

**"TO STAND UP FOR WHAT IS RIGHT . . ."**

**Text: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy which leads to destruction. . . . The gate is narrow and the way is hard which leads to life, and those who find it are few."**

**– Matthew 7:13**

**DR. RICHARD M. CROMIE  
THE ROYAL POINCIANA CHAPEL  
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I bid you God's peace for Memorial Day Weekend. Memorial Day is a distinctly American holiday, even if most nations honor their dead in one way or another. "Decoration Day," as we used to call it, started during the Civil War, a war of neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother, father against son. . . . Sadness was everywhere. Civil wars are always deadly.

But a little light shines in the darkness. Before the conflict was over, some Confederate women began placing flowers on the graves of their kinsmen, but they also placed flowers on the graves of the Yankees. What a lovely origin to a holiday: Americans crossing boundaries to remember the dead. One nation in two parts, under God, being drawn together to honor the dead.

There are several different traditions as to where Decoration Day originated. A steady claim has been made in Waterloo, New York, where on May 5, 1866, the Mayor ordered all flags to be lowered to half-staff, all shops closed, and all citizens were to march to the town's three cemeteries to honor those who had fallen in the Civil War.

Up in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, a huge sign greets you as you enter: "Birthplace of Decoration Day." It is a gentler story . . . there, on Sunday, May 30, 1864, Emma Hunter placed flowers on the grave of her father, Colonel Hunter, who had died in a Battle of the Forty-Ninth Pennsylvania Regiment. At the same moment, at the very next grave, Mrs. Meyer was paying similar tribute at the grave of her son. When they were finished planting flowers and sharing tears together, one said to the other, "Why don't we meet here again next year on the same Sunday, and we'll do it again!" They did, May 30, 1865.

In Vicksburg, Petersburg and Charleston there are equally interesting traditions. In Charleston, South Carolina, e.g., a black teacher took her Negro students out to decorate the graves of the white soldiers. That was the extra mile; it was still the days of slavery. God's love is powerful. The same thing happened in Columbus, Georgia, where the famous *"The Blue and Gray"* was written.

When the war was over, General Norton P. Shipman, of the Grand

Army of the Republic, officially proclaimed a regular celebration of Decoration Day for the thirtieth of May. In most places, the date took hold, although some southern states objected. Then in 1967 a joint resolution of Congress changed the holiday from May 30th to the last Monday of the month. I've never quite forgiven them for that, even if three-day holiday weekends are a good idea, too.

The Civil War took 646,000 lives, all Americans -- 150,000 on the battlefield. Each time a new battle drew our nation across the world, Memorial Day broadened, too. 8.5 million people died in World War I. In World War II seven million people died, not counting the holocaust where six million Jews were annihilated by Hitler. Viet Nam claimed its tens of thousands, Korea, even a few in Desert Storm.

Memorial Day is a somber time, primarily remembering those who died in battle. But it is also a time to decorate other graves, too, at least symbolically. Friends and family who in similar ways gave up their all.

The Bible says "**Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends.**" Of course, it refers to Jesus who died for all of us, and to dramatic surrender of life. But there is another kind of life that is given up, too. Every time a parent gives up time and energy and worry for a child, sacrificing herself or himself, that portion of life and time is gone forever. Life is lived in minutes and hours and days as well as decades. Every time a wife sacrifices her life and destiny for her husband that portion of her life is gone forever. It is noble, good. Memorial Day is a time to remember. That is first.

This weekend I challenge you to take some serious time, perhaps now, perhaps later, when you parade through the corridors of your memory, the men and women who surrendered their time and energy for you. We used to have Memorial Day parades all across the country, but most of them have been canceled in recent years, due to lack of interest. It is a time to remember.

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But if Memorial Day is a time to look backward, it is also a time to move forward, to build on the foundation of others. It is a time to stand up for the values that have sustained us through the years. It is a time to stand up for what is right. We have allowed too much compromise.

Back when I was defining my ideas about what America should be, I was greatly influenced by Senator Everett Dirkson. He served our nation with consummate skill for over 40 years. He had charm and dignity, in addition to being an accomplished politician and a brilliant public speaker. My fondest memory came from a speech I heard him give during the tumultuous era of Civil Rights legislation. It was impossible to hide. He was brave. In the question and answer period one reporter asked: "Senator Dirkson, but what will you do if the cause becomes unpopular and you lose votes?" The Senator smiled, looked up over the microphone and said, "My friend, sometimes you have to do what is right, and when you do, you have to take the consequences. What our nation should be is not a popularity contest. It is whether we are willing to stand up for what is right and good!"  
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**to take the consequences.**

It is easier to duck the issue, small or large, to let it go on and on, to let injustice slide by. It is easier not to stand up for what will bring the consequences of criticism. It is easier to compromise. It is easier to go along with the crowd. But, when something is wrong, and you know it, it is time to stand up and be counted!

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There our Scripture lesson comes in from Matthew 7: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy which leads to destruction, and those who find it are many. The gate is narrow and the way is hard which leads to life, and those who find it are few."

There are two things going on here in the mind of our Lord. This little passage comes near the end of the Sermon on the Mount. He has set out all kinds of things for them (and us) to think about: Plans for how to live a Christian life, how to give and receive forgiveness, how to seek the

righteousness of God . . . in short the Sermon on the Mount is a set of directions on how to find real happiness, not just pleasures and how to make our lives matter, how to cut to the heart of it all.

The summary Jesus gives is formed in the metaphor of entering a gate going into the city. Jerusalem had dozens of gates. Most of them were small. But you must go through a gate to get to the other side. "The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who find it are many. As a rule of thumb, He is saying that if you have a choice between following the crowd and carving your own way, go on your own. To thine own self be true. As Robert Frost wrote:

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
And I, I took the one less traveled by  
And that made all the difference."

The road to excellence is always lonely. You have to walk it by yourself. But if we stand up for what is right God will bless us and our times. If we act clearly in defense of equality and racial harmony and

fairness for all people; if we reach out to the poor and needy; if we become a friend of the friendless and help the homeless to find homes, and help qualified Christian young people to have an education, of course those are the right thing to do, but there is an added bonus: you change lives for Christ. It redirects those who would otherwise go astray. Are you listening? When you do what is right it brings its own reward. It is twice blest -- it blesses him who gives and him who takes.

Our nation is dedicated to the proposition that all men and women are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

There are times when that stance is unpopular. If you stand up for what is right, there will be times when you will be criticized. The way is narrow which leads to life, and those who find it are few. Most people look the other way. But, if you don't stand for something, you will fall for whatever happens to come by. You have to make a choice. Joshua said it in the Old Testament: "Choose this day whom you will serve." Jesus

added, "You cannot serve God and Mammon."

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Now I am aware that the most of us are not up to doing physical battle in the major problems of the world, but some are. For many, our days of active duty are over. I know many have already put their lives on the line in war time, in public service for human dignity, and a myriad of other ways. I know. Maybe now it is more a matter of attitude and prayers and encouragement of young people to follow Christ and to dream. Maybe it is as simple a matter as being on the right side; of praying for God to touch and direct our world: To help it make a choice for the right thing, not the popular one.

James Russell Lowell said it better than anybody: "Thoughts men's hearts once died for we now breathe cheaply in the common air." Memorial Day is a time to remember, but it is a time to hope and dream and choose what kind of a person, or community, or nation do we want to be?

It's time to close. A couple of years ago for Peggy's birthday we went to New York and saw "Les Miserables," in my opinion, the best Broadway show of all. The story is set in France. John Paul Jean and others have waged a battle for freedom and lost. Tolstoy once said, "It is better to fail in a cause that will ultimately succeed than to succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail." Their cause was freedom. The play ends in defeat, on stage anyway. But the last resurrected song was magnificent. Remember the lines as they march in memory:

"Will you join in our crusade?

Who will be strong and stand with me?

Somewhere beyond the barricade

Is there a world you long to see?

Do you hear the people sing?

Say, do you hear the distant drum?

It is the future that they bring

When tomorrow comes. . . ."

Is there a land you long to see? Sure there is. Let's work for it.

Some day tomorrow will come. Others will be looking back on what we did, what we stood for. I hope they will be pleased with you and me. For now and evermore. Amen.