

## **That We All May Be One**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Nancy Turner Jones at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, May 24, 2009.*

Tucked away in Duke University's library of Historic American Sheet Music, there is a copy of a hymn written in 1867 by a woman named Nella L. Sweet, called "Kneel Where Our Loves are Sleeping". The hymn was dedicated "To the Ladies of the South who were Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead". Indeed, in all parts of the country, north and south ladies were decorating the graves of soldiers. And so, on May 5, 1868, General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic of the United States of America issued a proclamation for a Decoration Day to remember those who had died in service of the nation during the War Between the States. Logan's official proclamation came from many separate beginnings; a growing movement in individual towns and gatherings of people all over the country honoring their war dead. There were so many lives to honor. The Civil War claimed well over a million casualties. Three percent of the nation's population died due to wounds suffered in combat, disease, and other war-related causes.

And so, on that first observance of Decoration Day in 1868, three years after the ending of the War between the States, flowers were placed on the 20,000 graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. It is said that Decoration Day was about honoring those who had given their lives in the long struggle. But it was so much more than that. We were a young nation, a young nation torn apart so devastatingly there was no guarantee it could even survive. Decoration Day which became our Memorial Day, was an effort to honor those from both sides of the conflict but even more importantly, to draw this young country together once again.

Today is not only Memorial Day Weekend, but the final Sunday of the Easter season, the Sunday between Jesus' Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The disciples had been through so much, their world devastated by Jesus' suffering and death. And now, with him gone the disciples and followers of Jesus felt alone and confused but knew they must draw together. They went into hiding after the crucifixion but after the resurrection appearances, they began to walk back out into the world.

Our gospel reading today comes, not from one of Jesus' resurrection appearances, but from what is called "the priestly prayer". It is Jesus' final prayer for his disciples on the night before his death. In this prayer, Jesus sums up the significance of his earthly life. He has finished the mission he was sent to do, and he asks that God's glory now be revealed through him. More importantly for the band of confused disciples, he prays for their protection. This is a very unusual prayer because there are few instances recorded in the Bible where Jesus prayed aloud and one of those "the Our Father" we have memorized and say every Sunday. Even though he is speaking to God about the disciples, by praying aloud he is also speaking indirectly to the disciples, letting them hear what he wanted for them. "Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." (17:11) "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from evil." (17: 15) Jesus did not want his disciples removed from the troubled world. As he expressed in his prayer, he wanted them to continue his ministry: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world"

(John 17:18). Jesus knew there were more Samaritan women longing to hear that the community of faith was not closed to them. He knew there were more people born blind waiting to be led from darkness to the light of faith. He knew there were many in need of healing and good news and so he prayed, despite the difficulty of the world, they were to remain in it.

This is not an easy prayer. We only have to read Paul's letters to know it was not easy to be the church then. And it certainly isn't easy now. We exist in a troubled world. We may feel tempted to draw rigid or judgmental lines between the faithful and the damned between who is right and who is wrong. Certainly our political discourse has ratcheted up the rhetoric to such extremes that it is hard to even see a middle way. There is anxiousness about business, finance, unemployment and terrorism all around us. Our denomination is torn by passionate issues and too many interested more in winning than being the community of Christ.

But this prayer makes it possible for all generations of believers to hear and experience the love that Jesus and God have for them. To successive generations of believers, this prayer communicates the theological vision that lies at the heart of the life of faith. Jesus hands those whom he loves back to God and holds God to God's promises for this community, for this country, for our world. Even though the world is troubled, Jesus wants us in it. He wants us in the troubled world because his revelation is not for us alone. He wants us in the troubled world – bearing witness to it.

And so with that lens we can say that whether General John Logan intended it, Memorial Day has theology in it. Remembering and honoring all people – even those you disagree with enough to go to war against, brings each one of us to the hope of “a more perfect union.” Memorial Day is not about division. It is about reconciliation; it is about coming together to honor those who died – on both sides. Indeed, the Emancipation Proclamation declared the slaves free on January 1, 1863; but when I was a child in 1963 in many hometowns across America, Black and White children did not attend the same schools, eat in restaurants together or swim in the same swimming pools. Some of the divisions so raw and painful in 1868 persist still. It is not an easy world - yet we have come so, so far. Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. As Christians, as Americans, as people of God we live in that hope.

The German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann has a lot to say about that kind of hope. He grew up in Germany, studied mathematics at the university and idolized Albert Einstein. He took his entrance exams to proceed with his education but by then Hitler was on the move and Moltmann was drafted into an Air Force auxiliary of the German army. Ordered to Reichwald, a German forest at the front lines, he surrendered in the dark to the first British soldier he met. As a prisoner of war he was first confined in Belgium. He wrote later that he and his fellow prisoners were tormented by “memories and gnawing thoughts” losing all hope and confidence in German culture because of atrocities they knew were going on. Photographs of Buchenwald and other concentration camps were nailed up in their confinement. Moltmann claimed his remorse was so great, he often felt he would have rather died along with many of his comrades than live to face what their nation had done. Moltmann met a group of Christians in the camp, and was given a small copy of the New Testament and Psalms by an American chaplain. He gradually felt more and more identification with and reliance on the Christian faith. Moltmann later claimed, "I didn't find Christ, he found me."

As a prisoner of war in a British camp during World War II, Moltmann observed that his fellow prisoners who had hope fared the best. After the war, Moltmann returned home at 22 years of age to find his hometown of Hamburg (in fact, his entire country) in ruins. Moltmann returned to school, determined to study theology to understand that power of hope to which he owed his life. Moltmann is known as "one of the leading proponents of the theology of hope. He believes that God's promise to act in the future is more important than the fact that he has acted in the past. What is implied by this focus on the future, however, is not withdrawal from the world in the hope that a better world will somehow evolve, but active participation in the world in order to aid in the coming of that better world." Moltmann had seen the worst the world has to offer and built his theology of hope in God from that. "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). Moltmann believed that remembering is part of that hope.

Hope without remembrance leads to illusion, just as, conversely, remembrance without hope can result in resignation.<sup>1</sup> Decoration Day has become Memorial Day – it is about remembering . This weekend we have ample reason to remember and give thanks for those who have given their lives in sacrifice and service to our country. I hope we pause to remember those who gave so much to make us who we are. But I hope we do not stop there. I hope that in addition to the quiet gratitude we will express for those who gave their lives, we also celebrate those who, following the Civil War and many other national challenges, chose to work toward "a more perfect union." Without those who made that choice, our grand experiment, this United States, could have come to an end. And so we pray in hope for all those actively working for a better world. We live in the hope of Christ's words... "Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

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<sup>1</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), ix.