

“THE DEBT OF LOVE WE OWE”
Romans 13:8, Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

Memorial Day is a federal holiday that always falls on the last Monday of May. It was first known as “Decoration Day.” It originated three years after the Civil War in 1868.

Memorial Day began when an organization of Union Army veterans in Decatur, Illinois established the fourth Monday in May as a time to go and to decorate all of the graves of the war dead who had fallen in battle. They thought that the fourth Monday in May would be a good time to plant flowers upon those graves in the hopes that they would bloom all summer, and perhaps even into the fall.

In the 20th Century, Memorial Day eventually extended to honor all Americans who had served in any branch of the Armed Forces, and especially all those who paid the ultimate price with their very lives on battlefields all over the world in their defense of freedom too.

Recently I learned something, quite interesting, about Memorial Day. Apparently one of our largest National Cemeteries is located on Long Island, New York and in 1989 its proprietors advertised in local newspapers for volunteers to come and help decorate the many graves of the soldiers who were buried there on the upcoming Saturday; the Saturday before Memorial Day.

While many people responded to the plea for help, it seems that some of those Americans who volunteered—had little understanding really of why they were even there.

For example, one 13-year-old Boy Scout, there with his Boy Scout Troop to help decorate those graves was actually interviewed by a television reporter from a local news station, for a spot that would appear later that day on the evening news: “Young man do you know why you are here today to help place so many of these flags upon these many, many graves?”

Almost instinctively, that 13-year-old Boy Scout spoke up and said: “Yes, I know why I am here today! I am here is to rack up some more service hours so that I can receive my next award as a boy scout!”

Well, at least we can say that this young man was speaking honestly, and maybe the reason he gave that seemingly “self-serving answer” was because his Boy Scout Troop Leader had failed to explain to him and to the all the other boys in his troop, why they really were there that day.

Hopefully he was also there to honor the lives of all those fallen soldiers and to help pay back the great debt of love that he owed and that we all owe, to all those who have lived before us and died before us, especially to those who have paid the ultimate price, with their very lives to secure and protect for us so many of those great civil liberties and political privileges we enjoy today!

Today is Maundy Thursday on the church’s liturgical calendar. And in a very real sense, for us Christians, today is also a Memorial Day for us too. But do we really know why we are here again this night?

Isn’t it in part to face up to the fact that there is one great debt in this life that we will always owe to God, so long as we are living in this world, too? And this ongoing debt that we will continue to owe God our Heavenly Father, because of the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ that first Easter morning, is the ongoing debt to love one another.

Listen to these words of Jesus, once again from our Gospel lesson this evening: *“I give to you a New Commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:33-35)!*

When St. Paul first wrote these magnificent words to his friends in Rome, I can't help but wonder if he didn't have these very words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in mind! For it seems as if Paul is simply echoing for us here the words of his dear Master, when the apostle says: "Owe no one anything except to love one another" (Romans 13:8)!

Brothers and sisters you and I know that there are many things that distinguishes us as human beings from all other living creatures that the Lord God Almighty has also placed upon this earth. But have you ever stopped to think that: **ONE OF THE GREATEST THINGS THAT SETS US APART---AS HUMAN BEINGS FROM ALL OTHER LIVING CREATURES THAT OUR GOD PUT UPON THIS EARTH---IS THIS GREAT DESIRE WE HUMAN BEINGS ALWAYS SEEM TO HAVE TO WANT TO REMEMBER AND HONOR OUR DEAD; THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE LIVED AND DIED BEFORE US.**

Yes, a herd of elephants, coming upon the dead body of another elephant, will stop and touch it with their trunks, and trumpet loudly, as if they are mourning their loss, sometimes for hours! But then they move on.

If possible, however, we human beings often seek to remember and honor those loved ones of ours who have died before us, by purchasing a cemetery plot and by purchasing a grave stone for that cemetery plot; sometimes carved out of such precious rocks as marble or granite. And we also want the full named of our loved one, including the date of their birth and the date of their passing, chiseled out on that stone of our loved one who has died.

When it comes to so many of our national heroes, we often build great stone structures to help us remember them too, structures like the Washington Monument in Washington DC, in memory of our first president often heralded as the "Father of our Nation;" a stone monument that reaches 555 feet into the air.

Then there is also the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, in memory of our third president, who was also the primary author of the Declaration of Independence. There is also the Abraham Lincoln Memorial to help us remember our 16th President, who gave his all to eradicate human slavery in our land, both of which are also strategically set on various part of what we call the National Mall.

Sometimes human beings who want to somehow continue to do good things for others in this world, even post-mortem (after their death) will create all sorts of foundations and endowments, established and given in their own name, to universities and colleges, sometimes to universities and colleges that are oftentimes their own "Alma Mater," or to hospitals, libraries, orphanages and the like.

BUT WHAT DID OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST DO WHEN HE ASKED FOR ALL OF US WHO ARE HIS DISCIPLES TO DO SOMETHING VITALLY IMPORTANT, TO MAKE CERTAIN THAT WE ALWAYS REMEMBER HIM AND HIS DEATH TOO?

What type of memorial would be established for this very purpose, on the night before he died on the cross to save every one of us eternally for our sins? Did he write a book with his own human hand and make sure it would forever remain at the top of the best-sellers' list throughout posterity?

No! But the Holy Spirit wrote a book like that we all still immensely treasure that is named the **HOLY BIBLE.**

Did he establish a university in his name the way that Duke University, for example, in Durham, North Carolina was eventually named after a man named Washington Duke, because the Duke family had become so very instrumental in the founding of that great research institute? No! No! No! It was none of those things!

No, the way that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said that he wanted to always be remembered by us, was by asking us to repeat again, and again and again—a rather simple, and very uncomplicated ritual—that he himself instituted for us on the night before he went to the cross of Calvary to offer his perfect life for us there.

AND LET'S NOT FAIL TO SEE THE GREAT BENEFIT TO THIS TYPE OF MEMORIAL THAT JESUS WAS ESTABLISHING...BY WHICH HE ASKS US ALWAYS TO REMEMBER HIM! IT'S NOT A STONE STRUCTURE SIMPLY LIMITED TO ONE TINY CORNER OF THE WORLD!

NOR IS IT AN ENDOWMENT FUND, OR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY THAT COULD ONLY HELP A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE.

NO THIS MEMORIAL COULD CONSTANTLY BE SEEN AND WITNESSED BY EVERYONE AND EVERYWHERE! AND ITS BENEFITS THAT WOULD COME TO US WOULD BE NOTHING SHORT OF EVERLASTING LIFE!

On that cross our Savior would willingly receive all of wrath that his Heavenly Father could rightly have poured out you and me and all of us, upon the whole human race instead, except the Triune God loved all of us far too much for that, the God who couldn't stand to face eternity without you and me in it! He didn't pour all the wrath that he could very justifiably poured out on all of us because, as John, the author of our Gospel lesson this evening tells us, ten chapter previous to this: *"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life"* (John 3:16)!

St. Paul says it so precisely in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that Jesus, who was without sin became sin for us, during those long six hours, when those nails that were driven through his hands and his feet would pin him to that cross, even though it wasn't really the nails that were holding him there as the sinless Son of God—but the intense love that he had for you and me and in offering up to his Heavenly Father the highest form of obedience that had ever been given to him by any other man or woman who ever walked the face of this earth!

As the Gospel writers describe it, this action was quite simple. While celebrating the Passover with his disciples in Jerusalem one last time, Jesus takes a loaf of unleavened bread, offers a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the gift of that bread, then he breaks it and passes pieces of it to his disciples, commanding them also on this night that they should eat it, saying: "Take eat this is my body."

A short time later, at the conclusion of this Passover Meal, he took a cup of wine and also blessed it, *meaning that he thanked God for it*, and then he passes that cup of wine around the table too, commanding each one of his disciples to drink from that cup because, as he said, *"It is the blood of the New Covenant that is being poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"* (Matthew 26:26-28).

Yes, St Luke is the writer who tells us that Jesus also said on that very sacred night: *"Do this in remembrance of me"* (Luke 22:19-20). Not only does Luke share with us that Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me," but that Jesus said, "Do this OFTEN in remembrance of me! And then Luke goes on to tell us, the very same thing that Matthew and Mark tell us, that Jesus also said: *"This cup that is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood."*

In the ancient world, the making of a Covenant, actually in Hebrew, the "CUTTING" of a covenant was the establishment between two differing groups of people that was meant to last forever. And the establishment of that New Covenant would always be celebrated by representatives of each group of people sitting down to eat and drink together.

But that his was no ordinary, simply human covenant that Jesus was making with his followers, becomes extremely evident to us also when he identifies the food that we are to eat and to drink in this powerful celebration. He says: **"Take and eat, this is MY BODY,"** and **"Take and drink, this is MY BLOOD"** of the **NEW COVENANT**.

The fact that Jesus, who is the only-begotten Son of God, asks us to feast and to dine on his body and blood means that this is a **HEAVENLY FEAST THAT HE HAS COME TO SHARE WITH US**. He tells us to do this, using the present tense of the Greek verbs, meaning that these actions are to take place in the

present and continue indefinitely into the future! In other words, he is also telling us that this is an **E-V-E-R-L-A-S-T-I-N-G C-O-V-E-N-A-N-T**.

When Jesus includes the word "My Body" and "My Blood" he is reminding us that this sacred covenant would not be sealed by people simply eating the kind of ordinary, EARTHLY food that WE human beings would normally have prepared OURSELVES AND FOR OURSELVES, BUT THIS WOULD INDEED BE A HEAVENLY FEAST!

At long LAST what we ACTUALLY see our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ doing for us on this night is fulfilling those majestic words that God spoke to his people of Old through the Prophet Jeremiah one day, when God simply used Jeremiah's tongue and voice as his very own mouthpiece: ***"Behold the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD! But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD!' For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more!"***

J. Wilber Chapman is the name of a popular Presbyterian evangelist, who was an itinerant preacher who traveled all around the eastern United States, in the late 19th Century, who preached the Gospel winsomely and brought many who were not yet believers, through his preaching and baptism, into the fold of Christ's Church. He sometimes told, what he claimed was a true story about a soldier named Charlie who was mortally wounded, but whose fellow soldier, named Jim, stayed right there beside him through the long and lonely days of his life's end.

"Jim, I'm going to die," Charlie whispered to Jim, knowing full well that Jim had no family of his own. Then Charlie added: "But I want you to go back to my mother and take my place in my family there."

"But Charlie, your mother does not even know me!" Jim reminded his dying comrade, "and she would not want me to come into her home and live there with her as her son!"

"I will write a letter and you will take it to her," Charlie explained.

In the letter Charlie told his mother about his being severely wounded in warfare, and of his own suffering, and of how his best friend ever named Jim had stuck close by him day and night through it all. The letter closed like this, "Mother, please receive Jim into your home for my sake!"

Jim then carefully tucked the letter away in his waistcoat. After the close of the war, he went to Charlie's home town and sought out Charlie's mother at her home. He knocked on the door and stood there waiting, as a man who was thoroughly ragged and worn from the ravages of war himself, a very unsightly character.

As the lady opened the door, she looked upon him and thought him to be just another beggar passing by. But Jim handed her the letter through the half-opened door. She read it, recognizing her son's handwriting. When she read the last line, "Mother, receive Jim for my sake," the expression on her face changed, tears of deep emotion welled up inside, and she threw the door open wide, receiving Jim "for Charlie's sake."

According to the Holy Bible, this sort of acceptance is the story of the cross. God accepts us as His own beloved children for Christ's sake. We may not understand why it had to be this way. But when we look at the cross, God invites us always to see there, for every one of us here again tonight, an open door.

And thus we remember. We remember those who died that we may live in freedom.

We remember all those valiant saints who lived and died before us that we may live in faith.

And, above all, we remember Christ who died upon the cross, that receiving forgiveness and reconciliation with our Heavenly Father, we too, like him may now live forever.

“Alas! And did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die?
Would he devote that sacred head, for such a worm as I?”

But drops of grief can ne'er repay, the debt of love I owe;
Here, lord, I give myself away: ‘Tis all that I can do!” Amen