

If I am honest, the words Memorial Day usually bring to mind that it will be Memorial *Weekend*, a 3-day holiday weekend that usually coincides with warm weather, nature's shift from spring to summer; even the weather forecasters start talking about beach weather. Also in the news are things about where to go shopping for the best buys. We know that in our over-commercialized consumer culture, ads fill the media with "buy this, buy that, this the sale is one day only!" So we often overlook the real reason for the holiday.

When I was in High School I won a speech contest for an organization called "Voice of Democracy." I marched in the high school marching band on Memorial Day, then stopped at the town common to give the speech. While it is not at my fingertips, surely I said something about our "sweet land of liberty" and about all the soldiers who fought to preserve our freedoms. I probably did not say enough about remembering the horrific *cost* of war, all the deaths and permanent injuries, physical, psychological and spiritual. No matter how much we might try to glorify the victories or rationalize why we keep fighting, war was, is, and always will be horror and hell. We remember, so that we will not enter wars lightly or impulsively, but only as a *last resort after exhausting all other nonviolent efforts to resolve the conflicts*. We know this and teach this to our children at interpersonal levels: "use your words, not your fists, (and surely not guns!) to resolve your problems." Despite justifying times of war, both the Christian and Jewish faith in their "ideal" values have always taught *peace and love as God's "ultimate" will*.

The Ten Commandments from Moses have been valued by Christians and Jews for centuries. We may think of them as too negative (Thou Shalt Nots), but let's face it, in times of genocidal war (and demented mass killings at schools and grocery stores), it is necessary to say STOP doing certain things, before we can work

on the higher callings of God... like peace and love! I take my theme this morning from Rev. Dr. James Forbes, from his book entitled "Whose Gospel." Forbes explains why War breaks all 10 commandments:

1. Thou shall have no other gods before me. War elevates interests of nations, and nations themselves, above God. War says that salvation comes through weapons, power, and domination, not through God.

2. Thou shall not make a graven image and bow down to it. Similar to commandment #1, the symbol of a nation's flag can take the status of a god; a flag can evoke the feelings and thoughts of perfection; we can forget the important song lyrics "God mend our every flaw and may God our gold refine." (from O Beautiful for Spacious Skies by Katherine Lee Bates).

3. Thou shall not take the name of the Lord in vain. We often think of this as Thou shall not Swear, but it can also mean Don't "misuse" the name of God. Too often wars are said to be sanctioned by God; we say God is on our side... This is taking God's name in vain.

4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. It is obvious that War does not take a day off every week, or have a long weekend. Nor do soldier's even get a good night's sleep, with the fear of nighttime missiles, or enemy attacks at dawn. Constant anxiety and fear, being continually on edge is the sure recipe for PTSD.

5. Honor thy father and thy mother. For every death or severe injury, there are parents with broken hearts the rest of their lives... and we could easily multiply by 10 or 20 to get the number of family and friends that are affected.

6. Thou shalt not kill. The most obvious broken commandment! People have always tried to justify war, but killing is still against God's ultimate will. The killing in war should be absolutely a last

resort, an act of unquestionable self defense. The warlike history of Israel and of Christians are historical narrative, not the ultimate will of God's 10 Commandments, nor the way of Jesus.

7. Thou shalt not commit adultery. While it may seem a bit of a metaphorical stretch, this is similar to the opening commands about having no other gods. Those who follow God's will have a covenant, like a marriage covenant, to put God first. Flirting with the gods of power and control, via ungodly killing, is straying from God.

8. Thou shalt not steal. Another very clear commandment! Yet in war, the lives of young men and women are stolen from their parents and family and friends. To add further injury, the victors often loot and rape, and actually steal land, oil, and industries, etc.

9. Thou shalt not bear false witness (basically, "Thou shalt not lie"). Well, war obviously has all manner of propaganda, misinformation, outright lies, hiding the horrible costs of war, hiding the exponential grief as wars drag on, putting on masks of national righteousness, while demonizing, vilifying, dehumanizing the enemy. All a false witness to our common humanity, to justify the fighting and killing.

10. Thou shalt not covet anything belonging to thy neighbor. This is very similar to the command not to steal, which may start by desiring or covet a neighbor's goods, a neighbor's spouse, all the things that people steal in time of war.

Again, the 10 Commandments may be mostly negative, telling us to STOP doing things, but if the world could stop killing, stealing, lying etc, there might be room and time for the nobler goals of making peace and loving neighbor as oneself. Yes, to focus on the positive, we remember that Jesus said all the commandments can be summed up in two: Love God, and Love your neighbor as yourself. LOVE is indeed the command that can cause all the rest to be followed. Love will never kill, steal, commit

adultery and lie. To focus on Love as top priority IS to focus on God, and to have no other gods that take first place in our lives. Our flag and our country can never take first place before God; that is idolatry. The song lyrics are so true: “Other lands have skies as blue as ours,” dreams and aspirations as good and noble as ours. (And all countries, like people, have their flaws, their weaknesses as well as strengths.)

We are followers of Jesus who told his followers to put away their swords, and said that if you live by the sword, you shall die by the sword. Jesus was simply stating a fact, that violence always breeds more violence. His words “If you live by the sword” are a way of saying: if weapons and power are your God, your way of salvation, you will not know the true God, the God of peace, mercy, steadfast love and joy. Like the Roman Caesars of old and the Putins of today, even if you have conquered lands and gained control by killing, you will live your life looking over your shoulder, fearful of an act of revenge, fearful of being killed in return.

We know that Christians have justified war, have ignored Jesus’ principal commands, at our own peril. If we live by killing and domination, we will receive that in return. What goes around does come around. If we lie, steal, and kill, the same will be done to us. On the other hand, If we extend a hand to make peace, to love a neighbor, the same will be returned. On this Memorial Weekend, let’s remember the Ten Commandments, how we break them when we are at war, how death and tears are only multiplied. Then, let us commit to engage in war only as a last resort, when nonviolent efforts have been exhausted. Let’s pray and work for peace, for freedom for *all* God’s children, both here and abroad. Amen.