

Acts 17:22-31
I Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

I had an utterly unexpected experience meeting a friend one day in Washington, D.C. He had just moved out of town to take an exciting new job in Virginia. I don't remember why I was in our nation's capital on that particular trip, but we agreed to meet up for a day of sightseeing. We chose to rendezvous at the city's newest monument.

It had been extremely controversial – that monument – just like the war it represented. It was reviled by many in its conceptual stages as it was to consist of a V-shaped wall of polished black granite devoid of any outright military or patriotic symbols. Critics included Jim Webb, a future U.S. Senator, who called the design “a nihilistic slab of stone.” Political commentator and one-time presidential candidate Pat Buchanan accused one of the design judges of being a communist. The 21-year-old Yale University architecture student who submitted the winning design, Maya Lin, was even racially insulted as the daughter of Chinese immigrants.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has come simply to be known as the Wall. As I approached it that day – it was obstructed from my view because it sits a little below street level – the prospect of seeing 58,000 names inscribed on it of American military men and women who died in Southeast Asia overwhelmed me, and I began to weep.

At about this point my friend found me. He asked if I was OK. What was the matter? I couldn't answer him. My tears just didn't make any sense. I had not lost any loved ones in Vietnam.

In fact, I really had very little personal stake in that war. On the one hand, I did not know anyone who was drafted, enlisted, or claimed "conscientious objector" status. On the other hand, I had not been a war protestor. At the time, given my age and interests, I was largely apolitical. For me, the Vietnam War was that gruesome thing that spilled out of my family's TV set every night and into our newspapers every morning.

Memorial Day has become problematic for some who see it as promoting a form of blind patriotism that is really just tribalism or an excuse for indiscriminate, excessive support. Unblinking/unthinking support is nothing more than boosterism. Boosterism is for pep clubs. Patriotism is for us who love the principles, ideals and proper accomplishments of our country. We are patriots when we cherish our homeland but know, as responsible citizens, that it is subject to critique done reasonably and lovingly.

There are those who see Memorial Day as reinforcing militarism. Increasingly it appears, however, that humankind is approaching an hour – and may be there already – when large-scale militarism can no longer be used to solve the world's problems. That's because of the threat modern warfare holds for destroying our species as well as huge portions of the planet we live on.

For me, Memorial Day is a secular version of All Saints Day: a time when we remember those who have gone before us in death, albeit a death caused by war.

There is an irony in this year's timing of Memorial Day weekend, however. It partly overlaps with the ancient observance of Rogation Days. They are the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before Ascension Thursday. Today is Rogation Sunday. It is ironic because while Memorial Day makes us aware of death, Rogation Days are all about life.

Rogation celebrates the Earth and goes back as early as the fifth century. Gradually it faded from the Roman church but not so for the Celts and Angles of the British Isles – our religious forebears. They grabbed hold of the custom and preserved it.

Rogation Days are all about praying for the Earth. There would be processions of parishioners, led by the priest, churchwarden, and choirboys, around the boundary of the parish – or county – to pray for its protection in the upcoming year. There were prayers for healthy livestock, temperate weather and good crops. "Rogation" comes from the Latin word meaning "to ask."

These ancient traces of our faith are gaining new currency as we re-learn the importance of caring for the Earth and its species. Here at Nativity we are working to improve our stewardship of Earth. The "Great Green Group" – I think that's their name; they go simply by the title G3 – has been meeting with conservation groups and others about our property. For one thing, they are hoping to achieve a designation called "Humane Backyard," awarded by the American Humane Society, whose website explains this initiative:

In addition to providing food, water, and cover, a Humane Backyard gives wildlife a safe haven from harmful pesticides and chemicals, free-roaming pets, inhumane practices (such as wildlife trapping), and other dangers in our human-dominated world. Whether you have an apartment balcony, suburban yard, corporate property, place of worship, or community park, you can turn it into a habitat for wildlife, people, and pets.

In addition, the members of G3 – led by Deacon Teri – are working with the Audubon Society. So far the Society has put up three houses for nesting owls on our land. Finally the group hopes to have a beautiful walking path constructed around our property by the end of the summer. We want to care for what has been entrusted to us as a faith community; just as we care about what has been endowed to us in lives lost on the battlefield.

What moved me to tears that day in Washington, D.C. was the enormity of death; the tragic waste of even one human life, much less tens of thousands. Of Americans. We weren't the only ones who died. If we don't remember we are doomed to repeat. That's why Memorial Day is important. And while I had not lost any one in Vietnam, I lost them all. The great Anglican poet John Donne says, "Any one's death diminishes me because I am involved in humankind. Therefore do not send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee."