

Sunday, May 29, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon

One of my mother's favorite expressions was "There but for the grace of God, go I." She used it any time that my sister's and I would comment on the status or condition of another person.

These words have resonated with me this past week as I listened to the stories of the Ugandan orphans, as I watched the horrific images coming out of the Midwest after the tornadoes and as I reflected on the meaning of Memorial Day. I found myself not only counting my blessings, but marveling at God's amazing grace in my life.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, a day set aside to recognize the sacrifice of American soldiers who gave their lives so that we might live safe and free. Memorial Day was officially proclaimed on May 5, 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, and was first observed on 30 May 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. It was a day set aside to decorate the graves of those who had given their lives. The intent was to ensure that those fallen soldiers would never be forgotten. Memorial Day is about remembering; it is about coming together to honor those who gave their all.

When I think of the number of Americans who have given their lives since 1868, estimated at 1.2 million, I am overwhelmed with grief and gratitude. Grief that we have to sacrifice human lives so that we may live free and gratitude that individuals continue to take on this awesome responsibility every day. Gratitude that I can be protected without placing myself or my loved ones in danger. Gratitude that "God has shed his grace on me."

These words, taken from our hymn "America the Beautiful" remind us of the power of God working in our lives. It is important that we remember that the blessings in our lives come from God. God does not shed his grace on us because we are better, or different than other people. God's grace is a gift, a gift for which we must remain ever thankful.

Katherine Lee Bates wrote the words for "America the Beautiful" originally as a poem, having been inspired by a visit to Pike's Peak in Colorado. It was first published in 1895 in a church periodical called the *Congregationalist*. The words were later put to music by church organist and choirmaster Samuel A. Ward. Ward had originally written the music, for the 19th century hymn *O Mother dear, Jerusalem* in 1882.

The beautiful hymn which we have come to know as "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies" reminds us of our blessings as well as our responsibilities. *Crown them good with brotherhood* reiterates Jesus' message from John's Gospel that we love one another.

We are called to appreciate the blessings in our lives by sharing them with our neighbors.

*America, America, God mend thine ev'ry flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law.*

We are reminded that our forgiving God will mend our every flaw but that we have the responsibility of self-control and abiding by the laws of the land. We cannot simply stand by and let life happen to us.

We have a responsibility to make choices, of disciplining ourselves to abide by the tenets of a free society.

O beautiful for heroes proved, In liberating strife, Who more than self their country loved, And mercy more than life.

This powerful verse summarizes the reverence that we must have for those who gave their lives in defense of our country.

“Who more than self their country loved.” What do you love more than self? More than life? The hymn goes on to promise that God’s grace will deliver life without tears, that the dreams of the patriots will come true.

We sing this hymn to remember. We remember that God has shed his grace on us and that we live in the light of the promises made by Jesus Christ, empowered to live out our potential by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As I contemplate the sacrifice of soldiers around the world, of their families throughout time, I can’t help but wonder if I could be a hero. Our lives are so comfortable that it is hard to imagine the courage that some people must gather to face each waking day.

I hope that I would have the ability to sacrifice – but I have not been tested. I have not been tested for sacrifice but I have been challenged for my faith. In the reading we heard earlier from 1 Peter, we are told to “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” The challenge we face is to live our lives as models of Christian faith.

In an article I read this week called “What Does it Mean to Be Filled with the Spirit?” the author pointed out that there was no higher calling than to live as an authentic Christian. *If you are an authentic Christian, the article said, you live what you believe. You speak the truth. You love generously. You admit failure quickly. You acknowledge weakness without hesitation. You know who you are, accept who you are and are who you are.*

Our gospel reading today provides an additional lesson on how we are to conduct ourselves.

As followers of Jesus, it is not enough to say that we love Jesus; we must live by his commandments. His commandment – the great commandment – is that you love God with your whole heart, your whole mind, your whole soul and that you love your neighbor as yourself. The key word is “whole.” Just as those 1.2 million soldiers gave their whole self to defend our country; we must be willing to give our entire being for the good of our neighbor. We are called to conduct our lives based Jesus’ promise “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

As we go about our business each day we might ask ourselves if we are doing a good job representing the presence of God in our being.

Are we providing a showcase for God's grace? Do people come away from an encounter with you feeling valued, loved and listened to? This is what Jesus asks of us. He tells his disciples that he is going away, but they are to continue the important work of spreading his message throughout the world. He assures them that he will send an Advocate to help them. Help them to remember what he has taught them. Help them to meet the challenges that lie ahead. He promises that they will not have to do it alone. This promise is for us as well. We do not have to handle life's challenges alone. This is one of the reasons we come together in church each week. To remember, that we are part of something larger than ourselves – a community – the body of Christ. We gather to be reminded that God is a very part of us.

God abides in us.

The Watoto children conveyed this message loud and clear last Sunday. They told stories of watching their parents die of HIV/AIDS, of hearing that their parents had been killed in a war, of being orphaned at young ages, begging in the streets for food, not being able to attend school, and then of being found, found by the Watoto community. They sang songs of hope and praise, thanking God for finding them and saving them and giving them a future. Their lives continue to be difficult, but they are able to rise above the challenges and give thanks to God. They tell their stories to remember.

We must commit ourselves to remembering as well.

Remembering that there are children without families in Uganda. Remembering that there are soldiers all over the world protecting us. Remembering that we have brothers and sisters all over this planet suffering from natural disasters beyond our comprehension.

So this holiday weekend, enjoy the barbeques and parades as a way of remembering that someone gave their life so that you might have the freedom to do so and that it is only by God's amazing grace that you are sitting in Salisbury Congregational Church this Sunday and not in Uganda, Oklahoma or Afghanistan.

Amen