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Sermon Title: Memorial Day 2017
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:10-18

Deuteronomy 8:10-18

You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Help me out on this: what is Memorial Day? I'm quite serious. My memory (remember, I'm a child of the '50s) is that it was "Decoration Day," and folks went to the cemeteries, not just to visit the graves of loved ones, but it was also really a spring-cleaning for the graves. All the debris of winter, the mud and weeds of spring make a mess of those sacred spaces. So people went to cemeteries with rakes and little gardening trowels and flowers to "decorate."

But Memorial Day was also patriotic. I was a Boy Scout, and our troop was also a Drum, Bugle & Fife Corps. On Memorial Day weekend we'd march in various parades, one in Queens, another in Brooklyn, maybe one on Long Island. And

the highlight of the parade was always at the end when the old soldiers would be honored. I mean *old* soldiers, not Korea, not World War II; I mean World War I and the Spanish-American War, with uniforms and guns we'd only seen in movies. And at the end, there was a live rifle 21-gun salute at some war memorial, and we kids would scamper all about collecting the shell casings from the bullets.

As I got older, and America got older, Memorial Day became a long weekend, the time to put your boat in the water, open up the family cottage, fire up the barbecue. If you Google it, Memorial Day is all of those things, with roots going back to the Civil War. It looks as though first the South, then the North got the idea to "decorate" the graves of Civil War soldiers to memorialize, to remember their sacrifice, their loss, their purpose.

What are you here for? Perhaps you don't have a boat or a cottage or a barbeque or a Little League game. So here we are in Church on Memorial Day weekend trying to remember what the heck we should remember.

The Bible is helpful on this. Look up "remember" or "remembrance," and there is a useful list. The Bible tells us to "remember the Sabbath, remember the wonders of creation, remember your Creator, remember the covenant, remember the poor, remember Jesus"; and then, getting more personal, we are to "remember that we are dust," and we ask God "not to remember [our] sins." That about covers it, and I can summarize it even shorter: remember who you are, where you came from, and who helped you get here.

All of that, the Bible references and my summary, are designed to keep us humble. There's a saying I like, a put-down, really, of entitled, arrogant, self-centered snobs: "They were born on third base and think they hit a triple!" It's sort of like that myth of the self-made man, someone who thinks he got where he is because he's so great. He may be great, but he got there, always, thanks to some family member, some teacher or coach, some friend, someone who pushed, cajoled, yelled, befriended, inspired at just the right time.

Memorial Day invites us to remember. Maybe we can't get to the cemeteries of all those to whom we owe a debt, the graves may be too far away or unknown to us; so maybe we can't clean away or decorate. But we can remember.

I put remembering into three categories: 1. Patriotic—the folks who did what was necessary to make this a great country. 2. Personal—the folks in your life without whom you wouldn't be you. 3. Spiritual—the parts of faith that keep you on track: God, Church, Jesus.

Patriotic may seem simple, obvious. We should remember, honor all the soldiers who fought and died, who made what we rightfully call the ultimate sacrifice, to help our nation get free, stay free, enable others to be free. And we should add another layer to that, all the soldiers who fought and lived, forever wounded, each in their own way, by their own memories of loss. The closer we get to war and modern technology, modern journalism, modern news, modern novels and memories, modern movies—they all get us closer to war, and the closer we get, the more we realize the enormous cost of war, *the enormous cost of war* on every level of the human condition. So, on Memorial Day, remember the full spectrum of the victims and heroes and losses of war.

There is a little-known verse in the Bible, one of the truest, most horrifying verses in the Bible. It's about King David, and in an almost offhand way, it says "In the spring, when kings go off to war . . ." (2 Samuel 11:1) The verse makes it sound as if it's routine, a part of nature, the cycle of the seasons, it just *is*. We are seeing this now with terrorism, wondering if terror is the new normal. Should being scared to go to certain places be normal? Should being nervous around certain people be normal? Should war be normal? After the "slaughter of the innocents," in Manchester, England, Alida said to me, "Those 15,000 kids and moms at the concert will never be the same again. They will be forever traumatized, for life."

In three weeks, under Jerry Hood's direction, our Church will once again plant flags on the Green, this time almost 7,000, one for each soldier killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a monumental effort, and I would beg each of you to come and plant at least 10. Take a flag, bend over, plant it deep in the ground, remember one soldier.

There's a third layer of patriots worth remembering, and the most likely to be forgotten. In our closing hymn, "America the Beautiful," we'll sing, "May God thy gold refine . . . God mend thine every flaw." Remember the folks of courage who dared to "refine our gold" and "mend our flaws." Let's remember the folks who told us we could be better.

Each of us probably has our own issue, our own cause, our own hero: women's suffrage, public education, workers' rights, the environment. I'll pick an obvious one: the civil rights movement. Every year Alida and I host a group of Fairfield Warde High School history students in the sanctuary. In one day, they visit a synagogue, a mosque, a Catholic Church, and us. Our job is to explain the basics of our faith—for us, New England Congregationalism. Plus, we are to address what our Church thinks about war, terrorism, other religions, homosexuality, women clergy, and civil rights. In one hour. When I tackle civil rights, I make it really easy for them. I tell them civil rights is almost an entirely Protestant family issue.

We Christians, and mostly Protestants, were the slave traders, we were the slave owners, we converted the slaves into Christians. We were the abolitionist movement, we were the Ku Klux Klan, we were the civil rights movement and the opponents. When the civil rights movement organized, they met in Protestant Churches; and when they marched, they sang Protestant hymns, and their leaders were mostly Protestant clergy. We were the right, the wrong, the victim, and the oppressor. The whole thing from slavery to civil rights was a family squabble.

So I think a patriotic part of Memorial Day can be to remember the heroes of America who took a stand for justice. Some were beaten, some were killed, some were traumatized, some lived to tell about it and rejoice. We should be proud of such a love for America that they dared to make it greater. O.K., that's the "patriotic" Memorial Day.

On the "personal," I make two suggestions. First, is there a way to recover at least a sense of "Decoration Day"? To find some way, a simple way, a tangible way to take ourselves to graves of our loved ones? If not in person, in memory, in spirit. Go there, in your mind's eye, have a moment of silence before the grave of someone who touched your heart.

My father's parents are buried on a little hill in a little town in rural Virginia. I'll never be there again, I'll never plant a flower there or clean it or decorate it. But in my mind's eye, can't I go there for just a moment, kneel beside the grave, see the names, and remember how they shaped my life? Try it yourself. And if you can't take flowers there or send flowers, bring them here, put some up on the altar, put their name there alongside it, and remember. And my second suggestion, personalizing Memorial Day, is to remember somebody who showed you the way: some coach, some teacher, some Scout leader, some boss, some neighbor who took you under their wing and helped make you the person you are today.

And who knows? Maybe there is a way to say thank you. You know, some religions pray for the dead! Why not? Why not on Memorial Day send a little prayer up to Heaven for someone who made a difference in you? And if they're still alive, surprise them, reach out to them, send a note, an email, show up at their front door.

My final Memorial Day advice is theological. When Jesus had his Last Supper, he began what we call Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. And that's good, he wanted us to keep doing it, but with only one requirement. He said, "Do this as often as you do it in remembrance of me." *In remembrance*. Holy Communion is a Memorial Day event. It's a time to think deeply about Jesus: who he was, how he got here, and who made it possible—the same

three questions I asked earlier. It's a good combination. The Bible wants us to think deeply about ourselves and about God and about the connection between us and God—and that is Jesus.

That connection is worth remembering: that love that comes from above. We like to boast about the God-centeredness of our country, about “In God We Trust” on our money, and “One nation under God” in our Pledge of Allegiance, and “God bless the United States of America” at the end of every political speech. And “God Bless America” sung during the seventh inning of every Yankee baseball game and our presidents being sworn in on a Bible and our very founding being predicated on religious freedom.

So it's good to remember where we came from, how we got here, and who helped us along. Let me bring all three parts together in closing: the patriotic, the personal, and the theological. Just about every funeral I've ever done in my whole career ends with food. A reception here at the Church or at a club and often close family going off to a favorite restaurant for dinner. Why? To remember, to tell stories and remember. About the dearly departed. About you and the dearly departed, and the impact they had on you and the debt you owe to them.

That's not a bad goal for our Memorial Day weekend. Whether thinking about our nation in general, our soldiers in particular, our heroes who made us better, our loved ones who touched us, or our God who gave us the life and teachings of Jesus. There is a lot of good fodder out there for stories.

So whether you gather around the barbecue or sit on the beach or enjoy your porch or just be together with someone in your living room, take a moment to remember.

Let us close with this beautiful patriotic hymn, “America the Beautiful,” No. 720:

*O beautiful for spacious skies,
for amber waves of grain;
for purple mountain majesties
above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee,
and crown thy good with servanthood
from sea to shining sea.*

*O beautiful for heroes proved
in liberating strife,
who more than self their country loved,
and mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
till all success be nobleness,
and every gain divine.*

*O beautiful for patriot dream
that sees beyond the years
thine alabaster cities gleam,
undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
confirm thy soul in self-control,
thy liberty in law.*