

# The Meaning of Memorial Day

✖ Each December I urge my congregation to focus on the true meaning of Christmas. The worry my fellow pastors and I share is that the solemn message of Christ's birth gets overshadowed by the commercialization, jingle bells, and Santa-fication of the yuletide season.

As we turn the calendar's pages to yet another Memorial Day, I feel compelled to issue a similar challenge, one I offer not as a clergyman but as an American. Simply, let's not lose focus about what this most solemn of national holidays should really be about.

Too often Americans view the Memorial Day holiday as a pleasant three-day weekend kicking off the summer, perhaps with the year's first trip to the beach or the lake. We are inclined to think of the Fourth of July as the highlight of the season, with parades and fireworks to renew our nation's dedication to the principles of liberty. But it's worth remembering that we are able to celebrate Independence Day only because of the sacrifices made by the men and women whose lives were cut short to advance those principles. Memorial Day is for honoring their supreme sacrifice.

But what does that mean? It is not enough simply to bow our heads and note that more than a million men and women have given their lives so that we may be free. That reduces their

sacrifice to mere  
statistics. The challenge for the living is to keep in mind  
what each of those  
individual sacrifices represented. Each soldier, sailor,  
airman, or marine who  
died in battle left behind loved ones who mourned their deeply  
personal loss.

They were fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, childhood  
friends,  
relatives, neighbors, and members of the community. In giving  
their lives, they  
left unfulfilled dreams and ambitions to add to their loved  
ones' sorrows.

That's a million instances of tremendous personal anguish.

The hole their deaths have left in the hearts  
of those closest to them can never be filled. No letter of  
condolence, no  
tribute, no ceremonial flag, no medal or token of our esteem  
can ever make up  
for what they've lost. All of those things may help make the  
grief just a  
little bit less intense, but can never fully alleviate it.  
That is what their  
survivors must bear.

Their deaths are our loss too, less personal  
but in many respects more meaningful. It's a different type of  
loss. Think of  
the treasure of American youth that has been spilt over  
rolling farmland, on  
sandy beaches, or in distant jungles. Today our heroes fall in  
unforgiving  
mountains or in hostile deserts. Our nation's greater loss is  
what the country  
foregoes when large numbers of promising, productive men and  
women are killed

before they make their meaningful contributions to the greater good. Scientists and statesmen, engineers and poets, cut short before their time; what they might have accomplished one can only guess.

At the same time, this loss must be viewed through the lens of a great cause that renders their deaths heroic and honorable – contributions that, taken as a whole, are infinitely more valuable than the collective sum of what might have been.

Memorial Day is a time to salute those who gave, in Lincoln's words, "the last full measure of devotion" so that the rest of us might live freely. Nothing underscores the importance of liberty as much as the price paid for it. How else to explain the paradox that the price for freedom was so often paid for by those who willingly gave up their own? That sacrifice testifies to the extraordinary power of the ideal of freedom.

The first widespread observance of what we know as Memorial Day was held in 1868, just a few short years after the conclusion of the Civil War. Future President James Garfield, who had served with distinction as a Union general, delivered an oration at Arlington National Cemetery that rings no less true today than when he stood to speak. Of the nation's fallen soldiers in our various wars, Garfield said "for love of country they accepted death, and thus resolved all doubts, and made immortal

their patriotism and their virtue.”

Americans are asked to pause at 3 p.m. local time on Monday for a moment of remembrance. That is the very least we should do to honor the patriots who have lost their lives in conflicts from Lexington and Concord to Baghdad and Tora Bora. We need to do more. If we are to truly honor them, we will reflect not just on our fallen heroes, but on what their sacrifice means for us every other day of the year.

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