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Memories and Amazement

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For many, this weekend is the official start of summer, and stores are bursting with sale items to make your summer fashionable and pleasurable. For others this weekend is Memorial Day weekend, a time, as the name implies, to remember; specifically the people who have sacrificed their lives serving in the American armed forces and their families.

These memories aren't intended to glorify wars, they are to remind us all of the heavy cost of war. The memories are as many as there are soldiers who have served. Today I want to share a memory from the Civil War, not necessarily as a historian would where dates and battles reflect the sequence of events and the effects each battle had on the whole, which is okay, because memories can be about more than history. Memories are really about people, which is what Memorial Day is attempting to lift up.

This memory is of a soldier who fought in the Civil War on the confederate side whose name was Sgt. Richard Kirkland. Sgt. Kirkland was born and raised in South Carolina, the son of a farmer who enlisted as a private in company E of the Second South Carolina volunteers. In December 1862 this company found itself under the command of General J.B. Kershaw in the Battle of Fredericksburg. After the war, General Kershaw took it upon himself to share his memory of Sgt. Kirkland's incredible act during that battle. For those who need a refresher, the Union Army took heavy losses during the 4 day Battle of Fredericksburg, and it was said that hundreds of wounded, dying, and dead soldiers lay in the field between the two armies' lines. No one could get to the wounded because of the continued fighting; so for a day and a night the wounded just laid there. Many cried out for help, some pleading for the simple mercy of a drink of water. Despite the cries, no one ventured out onto the field for fear of getting hit in the cross fire. That is until Sgt. Kirkland came to General Kershaw asking permission to go out onto the field and bring water to the suffering soldiers. He is reported to have said he could no longer stand the sound of their cries.

The General gave his anxious permission, then watched Kirkland step over the wall protecting the confederate soldiers and walk to the nearest suffering Union soldier. The General wrote of Kirkland's actions that day saying, "Unharm'd he reach'd the nearest suffer. He knelt beside him, tenderly rais'd the drooping head, rest'd it gently upon his own noble breast, and pour'd the precious life-giving fluid down the fever scorched throat. This done, he laid him tenderly down, plac'd his knapsack under his head, straighten'd out his broken limb, spread his overcoat over him, replac'd his empty canteen with a full one, and turn'd to another suffer. By this time his purpose was well understood on both sides and all danger was over. From all parts of the field arose fresh cries of 'Water, water; for God's sake, water!' more piteous still the mute appeal of some who could only feebly lift a hand to say here, too, is life and suffering."

You can read more from General Kershaw's journal in the Southern Historical Society Papers, but for now we have his beautiful memory of a powerful moment when a soldier found the courage to rise up and cross over the wall that offered protection, as well as identity, and purpose to live into the deeper calling of loving his fallen enemy, reminding his general, his fellow soldiers on both sides, and through his memory us who are here today that sometimes there really is something more important than winning or whose side you are on.

Perhaps it is appropriate that on this Memorial Day weekend our Gospel reading also brings us the memory of another soldier, a Roman centurion, who stepped over lines of class, religion and authority. I believe it is important to take care when we look at this encounter in Luke's Gospel to not be too quick to interpret this powerful story as Jesus rewarding someone for their expression of their faith by giving them what they asked for. That can set us up for a lifetime of bitter disappointment in our own walk of faith, especially when we don't feel our prayers are answered the way we want them to be, and I am not sure that is what the author of Luke was trying to tell those of us who would be reading this Gospel.

I find it interesting that in Luke's version of this encounter the centurion himself never meets nor sees Jesus in person. Unlike so many who came to Jesus and asked Jesus to prove himself by doing this or that, the centurion sent two groups of people to represent him: Jewish officials and his friends. Remember the centurion would have been considered a Gentile, not Jewish, a foreigner by both country of origin and by religion. Jesus was Jewish, so it makes sense that the centurion would send a delegation of Jesus' own people to speak for him. That is

a good political move. Those Jewish elders didn't let the centurion down; they spoke of his love for the Jewish people, of his generosity, of his good works, all of which they deemed made him worthy of Jesus' attention and care. That seemed to be enough for Jesus, because he followed the elders to the centurion's house.

But then another delegation approached Jesus: this time the centurion's friends, which we might assume were not Jewish, and they told a different story. They said the centurion did not see himself as worthy to have Jesus in his house, and spoke instead of accepting Jesus had the authority to heal his valued slave. And Jesus exclaimed he was amazed at the centurion's faith.

What made the centurion's faith so amazing? Was it all his good and charitable works? Was it that he recognized Jesus' authority? Or was it that he was willing to cross some lines that many people are not courageous enough to cross?

Many scholars and commentators wonder about the centurion's slave. Who was he? The centurion must have cared a great deal for him to go to such lengths to ask so many to go to Jesus and ask Jesus to heal him. Sounds like love to me. Love for a slave, someone who was in a completely different place in society from the centurion.

While it has been said that slavery in the ancient Mediterranean culture was not the same as slavery as it was practiced here in America, and it is poor practice to compare the two, slavery in any form is still not equality. It has also been said by scholars and commentators that Jesus never condemned slavery, but neither did he condone it. I wonder if that care and love for his slave is what amazed Jesus. Perhaps this centurion recognized a slave as a fellow human being; maybe similarly to how Stg. Kirkland recognized his fellow human beings in suffering Union soldiers. I wonder if Jesus saw love transcend the lines of classism and economic divisions and that is what amazed him. And couldn't that be a step toward equality and living the dream of God?

This love, it seems, also transcended the lines of religion and hierarchy as the centurion sent his delegations to both convince Jesus of his worth and his trust in Jesus' own authority. This is a respect that I am not sure was a common characteristic of military leaders in the Gospels. This centurion whom we never get to meet personally in Luke's Gospel certainly showed Jesus something that amazed him, something I would name as love, the kind of amazing love we name in our Baptismal Covenant as "respecting the dignity of every human being".

Perhaps the memories of these two soldiers can inspire us, this Memorial Day weekend to remember the value of love that amazed Jesus and the ways that love can inspire courage to come out of bunkers like “being right” or any of the other bunkers we can hunker down in when we feel threatened or frightened.

In a time when it seems there are more and more battle lines being drawn in politics and socioeconomics and gender and race and religion, are any of us brave enough to look to the fields in between those lines and love the fallen? The ones who been hurt by the conflicts and might be crying or afraid to cry out for their own version of a drink of water, a little soothing kindness or understanding. If Stg. Kirkland’s heroic act of giving water to the suffering could stop a battle, even for a short time, imagine what healing might happen if more of us lived into respecting the dignity of every human being. It can start with you and me, doing what we can, to love in the way that amazes even Jesus.