

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 29, 2011
The Cost of the Breath of God Sanctioned Freedom
By The Very Reverend William Carl Thomas

The Apostle Paul reminds the Athenians of what they might have overlooked: the altar he found among them with the inscription, 'To an unknown God.' He uses impeccable logic to claim, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things." Paul goes on to say, "For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, for we too are his offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals."

Paul declared that it was easy for the Athenians to hide the true nature of the deity of God in gold, or silver, or stone. He contends that multiple shrines filled with objects of worship distract from knowing the true God who "gives to all mortals life and breath and all things."

Just as it was in the time of Paul, the world that we make for ourselves has a way of pulling us into places or activities that distract from what is really important.

Memorial Day Weekend makes it easy to overlook Memorial Day. Just as Christians struggle with bunnies and commercialism that distracts from the price paid for us by Jesus on the cross, we are lured by needed leisure that diminishes the price paid by those who made possible the freedom we so easily accept. Memorial Day is a day we set aside to remember those who gave their lives to insure our opportunity to freely worship the God who “gives to all mortals life and breath.”

Originally called Decoration Day, it was first enacted to honor Union and Confederate soldiers following the Civil War. It was extended after World War I to remember Americans who have died in all wars. The name Memorial Day was first used in 1882 and was not in common usage until after World War II. Federal law in 1967 made Memorial Day the official name. The Veterans of Foreign Wars stated in a 2002 Memorial Day Address: “Changing the date merely to create three-day weekends has undermined the very meaning of the day. No doubt, this has contributed a lot to the general public's nonchalant observance of Memorial Day.”

Tomorrow, May 30th, is the traditional day to celebrate Memorial Day. 18 years ago I served as the chief marshal of the

Warren Rhode Island Memorial Day exercises. In the uniform of an army officer with the crosses that marked me as a chaplain, I evoked the Apostle Paul when I said, “A memorial is something that helps us remember something more important than a memorial.” I went on to say, “Look around South Cemetery. There are many memorials that call us to remember persons special in our lives. These memorials help us remember that while these persons are dead they are still very much a part of who we are. Family, friends, and yes, a number of patriots who died protecting the freedom we enjoy as naturally as the air we breathe. And just as the air can become polluted so can our sense of who we are as Americans. We can forget that it takes hard work and much determination to keep our freedom intact. Memorial Day calls us to renew our commitment to the ideals found in such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, the Pledge of Allegiance and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.”

I have walked the Gettysburg battlefield and felt God’s tears as brother fought brother. Both sides, no doubt, believed fully the words found in First Peter, “For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.” Abraham Lincoln made it clear that no one, Confederate or

Federal, suffered in vain. It is a good day that the air we breathe resound with his healing words.

“Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that the nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a

new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Every new birth must begin with a breath. Sometimes we take breathing for granted. Paul proclaims the God who gives all life and breath. Lincoln spoke about the cost of a “new birth of freedom.” Surely we have a responsibility to sometimes breath this breath of God sanctioned freedom in a conscious manner.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, you give us life and breath and all things. We give you thanks for the men and women of our armed forces, past and present, and especially for those who have given the last full measure of devotion to preserve our freedom to worship you. May their sacrifice be honored, as just in the cause of peace, and may our nation be ever grateful for their service. Let our leaders be guided by your wisdom. May our strength be manifest in how we share your love as one nation under God. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

All these words I offer in the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.