

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
May 25, 2014
Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26
John 14:15-21

“A Time to Remember”

Sometime last week I decided I wanted to take the kids to Jefferson Barracks this weekend. They’ve never been, and I want them to see it, to see those 390,000 graves so they can understand that Memorial Day is about honoring and remembering our fallen soldiers, not BBQs and pool openings and the official start of summer.

Most of you probably know, but if you don’t here’s a little history lesson for you, that:

Three years after the Civil War ended, on May 5, 1868, the head of an organization of Union veterans — the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) — established Decoration Day as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers. Maj. Gen. John A. Logan declared that Decoration Day should be observed on May 30, a date likely chosen because there are so many flowers in bloom on May 30.

The first large observance of Decoration Day was held that year at Arlington National Cemetery, where the veranda of Arlington mansion, the former home of Gen. Robert E. Lee, was draped in black. Various Washington officials, including Gen. and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant, presided over the ceremonies. After speeches, children from the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Orphan Home and members of the GAR made their way through the cemetery, tossing flowers on both Union and Confederate graves, reciting prayers and singing hymns.

The crowd attending the first Memorial Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery was approximately the same size as those that attend today’s observance, about 5,000 people. Then, as now, small American flags were placed on each grave — a tradition followed at many national cemeteries today, including Jefferson Barracks.

Of course, in recent years, the observance of Memorial Day has grown in many families to decorate the graves of all departed loved ones.

So it’s along these lines that I’d like to spend some time this morning remembering the people in our lives who have nurtured and taught us, inspired us and helped us; and molded us into the people we are today. On this Memorial Day weekend, who are the people who loved you and encouraged you and whose love continues to be a living force in your life? If this weekend you could decorate the grave of a loved one with flowers, no matter where that grave might be, whose would it be? (Today, we’re going to remember give thanks to God for them.)

Maybe it is a hero of national renown, a soldier who died in battle, such as we remember this weekend.

Or perhaps it's a grandparent, whose love was beyond anything you'd ever experienced.

Maybe it's a brother or sister, who became more than just a sibling, but a best friend.

Maybe it's a parent, or a teacher, or a mentor or a friend.

More than likely, your person is an ordinary person, who was extraordinary for you.

In today's reading from Acts, we hear this short little story about 2 ordinary people who were about to do something extraordinary. One of them was about to become the 13th disciple, charged with taking Jesus' mission to the world.

You see, when the book of Acts opens, Jesus is only around for a little while longer. He's about to ascend to God, which means he won't be around to lead the disciples. They will have to assume leadership themselves.

Jesus told them what their mission was: "to go the ends of the earth and preach the gospel of the kingdom of God." That's exciting stuff and throughout the book of Acts we see them doing just that. But leadership also included really mundane tasks like organizing the structure of the church so they could fulfill that mission. In short, they needed to find people to serve on committees and do some of the less than glamorous work!

And, they needed to find someone to fill Judas' spot. Having 12 disciples was important, because each disciple represented one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Peter makes it clear in his address that the replacement had to be someone who knew Jesus personally-someone who, in Peter's words, "accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us."

That's a tall order, but the 120 people assembled recommended two candidates to take Judas' place. The first is Joseph, and the other is Matthias. We've never heard of these two candidates before now, but we can assume that they met Peter's requirements for office.

So the 11 and others gathered there began to pray -"Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry . . ." That was the opening of their prayer. They thought they knew a little of what was in Justus' and Matthias' hearts. They thought they knew a little about their options. But perhaps they were aware that they didn't know everything, so they continue praying: "Lord, we think we know a little, but you fully know, you know fully, what is in the heart... Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry..."

After a prayer like that, Presbyterians might spend a week or two discerning which way the Spirit is moving. Or, we might form a nominating committee to take it to the next level and make a few phone calls.

But not the disciples. No. They cast lots! They throw dice! The next disciple would be chosen by luck of the draw, or – depending on your perspective -- whoever drew the shortest straw. Which seems really, really odd to this life-long Presbyterian!

But apparently, the 11 disciples and the 120 congregants assembled had every confidence that the simple process of casting lots was the best way to determine the will of God.

Which tells me, after I've gotten over my initial shock at the whole casting lots thing, that the Book of Acts is trying to tell us something important, something we need to hear. And that is that God can, and often does, choose ordinary people to do extraordinary things. And often, God's choice catches us completely off guard.

Because God is full of surprises!

When you look through the Bible, you find some really ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Consider the people God tapped on the shoulder in the Old Testament. God chose a murderer named Moses to take Israel out of Egypt. God chose a harlot named Rahab to sneak Israel into the Promised Land. God chose a Moabite foreigner named Ruth to be the grandmother of Israel's greatest king. God chose a womanizer named David to be that king. And according to Paul, God chooses the lowly and despised for the most important work.

I would add, that God chooses ordinary people to do extraordinary things; people, like you and me.

And that's exactly what we see happening in today's story. Justus and Mathias are ordinary men. So ordinary, in fact, that we've never heard about them until now. And yet, they followed the disciples from the time of Jesus' baptism to his ascension-which is about 3 years. Given the length of time they followed Jesus, and the fact that they're names are up for nomination. I'm a little surprised we haven't heard about Justus and Mathias until now. But we haven't, not a thing. So the only thing I can surmise is that they were just ordinary people, who happened to follow an extraordinary man, which led them to their calling.

Now, I want you to think about the ordinary people in your lives who have helped you along on the way. Who are the Justus and Mathias in your life? Who are the quiet, ordinary people who were extraordinary for you? It seems fitting to remember these people on Memorial Day weekend. On whose grave would you place flowers this weekend?

Who are your Justus and Mathias?

Now, I need to tell you that after this story in Acts, we never hear from Justus or Mathias again. That's caused some Biblical scholars to come to the conclusion that maybe Justus and Mathias weren't really called to serve as an apostle-that casting lots was a man-made scheme and the apostles should have spent more time in prayer. Could be.

But I think that what's really happening here, is that not everyone can be a big wig like Peter. Not everyone can be a General Ulysses S. Grant or General Robert E. Lee. At Jefferson Barracks there are a number of notable people listed who are buried there, but there are also 3,255 unknowns. And the 1st burial was Elizabeth Ann Lash, the infant daughter of a soldier stationed at Jefferson Barracks. Ordinary people who were extraordinary to the people who loved them.

So this Memorial Day weekend, consider the Justus and Mathias in your life. Who are they? What did they teach you? And give thanks to God for their ordinary lives, and their extraordinary influence on yours.

Amen.