

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:7-18, John 14:15 -21  
David H. Teschner  
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As we age, many of us will likely suffer some memory loss.

There's a humorous story about three older men who were talking one day. The first said, "Sometimes I go to the refrigerator, open the door and forget what I'm looking for."

The second man said, "When I go upstairs, I sometimes stop half way and wonder whether I am going up for something or if I'm on my way back down."

The third said, "I must be lucky I guess, I don't have that problem." as he knocked on wood. Then he said, "Excuse me, there must be someone at the door."

Some things are okay to forget. Others we hope we will never forget. This weekend, Memorial Day weekend, we remember all the men and women who have given their lives sacrificially in the service of our country.

Memorial Day should be especially important to us in Petersburg. So the story goes, at the end of the Civil War, a Union General's wife happened to see women from the Petersburg Ladies Memorial Association taking children from the town out to Blandford Cemetery to place flowers on the graves of both Confederate and Union soldiers.

The General's wife told her husband what she had witnessed. He would later become a United States Senator and labor to set aside an official holiday to remember those who died in all the American wars. Could that General's wife have observed the very first Memorial Day here in Petersburg all those many years ago? We'd like to think so.

Some may remember when this holiday was called "Decoration Day." Ordinary people could be seen decorating soldiers' graves with cut flowers, garlands or flags. Today it is mostly veterans' organizations or scout troops that place small American flags on the gravesites.

Several years ago I started visiting Blandford Cemetery every Memorial Day, but more often now I drive or ride my bike to Poplar Grove National Cemetery in Dinwiddie County. There you can read the Gettysburg Address and see endless rows of small markers and a flag waving at each one. Does it matter that 5,000 Union soldiers are buried there?

The point is that we pause on this holiday weekend to remember and give thanks for the thousands, mostly young, who in the prime of life died for a cause greater than themselves. Many soldiers would say they joined to fight for their country, but in the heat of battle, they fought for the friends and comrades they had come to love as brothers. Either way, they fulfilled Jesus' instruction or commandment "to love one another as he had loved us," and "to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Today in John's gospel, Jesus says that if we love him, we will keep his commandments to love liberally without selectivity. We will love freely because God has poured love into our hearts. Fortunately, Jesus wasn't selective when he chose to love me or you. In my case, it was long before I tried in the least to reciprocate or even say thank you.

We are not always easy to love. We don't stop loving our children the first time they say "no" to us, and God doesn't ever stop loving us either. For me the cross is more than a sacrifice for sin. It is an act of love toward one's enemies, those who were indifferent and those who fled from Jesus in his hour of tribulation. The cross wasn't necessary for the few women who remained faithful throughout.

The theologian and Franciscan priest, Teilhard de Chardin, wrote, "Some day, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity,

we shall harness for God the energies of love; and then for the second time in history of the world we will have discovered fire.”

Governments are ever striving to perfect the weapons of war. Churches and other faith communities should be striving to perfect and expand our expressions of love as Teilhard de Chardin suggests. Love is the only activity that can change the world.

There was once an elderly, despondent woman who lived in a nursing home. She wouldn't speak to anyone or ask for anything. She merely existed – rocking back and forth in a creaky old rocking chair.

The old woman, understandably, didn't have many visitors. But a couple of mornings each week, a concerned and wise old nurse would go into her room before she went home. She didn't try to speak or ask questions of the old lady. She simply pulled another rocking chair beside the unhappy woman and rocked next to her.

Weeks – maybe months – later, the old woman finally spoke. “Thank you.” She said. “Thank you for rocking with me.”

Love doesn't have to be complicated.

In the epic movie *Lawrence of Arabia*, you may remember the 10-day march across the Sahara Desert. Nearly dead from dehydration and exhaustion, the group finally spotted an oasis. The men ran stumbling on wobbly legs and drank ravenously from the fresh water spring. After their celebratory drinking and splashing, Lawrence noticed a riderless camel. Apparently a young boy had fallen off from having become so weak. Lawrence tried to rally some of the others to retrace their steps, but they refused saying the boy's unfortunate fate was the will of Allah. Lawrence went back alone in search of the boy.

Two days later he returned, again compromised from the severe sun and heat, but he had the unconscious boy in his arms. His first words to the men who had left the boy for dead was, “Nothing is written unless you

write it.” In other words, we have the power and responsibility to determine outcomes. Fate can be in our hands. Just as Lawrence would not leave the boy to die, he would stick by all his men to see that they weren’t overtaken by the desert either.

Jesus said he would not leave us orphaned. In other translations, the word for orphaned is desolate. Jesus will not leave us desolate.

When we love others, we find that we are loved by God. We become orphaned and desolate when we are self-centered and concerned only for our own well-being.

This weekend we are grateful for all those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Love doesn’t require that we die physically, but without love, we can’t begin to live. AMEN.