

**“Reflections on Normandy, and the Right to Bear Arms”
Genesis 9:8-17; Luke 1:67-80**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
May 27, 2018
Memorial Sunday**

Though I was unaware of the historic coincidence, the Normandy American Cemetery on the plateau above Omaha Beach was dedicated on my eleventh birthday, July 18, 1956. The solemn scene of sacrifice commemorates the single most massive, courageous and successful military assault the modern world has known. Some 150,000 Americans participated in that decisive invasion. 9,387 headstones now guard the bluffs overlooking what was, on June 6, 1945, the bloody beachhead of a swirling sea.

On a warm, breezy August afternoon five years ago, I walked with my wife and our son among the orderly rows of graves. We paused at the marker of a Maryland soldier, whose descendants may well be somewhere nearby this weekend, lost in thoughts of gratitude and grief. Our thoughts turned to my father-in-law, himself a veteran of that same “greatest generation”, like many beloved members, past and present, of faith communities in Frederick and Montgomery counties.

Memorial Day was first proposed a century and a half ago, as a national day of remembrance for those who died in the Civil War. With World War I, the holiday had expanded to honor all who had died fighting in any war.

Certain scriptural texts remind us that remembering and honoring the dead has been part of the human experience from ancient times.

A passage from Genesis, Chapter 9, reassures that even after the universal devastation of a figurative flood, God will always have saved up some act to guarantee

the survival of life. The rainbow appears as the clouds part. “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations.” (Genesis 9:12).

A passage from the Gospel of Luke, about Zechariah praising God upon the birth of his son John the Baptist, likewise reassures that, no matter what, God is always with us. (Luke 1:67-80) As foretold, the prophecies are fulfilled. Zechariah sees the ultimate salvation—the coming of God’s realm on earth, when light dawns upon the darkness and we walk in the way of peace. Wars are fought, lives are lost, but still we trust in the promise of peace with justice, the triumph of love. We honor those who have died that we might pursue the dream of hope.

We proclaim God’s promise in this age and for all the ages.

But wars and rumors of wars are a problem for a Christian of conscience—for any follower of the one who is so readily labeled the Prince of Peace. The early Christians were pacifists, and remained so until the time of Constantine in the early fourth century. Constantine needed a religion to unite the diversity of his empire. In Jesus Christ, he found a God that united humanity as one people, erasing ethnic, cultural, and geographic differences. Christianity became the state religion. In return, the state religion gave legitimacy to the ruler, including the army that maintained the empire.

One loyal Roman general ordered a mass baptism of his troops, in the Mediterranean Sea, but required that each soldier, while submerged, keep out of the water the arm that wielded his sword in battle. If that arm was not baptized, though attached to an otherwise Christian body, it would be free to kill Rome’s enemies.

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The theory of “just war” has emerged from that moral struggle. President Jimmy Carter, in a book entitled “A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power”, states “As a Christian, and as a president who was severely provoked by international crises, I became thoroughly familiar with the principles of a just war”. And he expresses doubt that many of our nation’s international conflicts would qualify.

Among the criteria for a “just war” are the following:

- *It can be waged only as a last resort, with all non-violent options exhausted*
- *Weapons used must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants*
- *Violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered*
- *Aggressors must have legitimate authority sanctioned by the society they profess to represent*
- *The peace to be established must be a clear improvement over what exists*

Which of our nation’s historic conflicts would qualify as “just wars”? The

Revolutionary War? The Civil War? World War I?

World War II? Korea? Vietnam? Iraq? Afghanistan?

In early 1991, I participated with other Minnesota religious leaders in a news conference opposing Desert Storm, on the basis that it did not meet the criteria of a “just war”. The following Sunday I was the guest preacher at a church whose property was swathed in yellow ribbons honoring a son of the congregation who was that day deployed in the Middle East!

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I was reminded on that Sunday of the plea for peace that I preached on Memorial Day of 1971, from the village bandstand after the parade in the town

where I first pastored. This novice minister in Lodi, Ohio, was not invited by the local VFW for subsequent Memorial Day observances.

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By extension, so are guns.

Not the “hunting” kind.

The kind that kill eight American kids on the average day, according to Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund. The kind that in any four day span takes lives equivalent to the massacre at Virginia Tech. The kind that makes youngsters in the states with the highest rates of gun ownership, sixteen times more likely to die accidentally. Parkland, FL...Santa Fe, TX...Noblesville, IN...

I try to reconcile the gun-related deaths of our children with the language of the Second Amendment, which is conveniently hauled out to defend the right of an individual to purchase and own a gun without limiting restrictions. But I can’t, because the notion of common people armed as a “well regulated Militia” is a 200-year old anachronism haunting the credibility of a modern democracy.

I try to reconcile the gun-related deaths of our children with the language of Larry Pratt, Executive Director of Gun Owners of America: “We should be praying that we will all be able to go around armed, because that will be one outward indicator that we have God’s blessing.” I try to reconcile it, but I can’t, because the notion of common people armed as a “well regulated Militia” is a 200-year old anachronism haunting the credibility of a modern democracy.

Andy Raymond owns Engage Armament, a Rockville gun store specializing in assault rifles. He thought it only prudent to offer customers the option of the Armatix iP1, a “smart” handgun that requires the handler to wear a matching watch, in order for the gun to work. Death threats forced him to discontinue such sales.

Some area clergy and congregations stood up for Andy, stood up for “smart guns”, stood up against the NRA and the gun lobby, stood up for the credibility of a modern democracy.

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In 1972, twenty-eight years after the assault on the beaches of Normandy, sixteen years after the dedication of the Normandy American Cemetery, one year after my unpopular Memorial Day speech on a village green in middle America, I encountered a German World War II veteran in a tavern near Munich. It was the week when Israeli athletes and coaches died by gunfire at the 1972 Olympic Games. The old soldier sobbed as he pleaded for the forgiveness of accidental tourists from America, forgiveness for those 9,387 headstones—among others--guarding the Normandy bluff overlooking the once bloody beachhead of a once swirling sea.

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We can only imagine the rainbow: God’s promise for this age, and all the ages.