignitaries- senators, congressmen, and business leaders alike.

The troops witnessed the shot from trenches 4,000 meters west of ground zero. After the shot, they were to attack two objectives located southeast of the point of detonation. High winds and dust forced most of the troops back, although some eventually approached as close as 700 meters to the south of ground zero.

For the damage effects evaluation, engineer battalions excavated bunkers and foxholes and placed military equipment in the area.

Other Army personnel placed sheep and dosimetry (radiological) instruments in the area for use in medical and shielding evaluations. After the shot, engineer, ordnance, and medical teams evaluated damage to equipment, fortifications, and animals. Veterinary officers and technicians inspected the effects of the detonation on sheep, and a medical team retrieved dosimetry instruments from G.I. badges.

From a tactical military stand point, the Atomic Cannon was designed to destroy otherwise invulnerable fortifications and turn back masses of invading communist troops. It was clearly meant as

a warning signal to the North Korean government - during the Korean conflict - as a show of arms and military might. From a human standpoint, the results of that day in May, 1953, were devastating for some atomic veterans. Although it was just one of hundreds of U.S. atomic tests, Shot Grable, as they called it, had lasting effects. For my Dad, residual effects of radiation exposure from the blast led to a lump in his neck, detected less than one year later. Treatments for his cancer began shortly thereafter. After lengthy stays at Thomas Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia, he passed away on July 7, 1959.

Now this is a Memorial Day Sermon - a sermon based on scripture - the truth God gives us to live and learn by ... so I've chosen two appropriate scripture passages to put the meaning of this day into perspective.

We begin with the story of Cain and Abel. It might seem an odd choice - but it's not. The author of the book of Hebrews records for us a list of heroes of the faith - and beginning the list is Abel. It is a curious choice - and we wonder why. All we know about him is that he was the second son of Adam - the keeper of the sheep - that he made an offering to God, which God liked, and he was murdered by his brother. In all of scripture, Abel doesn't speak a word; he doesn't open his mouth - at least, that is, until after his death.

In Genesis, following his death, these words come to us from the Lord, to Cain: "Listen, your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"

The author of Hebrews puts it this way, "through his faith, he still speaks." He *still* speaks? Yes ... the good works of a righteous person continue to speak long after the person is gone ... that's why we remember, because there is still much to be said and listened to by those who have gone before us. Abel is much more than a memory - those who have gone before us who we have lost are still calling out to us, and through their faith, they still speak; for justice, asking for God, through us, to help set things right so that their death may not have been in vain.

Abel's is a tragic cry, a plea - to God and to us - a voice gathering up human suffering and loss and sacrifice throughout the ages; and God hears it.

Not only does God hear it - God has experienced that same feeling, the same loss, and the same suffering. God in Christ knows more than what it feels like to suffer loss, our God also knows what it is like to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Jesus tells his disciples - in no uncertain terms - how important this is. It is tied to his greatest commandment, to love one another, and is the greatest example he can give to them. It's also the example he lived out for them - with his own death, for them - and for us, too.

Giving one's life for another is absolutely the greatest act of friendship that can ever be done - even when that friend is not seen, or unknown.

Those who give their lives in the service of their country - now serving in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or Korea - or who knows where - are, with their actions, giving us the greatest gift that they can give - and

they deserve that recognition. Regardless of politics - regardless of agreement or disagreement with decisions behind where and why they have been sent - because of the sacrifice they are making and the willingness they demonstrate with their very lives, our soldiers deserve our loyalty, support, and thanks. And as we express our gratitude in our worship today, let me end my words, not with an exclamation point, but with a suggestion.

Instead of being led to ask the perennial question “why,” turn that question into a “what.” Instead of asking “why did this happen to me?”- or him, or her, your uncle or friend or father, the neighbor down the street or the person you just read about in the *Parade* magazine, accept their sacrifice as a gift - laid down for you; and then ask:

“What am I to do with this gift?”

“What can I do with this life given to me from their sacrifice?”

“What can I do to do justice to this gift I’ve been given?”

As you do that - you will better love one another - as Jesus asked us to;

And you will be a better person.

And our world will be a better place, in God’s name. Amen.