



Memorial Day  
Easter 7A 5/24/20  
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment  
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*Oh Lord: take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

Alleluia Christ is Risen!

I speak to you this morning on the cusp of Memorial Day.

The roots of Memorial Day lie in the massive carnage of the Civil War. Faced with the monumental task of burying roughly three quarters of a million Union and Confederate dead, the traumatized nation held ceremonies around the country in cemeteries, new and old.

The first *national* commemoration of Memorial Day was held at the newly established Arlington National Cemetery, outside Washington DC, on May 30, 1868. Originally known as Decoration Day, this occasion was marked on May 30 each year, until it became an official Federal holiday in 1971, to be celebrated on the last Monday in May.

Interestingly, the first *local* observance of Memorial Day was likely marked by freed slaves in Charleston, South Carolina, the location of the opening salvo of the Civil War. Freed slaves exhumed the bodies of 265 Union prisoners of war who had been dumped into a mass grave by their Confederate captors.

The formerly enslaved peoples reburied the bodies into a proper graveyard, then honored the dead with a parade. Stories in the Charleston Courier and New York Tribune reported that on May 1, 1865, more than 10,000 people, mostly freed slaves, staged a parade around the newly created cemetery. <https://www.history.com/news/memorial-day-civil-war-slavery-charleston>.

Marchers included members of the famed 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry, the second fighting unit in American history to consist of African American soldiers. (The first was formed in Kansas). If you have seen the movie “Glory,” starring young Denzel Washington and Matthew Broderick, you know a little bit about the regiment. The regiment is also memorialized in a monument on the Boston Common.

Memorial Day is about memory, then; remembering those who have sacrificed for others, and standing up for them, and living up to what the recollection of their deaths is meant to inspire.

I imagine many of you have seen the front page of today’s New York Times already, released last night. It lists the names of 1000 people who have died in our country of COVID-19 and gives a more personal portrait from a representative sample taken from this cohort. This number represents one tenth of the nearly 100,000 deaths we have suffered so far in this country alone. World-wide, nearly 350,000 have perished. Each death represents a complicated and rich life, a



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web of relationships, the image of God departed from this world prematurely. The deaths of so many, then and now, should inspire us to prayer—prayers of sorrow, gratitude, and intercession.

That's what our Gospel is about today: Prayer.

And the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of Peter this morning sets the tone for our prayer. It captures an important part of the spirit of where we are: *ordeal; shared, widespread suffering*; the invitation to *cast our anxieties* on the Lord.

We're still in midst of the Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John but moving to the end. The past couple of weeks we have overheard Jesus saying goodbye to his disciples. He is preparing them, reminding them, encouraging them. But this week he shifts from talking with his disciples, to talking with God.

In what has been called the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prays for himself, his disciples, and for what becomes the Church, even unto our own day. He prays for protection in a hostile world, and for union with God.

One of the most critical things Jesus shows us throughout his ministry is the importance of prayer. He is praying constantly. He prays before picking his disciples, before he heals, before he feeds people, as he prepares to die. His disciples see him doing it quite a lot.

In the Gospel of Luke, one of his disciples finally, asks him to teach them to pray. This where we get one of the two versions of the Lord's Prayer. The other version is in Matthew—but the pattern is the same: begin with praise for God and a desire for God's Kingdom. And then prayer for the community—however broadly conceived—"Give us today our daily bread." Daily bread means not only what we need for physical sustenance, but ALL of that which humans need for flourishing.

Last Sunday, the Intercessory Prayer Group met for the first time in nearly a year. This group of persons, a couple of dozen, mostly affiliated with Christ Church, not all, mostly in this state, but not all, commits to praying for people and situations on a regular basis—however each prayerer may define that. We receive a list each month, updated as needed. One of the hidden blessings of this COVID-19 era is that in some ways it has made certain kinds of gatherings easier. We had participants from other states join us in the Zoom call.

I asked folks how their prayer lives had been affected by the Quarantine. A good number said, in words to the effect, "My list has grown longer." People are praying more and more for others—interceding before God, on behalf of others. I've been in a Morning Prayer conference call at our Cathedral for the past seven weeks or so, and in the free prayer time, while there are often prayers of thanksgiving, mostly there are prayers of intercession.



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Though I pray this way often, and know in my bones that it matters, I know I am not alone in wondering just *how* it matters. I have often pondered exactly what intercessory prayer is, and what it does.

Frank Griswold, former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, writes this: “Prayer is a form of energy... to pray for others is to acknowledge and call upon this energy whose dominant characteristic is love, a love which exceeds all that we might ask or imagine....The consequence of praying for others lies in God’s hands and is beyond our knowing. But this we know: no energy of the Spirit is ever wasted, even though our limited vision may make it impossible to see the fruit of the Spirit’s activity.

The Spirit’s movements within us do not always take the form of words and therefore to think of another and to desire their well-being is in itself prayer. As well, the Spirit can move us to some form of action on behalf of another. Such actions are also a form of prayer....

We know that the love and concern at the heart of our prayer will not be wasted, though how God will use our prayer exceeds our limited knowing. Prayer may produce peace or quiet confidence in those for whom we pray. Prayer may give us an increased capacity to companion them in what they are living or suffering. Our prayer may lead to immediate and tangible support they need in order to bear their present burdens.” [Praying our Days: A Guide and Companion (Morehouse; 2009) pp. 47-49]

As Jesus prays for us, so are we to pray for our world in need of healing, in this time of sorrow. And it is also a time of gratitude for the inspiring, often unnoticed and faithful service of so many—those who are tending to the sick, keeping the economy going, and otherwise going about their appointed responsibilities with flexibility, endurance, and compassion.

And so, as we mark this Memorial Day, forged in suffering as well as gratitude, let us keep praying, not only in grateful memory for the dead.

In these times, may we keep praying on behalf of the *living*, as Jesus teaches us, for daily bread for all, for hope and healing.

Amen.