

This, of course, is Memorial Day weekend. It's a time when there will be formal recognitions and ceremonies honoring those who have given their lives for our nation and so that we may enjoy the freedoms that are a part of life in America.

All over America flags will fly at half-mast tomorrow and this weekend and tomorrow, people will visit cemeteries and place flowers and wreaths on the graves of loved ones as a way of remembering -- of memorializing -- those who died in the service of our country.

Of course, there will be those who take no note of the meaning of the day and will simply use it as a free day off. There will be picnics, boating, and parties.

The remembering of those who gave their lives for others should be second nature to us in the Church. After all, the fundamental, core teaching and faith of the Church is the story of One who gave His life for others. Not so people could have freedom of speech, assembly, and religion, the right to be free from unreasonable search and seizure, or the privilege of electing their leaders. He died so that untold millions of people could have eternal life. He died to pay a debt we couldn't pay, the debt of sin. He died so that we could have for free what we could never earn or pay for.

There is no way that you nor I can repay those who have died to keep us free in America. All we can do to honor their sacrifice is to safeguard the freedoms they died for by voting,

obeying the law, and contributing what we can to improve our society.

Neither is there anything we can do to repay Jesus for what He did for us on the cross. It is a gift and He expects no repayment, only that we receive it by faith in Him.

However, He does tell us how we can honor His sacrifice and, if you will, memorialize Him. In the Gospel lesson for this morning from John's Gospel, He says,

*"If you love me, you will obey what I command. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me."*

If you want to memorialize Jesus, that is, if you want to show Him Your gratitude for what He has done for You by offering you eternal life as a free gift, it is simple: Obey His commands. It won't get you into heaven; only faith in Him receives that gift. But it is the only proper way to show Him your faith and love for Him and your gratitude for knowing that you have eternal life.

And what are His commands: They are very simple:  
Love God  
Love one another as He has loved us.

But, wait a minute, Pastor, you might say, that sounds like a little like works-righteousness, you know, earning your way

into heaven, earning God's love and mercy, doing things to make myself acceptable to God.

Not at all. First of all, it can't be done: you and I cannot make ourselves acceptable to God nor can we earn our way into heaven by being good. Simply not possible. Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through Me." Only through Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection are we saved; He did all the work, and only He could do it.

But if we really believe in Him as our only Savior, if we really believe that this gift is ours by His grace as a free gift, are we not going to want to show Him our gratitude and love?

That's what keeping His commands is all about.

Sadly, though, many of us, and maybe all of us at least some of the time, are like the Athenians to whom Paul spoke of Jesus in our response to the good news.

When Paul talked to them he began by saying this:

*"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious."*

But the Gospel writer, Luke, who also wrote Acts, explains this about the Athenians:

*“All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.”*

The Athenians were “religious” in the sense that they loved to talk about religion and philosophy. But what Luke is saying is that it never got beyond talk and discussion. All the talking and discussion never had an impact on their lives. They erected altars to every known false god of that time, and then, just to cover all the bases, had one erected “To An Unknown God”, just in case they missed one. Paul uses this as a jumping-off point to introduce them to Jesus.

But, for the most part, they were not interested in faith or commitment. They were not interested in having their lives or behavior changed. They were only interested in the discussion.

Today we hear much about “being spiritual”. If you are in a discussion about faith or God, the person you are talking to is likely to say something like, “I don’t go to church, but I’m very spiritual.”

Sadly, that often translates into something like this: “I don’t know much about Jesus or the Bible and I’m not really interested in knowing much. I want to craft a religion that meets my needs as I perceive them and that doesn’t require me to change much in my life or expect much from me.”

It is true about true Christianity that Jesus does not expect us to contribute to our salvation. That work is done, accomplished by Him 2000 years ago.

But He does expect that those who receive Him as their Savior, with the gift He offers, will show evidence of that in their lives.

James says it well in His book: "Faith without works is dead." In other words, true faith must show itself in a changed life, a life that is different from those who do not have faith in Jesus.

The faithful Christian life must be just that – a life that is faithful in all respects to the teachings of Jesus.

That is an ongoing project, a constant work-in-progress in the Christian's life.

Charles Swindoll says, quoting Patrick Morley in his book I Surrender, that the church's integrity problem is in the misconception "that we can add Christ to our lives, but not subtract sin. It is a change in belief without a change in behavior."

Rather, the reality is that the Christian life is an everyday struggle against sin and for righteousness, a daily renouncing of the value system of the world and a daily attempt to obey Christ' command to "Love God and Love Others."

Fred Craddock, in an address to ministers, caught the practical implications of consecration.

"To give my life for Christ appears glorious," he said. "To pour myself out for others. . . to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom -- I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. "We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table-- 'Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul."

But if we truly want to memorialize Jesus, if we truly want to live for Jesus, that's what we need to do. It's a constant effort, a continual vigilance to conform our life to the commands of Christ, not because we earn points, but because we already have all the points we need – and more!

A man named Cornelius was visited by an angel. He was a retired Roman centurion living in Israel. He had come to love the Jews and through them had come to love God. The angel had this to say to him: Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and

gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.”

Cornelius’ faith had led him to prayer and to sharing his wealth with the poor and God received these things as a God-pleasing memorial. God sent Peter to Cornelius to share the Gospel with him and he and all his household were baptized.

Paul encourages us to “make our bodies living sacrifices to God”, i.e., to live our lives as grateful sacrifices to God for the free gift of life He gives us through faith in Jesus.

We cannot do it ourselves, but God doesn’t expect us to. He gives us the Holy Spirit, who works tirelessly within us, helping us to conform our lives to the commands of Jesus. Do not resist His work, but welcome it and look for opportunities to live out in your life love for God and love for others.

For most Christians who have been in faith for a long time, the big obvious sins are pretty much under control. Most of us are living decent, Christ-honoring lives. What Jesus calls us to though is to never be self-satisfied, but always to be trying, with the help of the Spirit, to live a more Christ-honoring life.

(Our Daily Bread) Gordon MacDonald, in his book Ordering Your Private World, told of an experience in his own life that illustrates this truth. "Some years ago, when Gail and I bought the old abandoned New Hampshire farm we now call Peace Ledge, we found the site where we wished to build our country

home strewn with rocks and boulders. It was going to take a lot of hard work to clear it all out....The first phase of the clearing process was easy. The big boulders went fast. And when they were gone, we began to see that there were a lot of smaller rocks that had to go, too. But when we had cleared the site of the boulders and the rocks, we noticed all of the stones and pebbles we had not seen before. This was much harder, more tedious work. But we stuck to it, and there came the day when the soil was ready for planting grass."

It brought to my mind something from my junior and senior high school days at Long Island Lutheran High School. The school didn't have much money. It was built on the Rutledge estate in Brookville, LI. We didn't have a gym and the football field was a grassy field, filled with rocks. For gym class for several years, we would go out and pick up rocks. Hundreds of students for several years, picking up rocks. It seemed like that field manufactured rocks.

At our home here in Chester, there is an area on the side of our driveway away from the house. It must have been the place the builder chose to bury all the left-over bluestone from paving the driveway. It is filled with rocks. They rise up from the ground. I've finally given up on getting grass to grow there because I've realized that the rocks are just going to keep coming through the topsoil, so I'm planting it in ivy.

That's how the Christian life is. There will always be rocks of sin. Hopefully, as we live the Christian life, the rocks will get

smaller, but they will always be working their way to the service.

I hope you will take some time and in some way memorialize those who have given their lives to give you the life you enjoy as a citizen of America. I hope, especially, that you make it your goal everyday to memorialize Jesus, to make your life a living memorial to the One who gave His life for you, who rose victorious over death, and now lives and reigns forever. Do it by working each day to eliminate those rocks in your life, with the help of the Holy Spirit to present your life as a living memorial to Jesus.