



Sermon Transcript

May 30, 2021

50 Days of Spiritual Growth

A Memorial Day to Remember

Hebrews 12:1-3

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 30, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by David Rucquoi. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Hebrews 12:1-3

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Introduction

This weekend our country holds a National period of memorial, a holiday dating back to the Civil War (1861-1865); a war that, as of today, had more fatalities than any conflict in U.S. history, even though our nation's population in 1865 was only one fifth of what it was after WWII, and one tenth of our population today. Due to that carnage, every community quickly accumulated and decorated sad makeshift memorials, often at a grave site, not unlike the roadside memorials we see today (for those killed in accidents). Thus, the act of memorializing became known as "Decorating." As the death toll increased, local communities scheduled events memorializing the lost, referred to as "Decorating Day," which included prayer, mourning, and tributes in a solemn attempt to heal the wounds of war. In 1868, Decoration Day at the National Cemetery was declared to be on May 30th, as this date did not coincide with a specific battle and there would be spring flowers available. Over time, with new conflicts (The Spanish-American War and WWI), community-wide commemoration was held at the State level. In 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, designating a single Nation-wide holiday for commemorating the lost (at that point including WWII, the Korean War, and Vietnam) moving the date to the last Monday in May. This unified national commemoration, but also created a three-day weekend for federal employees and quickly became a celebratory event marking the start of summer. For some, this diluted the sacred, somber purpose of Memorial Day. To this day veteran groups petition our government to make the day solemn by returning the National commemoration to the last day in May. One leader of this was WWII veteran (who was shot five times, lost his arm, recipient of the Purple Heart, Medal of Honor, Bronze Star and Distinguished Service Cross, and Former U.S. Senator from Hawaii) Daniel Inouye, who passionately introduced bills to change the date for 25 consecutive years, every time congress was in session (1987-2012), until the year he died.

Given this somber purpose and history, is it wrong to celebrate, or say, "Happy

Memorial Day?” I would argue that a lack of joy or celebration does not ensure we are memorializing those lost. Especially for believers, joy honors a life, the person’s future, and what they gave to us. However, we should be mindful of what elements must be present to properly memorialize those fallen in service of our country. While we are not here to discuss civic duty, I think you will find that not only does Scripture validate such a memorial; but, this National Holiday provides a powerful object lesson for us as believers, captured in a single word: “HERO,” representing an acronym derived from our text (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Again, our memorializing is not fulfilled in the absence of celebration; it is fulfilled in the presence of something else. And that something, found in Hebrews 12, can be presented in the acronym, “H.E.R.O.,” which stands for Honor the Faithful, Establish Priorities, Run with Endurance and Observe the Champion.

The English word “memorial” comes from the Latin *memorialis*, “of or belonging to memory.” It refers to “something by which the memory of a person, thing, or event is preserved.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “memorial” as, “serving to preserve remembrance: commemorative;” and, “something that keeps remembrance alive.”

In the Bible, a word-group used in the Old Testament for “memorial” is reflected in the name of the prophet Zechariah, whose name means “Yahweh remembers.” Old Testament memorials are found in special offerings (Lev. 2:2), the name of God (Ex. 3:15; Hos. 12:5), the Passover (Ex. 12:14), Aaron’s wardrobe (Ex. 39:7), the sabbath (Lev. 23:24), and stones commemorating God’s blessing on the 12 tribes of Israel (Josh. 4:7), to name a few (of many) examples. In the New Testament the Greek equivalent is used for the woman with the alabaster flask of ointment (Matt. 26:13; Mark 14:9), and for the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:4). Throughout the Bible the concept of something, or some event, specifically used to provoke and sustain memory, is a rich tradition. Our text today is, perhaps, the most dramatic example of this; so much so, that the word for “memorial” is not even necessary.

The book of Hebrews was written to encourage first century Jewish Christians to hold fast to their faith, in the face of persecution from Gentiles and Jews alike. This theme reaches its apex at the beginning of chapter 11, where the author defines faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Like Pastor Scott taught, from Romans 8, we don’t hope for what we have or what we see. My daughter used to hope to be a college graduate. As of this month, she no longer hopes for that. After four years of hard work, she has achieved it, illustrating “*if we hope for what we*

do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:25). So Hebrews 11 begins with this clear definition of faith, then leads us to the beginning of chapter 12 like a memorial corridor of familiar names of people whose lives reflected this core value, guiding us to the pinnacle of the memorial exhibit.

On the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks English historian and Columbia University Professor of History and Art, Sir Simon Schama, wrote an article discussing how the winning design for the 9/11 memorial was chosen from over 5,000 submissions prompting him to ask the question, “So what makes a successful memorial?” He concluded that one prize element is naming the persons involved. In the 9/11 Memorial, at the wish of their families, the names of the victims are deeply cut into a bronze boarder surrounding the reflecting pools, in what Schama describes as, “accessible to the fingertip trigger of love’s memory.” In the same way, we see the names of those memorialized in designer Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in our nation’s capital, and on a memorial wall for the battleship Arizona, on the memorial for the Connecticut 29th Colored Regiment (from the Civil War), in Criscuolo Park, New Haven, as in memorials throughout our country. And this is what we see in Hebrews 11. Sadly, at some point these names become abstract. We couldn’t possibly know all the names, much less the people those names represent. So the names become representative of the cause for which they died, be it a specific war; or (in the case of Hebrews 11) faith, declaring why these people lived and died.

In recognizing similarity between memorials in our society and the literary memorial we see in Hebrews, I wondered what other principles we could derive for our modern, civic commemoration from this passage of Scripture? What I found can easily be remembered by the simple acronym, “HERO,” and the first letter (“H”) represents...

Honor the Faithful

In the first verse of Hebrews 12 we read, “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...*”. This “*cloud*” refers to that memorial list of names, in Ch. 11, of people who died for what they believed in. What the author of Hebrews will exhort his readers to do has been modeled by the people in Ch. 11. George Guthrie points out that the word “*surrounded*” conjures the image of one standing in the middle of an ancient amphitheater. However, those spectators are not passive. Rather, they have been in the arena themselves. They are witnesses in the sense that they have experienced God’s faithfulness and can say, with the Apostle Paul, “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*” (2 Tim. 4:7). From this Greek word for witness (“*martus*”) we get our English word “martyr.”

In his article discussing what makes a winning memorial, Simon Schama acknowledges one virtue that is as evident as it is subtle. For what New Yorkers pride themselves with, that the fanatical perpetrators of the 9/11 attack detested, is the element of pluralism that is evident merely in reading the names of the victims. Schama notes, “The world music of those names is perhaps all the eloquence we need,” as the names reveal gender, diverse nationalities, even an unborn child. In the same way, the names listed in Hebrews 11 identify men, women, Jews, Gentiles, known, and unknown alike. What’s more, the heroes of old were not revered for their absence of faults (in fact, they are known for many); rather, they are revered for the presence of enduring faith. They failed many times, but they never gave up.

In honoring the faithful, we not only acknowledge those past; but, in recognition of them, and the cause for which they died, we acknowledge our contemporaries. This is why we read in the previous chapter, “... *let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*” (Heb. 10:24-25). In his memoir, retired four-star Marine General Jim Mattis explained that while he “...hated some tasks that came with [his] jobs in the Corps, like crawling through minefields, [he] reveled in the camaraderie of men crawling through them with [him].” He later adds that “a Marine’s greatest privilege is to fight alongside a fellow Marine...” Mattis is so adamant about this that he states, “I don’t care how operationally brilliant you are; if you can’t create harmony – vicious harmony - on the battlefield, ... you need to go home.” So we honor the faithful by acknowledging their example, and applying their lessons, realizing we are part of that cloud for each other. I am part of your “*great cloud*”, and you are part of mine.

We’ll discuss one more element of Honoring the faithful at the close; but, for now remember that the first letter in HERO represents Honoring the faithful. The second letter in HERO (“E”) represents ...

Establish Priorities

The author of Hebrews continues his thought saying, “...*let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely...*” (Heb. 12:1b). This involves an exclusive exercise of choices. Like Pastor Scott preached from Romans 7, we have to make a conscious effort to stay out of the ditch, to avoid sin. We’ve seen in the book we are reading, “The Common Rule,” that “to choose anything means to kill off other options you might have otherwise chosen.” Author Justin Early refers to this as “curating your options” saying, “We are guaranteed to be formed in consumption unless we ruthlessly

pursue curation.” In business and politics this is referred to as “opportunity cost.” Basic economics teaches that a society must choose whether to produce “guns” or “butter.” More of one necessitates less of the other.

The author of Hebrews is saying we cannot endure the race while carrying the cumbersome weight of sin. Jesus taught a similar lesson saying, *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few”* (Matt. 7:13-14). The wide gate is the path of least resistance. It is comfortable, easy, popular, you can take whatever you want, whomever you want. You can do whatever you want. But the narrow gate, the way that leads to life, is hard. You have to unload things and leave them behind just to fit through it. For the shepherd to *“make you lie down in green pastures”* and *“lead you beside the still waters”* (Ps. 23) you must first follow him through the narrow gate. Or, as the author of Hebrews is exhorting, we must *“lay aside every weight”* and let go of certain things.

Several versions translate *“lay aside”* as *“strip off.”* If you’ve ever been to a Marathon in cold weather, it is not unusual for runners to wear all manner of gear (even garbage bags!) to keep warm as they wait for the start, and during the first mile or so. Then, as they run, they strip off their gear and throw it to the sidelines. Every year at the Boston and NY Marathons discarded gear is collected and given to the homeless. To run with endurance you must rid yourself of all encumbrance, even things that have value, in another context.

Sin has a funny stigma. It is not simply breaking a rule; rather, we should view sin as what some call “dysfunctional choices.” My college psychology professor, Philip Captain would begin every class saying, “We’re all neurotic and have come short of the glory of God. Neurosis is a self-defeating pattern of coping with life.” We need to stop viewing God as a cosmic kill-joy who plays whack-a-mole with people when they break rules, and instead view God as the loving father who longs for fellowship with, and success of, His children. The admonition in Hebrews 12:1 to *“lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely”* comes from a loving father who wants to see His children win the race.

“H,” Honor the Faithful. “E,” Establish priorities, now “R.”

Run with Endurance

We are exhorted, *“...and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,*

...”(Heb. 12:1c). We are to persevere. Never give up, endure the long race. This speaks of stubborn determination, and unwavering commitment.

On June 4, 1942 Ensign Bert Earnest flew his Grumman Avenger toward the Japanese fleet approaching Midway island, accompanied by Radioman 3rd Class Harry Ferrier, with Seaman 1st Class Jay Manning on the .50 caliber rear gun. They were one of six planes in Torpedo Squadron Eight. As the Japanese fleet came into view, Manning called out, “We’re being attacked by Japanese fighters.” Wave after wave of Japanese Zeros rained bullets into their fuselage. When Ferrier noticed that their tail gun had gone silent, he looked over his shoulder to see Manning limp in his harness. Recalling this event in his late 70’s, he reports, “The sight of Jay’s slumped and lifeless body startled me. Quite suddenly, I was a scared mature old man of 18” (he was actually 17 but had lied about his age to enlist). “I had never seen death before, and here in one awesome moment my friends and I were face to face with it. I lost all sense of time and direction.” He felt a searing pain in his wrist, then a blow to his head. “The next thing I remember” he recounts, “was waking up with my head hanging down and blood pouring down my face...At that point I was wondering if I was going to die.” Pilot Earnest was also shot and bleeding. The plane was badly damaged, including their compass. They aimed, dropped their torpedo and flew away from the Japanese fleet. Eventually, the Japanese fighters turned away. To avoid more fighters, they flew a large loop around the fleet. Flying over open ocean, after the fog of battle, with no navigational equipment, severely wounded in a wrecked plane they miraculously found Midway, where they were able to land and get medical care. For 317 U.S. sailors, airmen and marines (like Jay Manning, and every other plane from Squadron Eight) the war was over. They had endured to the end. The battle of Midway was the turning point of the war. Yet, it would be another three years of intense conflict before the war ended.

When Earnest, Ferrier and Manning were heading toward the target, they observed the other planes in their squadron bursting into flames, spinning wildly out of control, and crashing into the sea. They knew their chance of survival diminished as they moved toward their objective. They knew they were outnumbered, yet they held their course. This is endurance.

This emphasis on “*endurance*” clearly refers to a marathon, not a sprint. Today’s runners have a chip they wear to ensure they cross each mile marker, which has an electric mat to record their passing. Cameras at each mile marker track bib numbers. Still, every year, at nearly every race, people cheat. Oddly, many cheat without even knowing it. The admonition to “*run the race that is set before us*” is a call for integrity,

a call for awareness, and a call to focus on our own responsibilities and not that of others. It's not enough to merely endure. We must endure on our designated course. I'm not much of a runner, but I've raced sailboats. There are few things that can dampen good results faster than finding out you were disqualified for starting too early, going around a marker in the wrong direction, taking the wrong course, or sticking with the wrong class of boats. Every participant must know what they are doing, and (while other participants can be of help) this leads us to the greatest model of success, the ultimate Champion.

Observe the Champion

In our biblical memorial we first Honor the Faithful. Then we Establish Priorities. We must Run with Endurance. Finally, we Observe the Champion as the writer of Hebrews says we do all this, "...*looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*" (Heb. 12:2).

The one who endured the most is our Champion, Jesus. He knew there would be public shame. He knew there would be intense pain. He knew He would be completely alone. He disregarded all of that and chose to endure His own course, focusing on the finish, the goal, the ultimate joy of fellowship with the father.

This word "*founder*" literally means "the first to lead," or "the first in a long line of procession," which is fitting since Chapter 11's chronological "hall of fame" begins saying, "*By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God*" (11:3). Thus, the list of faithful not only begins with creation, it credits that creation to "*the word of God*," which is what John calls Jesus (John 1:1-14).

Other versions translate the word "*founder*" as "*originator*" (NASB), "*pioneer*" (NIV), "*who began*" (MSG), "*author*" (NKJV), or "*champion*" (NLT). And, as much as Jesus is the initiator, He is also the "*perfecter*," which means completer, the one who brings the process to the finish. Or, as John records, He is "*the Alpha and Omega*" (Rev. 1:8), "*the first and the last, the beginning and the end*" (Rev. 22:13). What is it that Jesus finished? You may recall the long ditch of sin from our discussion on Romans 7, and how Paul said that he does what he doesn't want to do, and he doesn't do what he wants to do (he keeps jumping in the ditch) then Paul proclaims, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death*" (8:24)? Then he answers his own question saying, "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Rom. 8:25)! When Jesus spoke His last words on the cross he exhaled, "...*'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up*

his spirit” (John 19:30). When Jesus died on the cross he completed our faith. We hope for deliverance. Our sin keeps us from a holy God. And “*the wages of sin is death*” (Rom. 6:23). “*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*” (Eph. 2:13). All Scripture is the story of God reconciling Mankind to Himself. What Jesus did on the cross finished that work. Guthrie says it this way, “In keeping with the race imagery, he has cleared the path of faith so that we may run it. The way is open, and although hurdles exist, the roadblocks have been removed.”

As much as this “*great cloud of witnesses*” is pointed out to us, we are not to look to them. We are to focus on our Champion. This cloud is not “*great*” because they are wonderful. They are “*great*” because they are many. Jesus is our example, our ultimate leader. In Him we have answers. So what are the witnesses for? If you look back at Ch. 11, nowhere are we told to look to them. We are simply told to be aware of them and their faith (20 times in chapter 11 it says, “*by faith*”). The term “*cloud*” refers to a dense mass. We are surrounded by a crowd who are experienced in running the race, falling down, getting up, and enduring. What we are to do because of them is not focus on them, but to be spurred on by their collective example, and to “*lay aside*” every form of encumbrance. My wife has run many marathons, and the kids and I have been there to cheer her on at most of them. It is no small effort to find a place along the course where you can see your runner, to wait while tens of thousands of people go by keeping 100% focused for several hours. And on more than one occasion, by pure necessity, my wife has run by us (knowing where we would be) without hearing or seeing us at all. As much as she wanted, and needed, our encouragement, she needed to be focused on her course. She knew we were there screaming our encouragements, and that had to be enough, as she “[ran] *with endurance the race* [set] *before* [her].”

So the Hall of Fame, listing names of saints who have endured before us, leads us to the memorial of the Champion. And we properly memorialize them when we:

Honor the faithful, by remembering them, their loss and the cause for which they died.
Establish priorities, understanding that there is a right and wrong, and they are exclusive.

Run with endurance, never give up, and make sure we are true to our course.

Observe the Champion, focus on Jesus, our flawless example.

One final point

When we spoke about honoring the faithful, we discussed how that “*great cloud*” is

made up of saints gone by, and saints present. There is one more category of the faithful to consider. At the end of chapter 11 (11:39-40), we read, “*And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*” Why could they not be “*made perfect*” without us? There are two reasons. First, their faith was based on a promise, and Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. We are beneficiaries of the fulfillment, by which their work is completed. Guthrie says it this way, “...historically these people of old did not experience the coming of the Messiah and the new covenant. Yet now they are ‘*made perfect*,’ seeing that the great community of faith that had lived for God throughout history has been ‘brought to fulfillment’ or ‘to a desired goal.’ This is the first reason they were not made perfect; but there is another reason. Notice the past faithful heroes are presented in chronological order. Abel was part of the “*great cloud*” for Enoch, and Enoch was part of the “*great cloud*” of Abraham. And Abraham was part of the “*great cloud*” for Isaac and Jacob, and so on. They had received a promise, and they ran their race with commendable endurance focused on that promise. In doing so, they passed the legacy of promise to successive generations. This race we must endure is a relay. And the “*great cloud of witnesses*” we are “*surrounded*” by are behind us, beside us, and ahead of us. So, as much as past heroes of faith are part of our great cloud, and we are part of that cloud for each other, we also make up that “*great cloud of witnesses*” for future generations - and must faithfully pass the baton, for “*apart from [them] [we] should not be made perfect.*” The race is not complete until the baton has been passed. Until we endure to the end.

Because of this, in following those who have endured to the end, we too become a hero for those who carry the future!

In preparation for this Memorial weekend message, I looked for lessons in historic memorials. I was surprised that the National Historical Marker Database did not show a Civil War memorial in the historic town of Wethersfield, so I looked to neighboring towns. There I found a poignant memorial that captures this point beautifully.

As background, the first U.S. Soldier’s Home was privately funded by one Benjamin Fitch, and dedicated on July 4, 1864 (before the end of the Civil War), on Noroton Avenue, in Darien, CT. The following year the home began taking in children, orphans from the Civil War, so the home housed both veterans and orphans. After Fitch died, time passed, additional wars occurred, and that facility became inadequate, it was replaced by a newer, larger facility in Rocky Hill, CT. In 1940, a statue that had been in front of the original home (captured in this picture) was moved from Darien to 287 West Street, Rocky Hill, where it stands today (as one of 136 Civil War monuments in

Connecticut).

In the Veterans Home there is a fact sheet, describing the statue as *"...a returned cavalry officer, in a sitting posture, with a child on his knee, an orphan to whom the soldier is depicting the battlefield, and apparently describing the scenes that he witnessed-- probably the death of her own father and possibly bringing a dying message from his comrade (her father)."*

The notion of the last verse in Hebrews 11 is that if I'm not receiving from those before me, and passing to those after me, that truth which is greater than me, I have missed the point. *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."*

Conclusion

Scripture validates giving a memorial, as we see throughout the Bible. At the same time, our National Holiday provides a powerful object lesson for us as believers.

Our memorializing is not fulfilled in the absence of celebration; it is fulfilled in the presence of something else. And that something is captured in Hebrews 12:1-3, as represented by the acronym, "H.E.R.O.", where "H" stands for Honor the Faithful, by remembering those past, supporting those present, and being responsible for those to come. "E" reminds us to Establish Priorities, understanding that there is a right and wrong, they are exclusive, and we must be true to the cause of the faithful. "R" encourages us to Run with Endurance, never give up, and make sure we are true to our course. And "O" is to Observe the Champion, to focus on Jesus, our flawless example.

In the process of doing this, as you memorialize those heroes of old, you too will become a hero.

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What do you remember from Memorial Day celebrations of the past?
2. Have you ever participated in a funeral that was especially memorable? What made it so?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Hebrews 11:1-12:3

What do you learn about faith, from these passages?

Do you remember the acronym from this message, and what it stands for?

Which elements challenge you the most? Which do you find most encouraging?

Do you think it's wrong to "celebrate" on Memorial Day, or to wish someone, "Happy Memorial Day?"

Is there anything about this study that makes your Memorial Day more meaningful?

Is there anything about our National memorial celebration that you find brings this scripture to life for you?

What elements of this passage grip you the most, and why?

Taking It Home

4. Based on this study, is there any aspect you'd like to remember for the future?
5. How would you like the group to pray for you and your spiritual growth, in light of this study?