

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPT: Revelation 7:9, 13-17.

Scarcely a day goes by that I do not think of my mother - and of my father and sister - but especially of my mother and the things I would love to tell her about her marvelous grandchildren whom she adored and her great-grand children whom she never met. The dead populate our consciousness, and for those of us who live long enough we think of them often. Remembering the dead, I believe, must be wired into our genes.

Regard, if not reverence, for the dead is a phenomenon known since ancient times. Both the Greeks and the Romans held festivals in which graves were festooned w. flowers and public tribute paid to all who had gone before and in many instances especially to fallen warriors. One of the earliest recorded remembrances was that of Pericles who in 431 BC gave an oration extolling the heroes of the Peloponnesian Wars. Some scholars have compared it to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address which itself had been given following one of the costliest battles of our own War Between the States.

If you go on line to research the origin of Decoration Day/Memorial Day you discover an array of choices, each claiming to be either the oldest or the most authentic. One which earned early Federal approval is the community of Boalsburg, PA, an extension of present day State College, where in Oct. of 1864. in order to remember the fallen of Gettysburg, three women, Emma Hunter, Sophie Keller, and Elizabeth Myers, placed flowers on the tombs of soldiers who had perished in that conflict. Another early precedent of our modern rituals occurred in the South closely following the end of that same prolonged conflict. As The War was drawing to a close, the Confederacy removed thousands of imprisoned Union troops into abysmal incarceration at a number of sites, including a Charleston, SC race track. After some 250 of those men had died and been buried and when the conflict had drawn to a close some thousand freed slaves, several regiments of colored troops including the well-known Mass. 54th., and a handful of whites went to remember those men - singing hymns, offering readings, and distributing flowers in memory of those they called "Martyrs of the Racecourse." I prefer to think of them more accurately as "Martyrs of the Race Cause." It was White Privilege that ranked at the top of the century old conflict between North and South, a phenomenon not exactly unknown to us in the 21st. century.

Most religious traditions and most cultures affirm a life beyond this life. It is called by different names but affirms a common reality: this mortal existence is not all there is. There is life, light, and hope yet to be experienced. The passage from Revelation about to be read is a Christian commentary on what is to be. "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and whence came they?" And the answer, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal and whose robes have been washed white in the blood of the Lamb." Their number, you will note is 144,000. 144,000 is another way of saying "A Great Multitude." Take three, the number of divinity, multiply it by four, the number for humanity, take that twelve, square it for its exponential quality, and then multiply by a thousand, a huge number in its own right: 144,000, and then note how St. John the Divine affirms how this number represents every tribe, every nation, every people. No one group has a monopoly upon the grace and wonder of God. We all matter.

SCRIPT: Revelation 7:9, 13-17.

HOMILY:

I am a child of the 40's and 50's, and since Congress never declared Memorial Day a national holiday until 1971, I tend to think of the holiday as belonging to May 30 and not the last Mon. in May. In my mind it is still Decoration Day, for on that day it was a family custom to make our pilgrimage to Pine Ridge Cemetery at the city limits of Buffalo and "decorate" the graves of family members. As I recall it, the task was not so much to adorn the graves w. flowers as it was to tend to the graves, because in the climate of Buffalo where summer occurs on a Thurs. most yrs., though sometimes it does fall on a Tues., only lilacs are in bloom by May 30, and neither our home nor my uncle's home had lilacs planted round about them. The task, you see, was to explain to us children where our ancestors were buried and where Ma, Papa, and Little Ma, our great-grandmother, would ultimately be buried, to tend to all their graves, occupied and yet to be, to clean up the debris that had gathered there, to raise the headstones above the mucky flood plain that surrounded them, to reassure my grandmother who each yr. complained she didn't want her feet to be under water - her grave was adjacent to a faucet used to fill sprinkling cans - that she should be thankful it was her feet and not her head that could possibly be under water, and why fuss about this, she wouldn't be aware of it anyway.

As the years passed and the generations changed, it was no longer people we had never known who were buried there. Rather it was our grandparents and then our parents who occupied those spaces. Rebecca and I lived far away. I don't believe I have been to Pine Ridge in years, but my cousin faithfully took his trowel, his long-handled shovel, his sprinkling can, and ultimately his son to "decorate" and tend to the graves. When we spoke long distance, he would moan about the arduous task, rebuke me for not tending my parents' graves, my indifference to the dead he would say, and I in response would bait him asking why he engaged in such a non-productive endeavor. "It's a matter of remembering the dead," he would say, and I would respond, "But do we not remember the dead by caring for the living? Do we not honor the dead by loving the living?"

Loving the Living: That's a comprehensive more than life long endeavor. Where does one begin? I'm sure it starts [w.in](#) our own families. There is much I could say about my own family of origin and what I have learned about relating to one's family. However, that data is quite personal and not appropriate from this rostrum. I do recall, though, the words of Sloan Wilson, the author of the fifties best-seller "The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit." He and his wife lived in our suburban neighborhood and were among the patrons of the branch library where I worked during HS. His one liner that most impressed me over the yrs. I gleaned from a Times magazine section in the early 70's: "A man can never treat his wife too well." Can that affirmation in any way be topped?

It's no great revelation that our circle of responsibility extends far beyond our immediate families. We live [w.in](#) communities where each member is an integral part of the equation. Some of us at The Highlands saw a documentary on the Mayo Clinic a couple of Fridays ago. It was entitled "The Mayo Clinic - Faith, Hope, Science. What an interesting combination! It was an August evening in 1889 when a violent tornado invaded Rochester, MN and W. W. Mayo, a local MD discovered there were too many wounded and homeless to be cared for in his private office space. Ever resourceful, the good doctor approached Mother Alfred of the local Sisters of St. Francis. They were a teaching order, and their boarding school's students were on vacation during August. Might they open their

dormitory to the homeless. Of course Mother Alfred said yes. Over the weeks and the months Dr. Mayo and his two sons, also MDs, Mother Alfred and her sisters combined forces to tend to the wounded, the distressed in body and spirit. The sisters raised the \$40,000. to build the first Mayo Clinic hospital by selling their knitting and sewing and by eating absolutely spartan meals. They learned nursing skills so the three medical Mayo practitioners had colleagues in healing. They epitomized that African saying, "The one who travels alone goes fastest; the one who travels w. others goes the farthest." Combine an agnostic medical family with a Catholic religious order; the result is a world renown network of people dedicated to loving and healing the living.

Well, that was the 19th. cen., and surely you will never have an argument when it comes to tending the wounded and healing the diseased. There is, though, often great conflict re: who else ought to be deserving of our ministrations. Allow me to reference Topeka, KS where Rebecca and I spent eight yrs. during the 80's and 90's serving First Congregational Church as co-pastors. Those yrs. were both exhilarating and horrendous, the greatest challenge to our ministry and our own emotional well-being coming from a conservative Baptist Church and their evangelical leadership, most widely known for their vitriolic anti-homosexuality stance. Their history of picketing the funerals of deceased service people is legion. But that came later. During our yrs. in Topeka they routinely picketed venues of education and entertainment where the public gathered. Maya Angelou who had come to speak at our newly opened Performing arts Center, said she had never encountered such hostility and never been so terrified for her own personal safety as she did crossing their picket lines that Sun. afternoon in May 25 yrs. ago when she was our invited guest. We had become accustomed to their picketing at Gage Park, Washburn College, the Downtown Y, but when houses of worship who sought to embody a welcoming stance to all began to be picketed on a weekly basis, their presence became literally unbearable. Open and affirming as we sought to be, it seemed to us their attitude could more accurately be phrased as closed and condemning. Each Sabbath their pickups would appear outside the doors of the main line Protestant Churches, and out would pour generations of the family along w. seven foot signs reading: GOD HATES GAYS, FAGS DESERVE TO DIE. Other of those signs were far more vulgar and offensive. The teens of our church would report back how the grandchildren picketing on Sun. would report in school on Mon. how much fun it was to hate, how gays deserved whatever suffering they were going through. We had three young men in our church who learning they were afflicted w. AIDS had literally come home to die. The congregation rallied around them and their families. Because the Epis. Ch. down the street was especially despised by this conservative crew, and because the picketing there literally blocked the entry to their sanctuary, several of us would arrive at St. David's early service to offer safe entry to their congregants, then return to First Congregational for our own service and assist our own people into our worship space. I still recall a psychologist of our ch. being infuriated when they yelled at her "Hey, old lady, you don't want to go into that fag church." Naomi said upon reflection, "I don't know which offended me more, being called an old lady or having my faith community being slandered as a fag church." Doing justice, embracing mercy, walking humbly, loving the living - it's how we best honor the dead.

My son has in recent months been helping me understand on a deeper level some of the dynamics of white privilege. I jokingly was telling him how one winter morning I found myself at a local bakery obtaining a loaf of gluten free bread and how reaching for my wallet discovered I had only a one and not eight of them. Now I was on my bicycle and had no desire to pedal back across the river to fetch the other seven ones and then bike back again, so I blithly said, "Give me a scrap of paper if you

would. I'll write down my name and phone and be back next Fri. to pay for the rest of it when I come for next week's bread." They smiled and happily acquiesced. "Exactly," said Stephen. "You got away w. that because you are white, probably also because they recognized you and remembered you come there often. They also expected to see you again as you said. But, beyond that, you didn't have to wonder if you were welcome in that neighborhood, if it was safe for you and your bicycle to be there, if something unseemly would present itself around the corner. You knew you could quite freely come and go unmolested." That's White Privilege. I once asked a parishioner, a Boston Latin School, Harvard undergraduate and Harvard Medical man, a neurosurgeon I might add, only after I'd known him for several yrs., "What's it been like being Black?" His answer was, "I always wondered whether I was noticed, whether I counted, if I belonged. Were people only being polite? Did I really matter, and did it matter I was there?"

White Privilege is not an arcane subject. It's a given most of us profitably live w. every day of our lives. We experience an acceptance and accesibility that does not so readily come to all. I love statistics, and here I'm indebted to a recent issue of "The Economist." In 1962, two yrs. before the passage of the landmark civil-rights act and the launching of the Great Society, the average wealth of white households was seven times greater than that of black households. Yet after decades of declining discrimination that ratio remains the same. For black households in this country median wealth is \$138,200. For whites, that number is \$933,700. The differences are caused by lower incomes and indebtedness. Note, for eg., 19.4% of black households have a net wealth at or below zero. For white households, it's less than half that number or 9.2% who have no accumulated savings. Home ownership, the classic wealth building tool of the middle class, stands at 42% among blacks, only one percentage point higher than it was fifty years ago, compared w. a current 73% for whites. All sorts of sociological and political dynamics explain these differences, and they can be debated for good or evil. The question remains: how can we as a society reduce the disparities? How might we choose to love and empower the living who are not so complected as we for more courageous loving and living in these days?

In 1865 Abraham Lincoln addressed that issue of honoring the dead and loving the living by challenging a still divided and weary nation. In his Second Inaugural Address, delivered just weeks prior to his death, he said, "... let us bind up the nation's wounds, to care for those who have borne the battle and for the widows and orphans, to do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace." It's an incredible challenge. It can surely be achieved. May we all be included in that mighty array representative of every tribe, clan, and nation, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and whence came they? They are those who have come out of the great ordeal, who have washed their robes, and made them clean."

Grant us, O Lord, to know what is worth knowing,
to love what is worth loving,
to praise what can bear with praise,
to hate what in your sight is unworthy,
to prize what to you is precious,
and above all to reach out and do that which is well-pleasing in your sight.
Amen.