

**That they may all be one
Veterans' Day 2018**

John 17

Rev. Alida Ward

Every picture tells a story, don't it?

Every picture tells a story.

When David put out the word to the congregation that we'd like some photographs of veterans to grace our Sanctuary today, we had no idea what was to come.

This is what happened:

over the past three weeks at the church office, there has been a steady stream of people, our church family, carrying pictures.

And telling us stories.

"This is my grandfather -- he served in both World Wars."

"This is my uncle -- he was a test pilot."

"These are my nephews, this is my son. All of them chose to serve."

"This is me -- can you believe it? I looked good in uniform, didn't I?"

"This is my father -- he looks so young, doesn't he? Too young to see what he had to see."

"This is my husband, in the Navy -- just before I met him."

And here there are now,

our church family veterans -- there are 49 families represented up here, and of course we know there are more among you --

we know there are pictures on your mantelpieces right now, pictures on your bureaus and nightstands,

all of the veterans that you cherish, that we cherish.

And every picture tells a story.

There's Dr. Tom Kennedy up here,
30 years old, fresh from medical training and serving as a Navy physician at
Camp Lejeune --
years before he touched thousands of lives as Chief of Pediatrics at
Bridgeport.

Bob Evans' brothers are up here, World War II veterans, the both of them --
Jack in the Navy, Frank the Army --
and Bob's son, nephews and daughter-in-law are here, too --
an extraordinary legacy of service in one family.

There's Barbara Barry's Uncle Fred,
he's the test pilot I mentioned --
and it was flying that claimed his life at age 24.

There's our dear friend Michael Fitzpatrick,
whom we lost just weeks ago --
handsome in his Marine uniform.
And John Beeton, Diana's husband,
whose wry humor and sharp mind made him someone I sure was glad to
know.

Marcia Carothers' father, Tom Weigand, is here -
And maybe I'm just being fanciful, but looking at his friendly face,
I swear I can see the look of the pastor he became --
a beloved Methodist minister who preached from this pulpit more than
once.

And I'm trying to figure out the correlation between being in the armed
forces and becoming a Greenfield Hill Church usher --
because I am struck by how many of our *ushers* are up here--
Joyce Bultman, Jack Barry, Bob Evans, Chuck Collison, and more.

From one form of service, I guess, to another.

Over these past weeks, we've received these pictures in the office with smiles, and tears — and with the telling of stories.

Because every picture *does* tell a story.

A story of the people they were then, of what they were to become -- of the lives they lived --

long and wonderful, or too soon gone from us.

And as different as all their stories were, and are -- there is a unifying theme, a common thread.

Of course there is.

And that is that each one of these men and women **served**, served proudly,

served the country they loved,

served us.

Each one of them knew -- knows -- that there is something greater than self, a story greater than our individual stories.

They know, these faces here, that there is something that binds us all together,

worth fighting for, worth cherishing, worth giving all for.

The faces that you see before you are diverse in background, differing in the lives they led and lead and chose,

but in their difference is this unity:

a commitment to service beyond self, sacrifice beyond measure.

These faces before you differ in much,

but in this they differ not at all. In this there is unity.

It's been an election week in this country, as perhaps you noticed.

So *unity* has not really been our theme, particularly; it's difference we've been focused on.

On each street in town were dueling lawn signs,
our mailboxes were stuffed with flyers that said “*she’s* great, but her -- not so much,” or “oh no, **she’s** a terrible choice, but this one, she’s great”.

(I did enjoy the number of “shes” there were, I gotta say.)

An election, of course, is not really meant to be about unity --
if anything, the homework you’re given for an election is to make sure you
know the differences between people, and know them well.

How blue are they really? How red?

And of course watching election night returns
we were once again transfixed by the sight of earnest newscasters
tapping on maps county by county,
a kind of pointillist art with only two colors.

All the country categorized by difference.

Which is why I particularly cherish what we have here today in these
photographs:

these faces before us in a unity of spirit,
a unity of purpose, a **unity** of service.

A week or so ago, a friend sent a link on Facebook,
a link to a poem by Maya Angelou,

The friend said “this is exactly what I needed in election week -- you’ll be
glad for it, too.”

So I opened the link -- it was an audio link,
it was the sound of Maya Angelou herself reading the poem.

A poem I want to share with you now.

You know the marvelous, sonorous voice Maya Angelou had --
I don’t have that.

But I hope the beauty of the words will shine even in my voice.

The poem begins with difference ...

but listen, listen to where it takes us at the end.

It's called Human Family.

*I note the obvious differences
in the human family.*

*Some of us are serious,
some thrive on comedy.*

*Some declare their lives are lived
as true profundity,
and others claim they really live
the real reality.*

*The variety of our skin tones
can confuse, bemuse, delight,
brown and pink and beige and purple,
tan and blue and white.*

*I've sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land,
I've seen the wonders of the world
not yet one common man.*

*I know ten thousand women
called Jane and Mary Jane,
but I've not seen any two
who really were the same.*

*Mirror twins are different
although their features jibe,
and lovers think quite different thoughts
while lying side by side.*

*We love and lose in China,
we weep on England's moors,
and laugh and moan in Guinea,
and thrive on Spanish shores.*

*We seek success in Finland,
are born and die in Maine.
In minor ways we differ,
in major we're the same.*

*I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.*

*We are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.*

*We **are** more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.*

It was just what I needed to hear this week —
this poem that moves from difference to unity —
this poem that reminds us
in minor ways we differ, in major we're the same.

It's what these veterans arrayed before us remind us, too:
that unity is possible,
that common purpose is possible.
In minor ways we differ, they could be saying:
in major we're the same.

This weekend,
today, this very morning,
marks the one hundredth anniversary of the armistice:
the peace agreement that finally ended the horror that was
World War I.

Only in the decades to follow did it become “World War **one**,”
of course —
to those who survived it, it was the Great War, and it was the war, they
thought, to end all wars —
and the peace, they hoped, to end all war.
And they danced in the streets of London and New York,
but surely the greatest rejoicing at the coming of the peace
came in the trenches, in the countryside,
where exhausted soldiers laid down their weapons for good.
Peace was more real to them to anyone,
peace more desperately yearned for by them than by anyone.

Because, of course, who could long more for peace than someone who has
been on a battlefield?
And it is still true, one hundred years on.
From our years of conversations with veterans of wars from World War II to
Iraq,
David and I have often noticed that the strongest voices for peace, for
caution and restraint,
come from those who have known firsthand the cost of war.

What these veterans arrayed before you share,
in addition to their courage, in addition to their commitment, in addition to
their service,
is their hope that no one else should have to experience what so many of
them did —
on the beaches of Okinawa, in the sands of Iraq, in Korea.

So on this Armistice Day,
on this Veterans' Day, with our hearts full of admiration for those who
sacrificed and served,
we remember what we are called to be,
whom we are called to be.
We remember our task as Christians,
which is both simple and profoundly difficult:
and that is to be builders of peace.
In this week of division,
in this week of violence once again,
our call as Christians is to be those who unify, not divide.

Let there be peace on earth, says the old folk song,
and let it begin with me.
Or in the words of the ancient philosopher:
*If there is to be peace in the world,
There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
There must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
There must be peace in the heart.*

Which brings me, finally, to the scripture that I asked Seth to read this
morning.
It's from a beautiful section of John's Gospel, several chapters long —
It's a meditation, a sermon, a prayer that Jesus offered to his followers as
they shared in their Last Supper together.
And he tells them all that he *hopes for* for them, after he leaves —
And what it is that he hopes they've learned from him.
He talks about love — he reminds them to love each other the way he's loved
them.

And he tells them never to be afraid,
but to carry within them the peace that he is giving to them.
And then there's the moment that Seth read to you,
when Jesus raises his hands before him, and lifts his eyes up to God,
and prays for the people he is leaving, prays for all humanity:
God, he says, I pray that they may all be one.
Let the way they live show the world what my life has shown them.
Let their lives show your love.
I pray that they may all be one.

We are the ones that Jesus was praying for.
We are the ones through whom he hoped his light would shine.
We are the ones who are to be the preachers of unity,
the bearers of peace.
The ones who know that if there is to be peace among nations,
there must be peace between neighbors.
The ones who know that *we are more alike, my friend,
than we are unlike.*

Every picture up here tells a story.
Every person here up here is so beautifully different,
every one of these lives so differently lived:
doctor, pastor, teacher, engineer, entrepreneur.
But they were one in purpose, one in faithfulness and courage,
One in service.

So, for them — and for our country and our God,
we too must serve.
We too must be one in purpose.
We too must seek peace with courage,
seek peace and pursue it —
seek ways to unify, not divide;

disarm fear with love.

That they may all be one, Jesus prayed.

That they may all be one.

Amen.