

Galatians 1:1-12

<sup>1</sup>Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— <sup>2</sup>and all the members of God’s family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup>who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, <sup>5</sup>to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

<sup>6</sup>I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— <sup>7</sup>not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup>But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! <sup>9</sup>As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

<sup>10</sup>Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

<sup>11</sup>For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; <sup>12</sup>for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

THE GOSPEL LESSON

JOHN 8:31-36

<sup>31</sup>Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’ <sup>33</sup>They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free”?’

<sup>34</sup>Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup>The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. <sup>36</sup>So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

### **An Honest Look at Our Past**

One of my earliest memories was a Memorial Day parade in the village where I grew up in Ohio. It was probably 1965, and I was just a child. But I remember the bands and the veterans in uniform and the scouts and the honor guard. I remember the parade ended at a cemetery where tribute was paid to our fallen heroes, mostly from the Second World War, the war that saw the greatest number of American combat casualties than any other war in our history. Through the eyes of a five-year-old child this was a grand celebration of American courage and commitment to all that was good in the world.

Fast forward ten years to 1975 and I was in a different world. For one I was a teenager, and more interested in myself than in anything else. Also my family had moved to Virginia, a state that once upon a time had been part of the Confederacy which had been defeated by the Union Army in 1865, and quite frankly Southerners were not as enthusiastic about Memorial Day, a holiday that was originally a holiday to commemorate the dead of the Grand Army of the Republic, the *Yankee* army. But other things had changed as well. Richard Nixon had become the first

President to resign from office in American history, due to his involvement in an illegal operation which came to be known as Watergate. Saigon, the capital of what was then South Vietnam, had just fallen to the North Vietnamese Army, bringing a sad end to a war that had lasted more than ten years and had cost over 58,000 American lives, a war that had divided Americans against one another to the point where our own soldiers were shooting college students. The current President, Gerald Ford had not even been elected. It was hard for me to feel proud about our country. It seems to me we had lost our innocence, and we started to look again at ourselves and our history. The cowboys didn't seem quite so good, and the Indians (who actually weren't Indians at all), didn't seem quite so bad. America was re-examining itself and what it was finding was not always pretty. I think most everyone who was teenage or older went through a sort of American identity crisis in those years, and I don't think we've fully recovered. We can still feel the effects of this in our current celebrations of Memorial Day; I've spoken to Gordon and Wally and other war veterans, and they share their disappointment that there are fewer parades on Memorial Day, fewer people visiting our national cemeteries, while more people are interested in beaches and barbecues on this weekend. A lot of this has to do with our attitudes toward our nation, toward our foreign policy which has really been called into question since the 1960s.

I disparage the lack of recognition that our war dead receive on Memorial Day and on any other day. Our nation is far from perfect, and we could compile quite a laundry list of our past transgressions as the United States. But being perfect is not what makes a country great. It's not what makes an individual great. **What makes America or any country or any person great is a willingness to be honest with ourselves and to strive to be better than we are.** The point of Memorial Day is not to create a myth about our soldiers as if each was a superhuman defender of peace and justice and everything good in the world; such a soldier does not exist. Such a human being does not exist aside from Jesus Christ. **The reason it's important to honor soldiers on Memorial Day is because we strive to dignify their sacrifice.** We were not a perfect nation when those men and women died protecting our nation, and we're not a perfect nation now, but those men and women died to preserve this nation, and it's our responsibility to give meaning to their sacrifice, to be a nation that is always better than what it was yesterday. What makes a nation great is that it can be honest with itself, critical of itself, and always striving to improve itself. Those turbulent times of the late 60s and early 70s were not periods of darkness in our history but rather periods of light. – of light shed upon our own behavior, upon our own sin of telling lies about ourselves in order to project an image of a nation beyond reproach. We needed to shatter that myth so that we could become a greater, more honest nation. We had to open our eyes to the truth that those who fought enemies who committed acts of injustice and aggression *within* our borders were just as patriotic as the soldiers who fought against enemies who committed acts of injustice and aggression *outside* of our borders. Critics are often those who love their country the most, and they don't kid themselves about who we are and what needs to be changed.

And **progressing** as a nation is no different from progressing as a Christian; it involves honest introspection, taking a good, hard look at ourselves as people, recognizing our own blind spots, repenting for our sins, and moving forward in a better direction. Authentic faith requires us to search our hearts and our religion, acknowledge what's wrong, and work to fix it. We can't afford to glorify the past if we really want to build a better future.

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't honor and respect our imperfect heroes; we just need to recognize that they were human like the rest of us. George Washington owned slaves, as did Thomas Jefferson. They were not perfect men, but they accomplished some great things. The Vietnam War was a tragic fiasco that ended in a humiliating way for our nation, but that doesn't mean that the brave men and women who served our military were corrupt or misguided. Memorial Day is not about honoring perfect soldiers who died for a perfect nation; *it's about flawed human beings who gave their lives for a flawed nation that **aspires to be something better, and must so aspire in order to bring ever greater honor to those who died.***

Like our Nation, the Church is far from perfect. Just as our 200 year history as a nation is full of missteps and screw-ups, so is our 2000 year history as a church. Christians have made so many booboos throughout history, and even some of our most revered leaders have slipped up. John Wesley, our great founder, was not known as a very good husband; he married a widow who left him because he was too busy with the Methodist movement. As much as he wrote, no one has ever found any love letter to his wife. He didn't try very hard to preserve the marriage; after she had left him Wesley wrote in his journal, "I did not forsake her, I did not dismiss her, I will not recall her." Martin Luther wrote some pretty harsh things about Jews later in his life, something that Lutherans are not too proud of. But Wesley and Luther and so many other great church leaders, as flawed as they may have been are nonetheless revered for their courage with regard to the church. Idolizing them would have paralyzed the movements they started; the Church needed to move beyond their founders, to be better than it what it was *while at the same time honoring those who gave so much to defend true faith.*

Today we begin our worship series, "Into God's Future," and it's appropriate to begin around Memorial Day, a day that we honor imperfect soldiers from in imperfect nation that strives to be something better than it is. We shouldn't dismiss our past just because it is less than perfect, and we shouldn't neglect the brave men and women who died because they were less than perfect. We should recognize the true good that is within us and the potential we have, through God's grace, to become not only a nation but a world that is perfect in all ways.

We speak a lot in this nation about freedom, but that usually means personal liberties. The freedom for which we must strive, as Christians and as a nation, is the freedom Jesus and Paul describe in our readings today. It's a freedom from sin, freedom from evil, which means it's a freedom from self-deception, from imagining ourselves or our nation as flawless in the past or the present. In Christ we are freed because we come face to face with the love of God which is not conditional upon our own perfection. It's a love that allows us to be in progress and to be honest with ourselves, but it's a love to which we *aspire and must continue to aspire.* Because we won't change, we won't improve, until we do look at ourselves honestly in the light of God's grace. And we owe it to the millions of people who died for our ideals, for a future that has yet to be realized. They believed in something greater than themselves, and all of them willingly put themselves in harm's way, and all gave their last measure for what they believed in. It's our responsibility to dignify them by ever becoming what they envisioned we could be.

So as we move forward in the visioning process as a church, we must honor those who got us to where we are. It's not a perfect place, but they strove for a future; they strove for *us.* Imagine

that; people we never met, who never met us, who nonetheless believed that *someone* would take the torch and keep passing it on. We should appreciate where those people have brought us as we prepare to pass the torch on to the next generation.