

# ***“What Kind of Memorial?”***

**May 30, 2010**

**Genesis 28:18-19**

**Genesis 35:19-20**

**Joshua 3:1-4:7 (Selected Verses)**

**Romans 12:1-2**

**A Sermon preached by  
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Now, when I was a boy growing up in the South...being born in South Carolina and growing up in Virginia...Memorial Day celebrations were simply NOT to be found. Oh, there might have been some VFW ceremony at the local cemetery or something. But by and large, Memorial Day passed as just another day. There were no small town parades...no patriotic speeches on the court house steps...no children dressed in red, white and blue bearing flowers to lay on the graves at the cemetery. There just wasn't ANY of that.

Oh, it's not that people in the South weren't patriotic, mind you! They were! In fact, in many instances there were probably MORE patriotic than people in the North. It's just that Memorial Day, you see, was first and foremost a YANKEE holiday...a celebration which began in order to remember and honor the soldiers who died fighting to preserve the UNION in the War Between the States – which, of course, you Yankees always called the CIVIL War...which is an oxymoron if there ever was one! We Southerners referred to it, quite appropriately, as the War of Northern Aggression. And we SURE weren't going to remember and celebrate a YANKEE victory with something like MEMORIAL Day.

In the same light, of course, we Southerners didn't celebrate Lincoln's birthday, either! Instead, we had Lee-Jackson Day...and Jefferson Davis day...and CONFEDERATE Memorial Day – which was a REALLY big deal in places like Richmond...and Natchez...and Mobile...and Chattanooga...Charleston...and Memphis and Atlanta. But Memorial Day? No way honey child! That was a YANKEE celebration.

Well, fortunately – or UNFORTUNATELY, according to some of my still staunchly SOUTHERN friends – I've grown up and CHANGED a good bit since then. And as I've grown, I've come to see the many virtues of CELEBRATING Memorial Day...remembering and honoring not ONLY those brave and gallant men who rightly fought to preserve our nation's unity during the Civil War...but also those brave men and women THROUGHOUT the years who have fought and struggled to maintain our nation's freedom and honor against tyranny and oppression and terrorism of EVERY kind. It is indeed good and right to remember and honor them with parades and speeches while the red, white and blue of the stars and stripes waves proudly over our heads.

And yet, as good and worthwhile as it is to remember those who have died serving our nation in times of war...protecting our freedom and preserve our liberty...it seems to me that MEMORIAL DAY has ALSO become a day to remember ALL of those who have gone before who have contributed so much to making us who we are as a people. They TOO are the ones we remember on Memorial Day – our ancestors...our loved ones...our mothers and fathers...our grandparents, perhaps – ALL of those who have touched our lives and made them RICHER for their having lived. They TOO are the ones we remember and honor on Memorial Day.

But let me ask you a question this morning. As you think about honoring those who have gone before you tomorrow on Memorial Day, just what kind of MEMORIAL do you plan to offer? Will you take some flowers to the cemetery and decorate the graves of your loved ones and think you have given them “memorial?” Will you come watch the Memorial Day Parade down Main Street tomorrow morning and then go to the park across from the cemetery and listen to some patriotic speech about the greatness of our land and the sacrifice of those who have died to make it so...and think that THAT is a suitable “memorial?” Will you have a new GRAVE STONE placed on the final resting place of a recently departed loved one and imagine THAT to be a fitting “memorial?” Just what kind of MEMORIAL to those who have gone before will YOU offer this Memorial Day?

Well, what I'd like to suggest to you this morning is that THIS Memorial Day we offer NOT JUST a memorial of stone...NOT ONLY the memorial of our fine words or fancy speeches...NOT MERELY the memorial of flowers decorating our loved ones graves. Instead, what I'd like to suggest is that THIS Memorial Day, we offer OURSELVES as LIVING memorials to the lives of those we would seek to honor and memorialize.

Now, in order to give some flesh and blood reality to that idea, let me share a story with you...a PARABLE, you might call it...remembering that PARABLES are often MIRRORS in which we see ourselves in the light of how GOD sees us.

Once upon a time, there was a mother who had two sons. (Sort of like how one of Jesus' parables starts out, now isn't it?!) Now, the mother was a GOOD mother...a KIND and LOVING mother...as good and kind and loving a mother as you'd ever want to know. She was ALWAYS there for her sons...fixing their meals...washing their clothes...providing a warm, secure and nurturing home in which her sons could grow and learn and mature into the men she had always hoped and prayed they would become. Oh, she never had a lot in the way of MATERIAL POSSESSIONS to offer her boys. In fact, she was quite poor...though her sons never knew it...at least not at the time. But she made do with what she had and gave her boys something FAR MORE IMPORTANT than the "things" that money can buy. She gave them HERSELF – totally and completely – offering her sons her love...her warmth...her support...her sound advice and often-needed counsel...her listening ear whenever they had a problem or a joy to share...and occasionally even her strong, but gentle hand of discipline when the boys needed a little "extra encouragement" to behave themselves as the young gentlemen she knew they could and should be! She gave her sons both roots...and wings – the roots of knowing they always had a safe, secure home where they would always be welcome and loved...and the wings to go out into the world to explore and learn and become all that they could be.

But even MORE importantly, she offered them her FAITH...her strong, secure belief in God and in God's love for them...ALWAYS...no matter WHAT may come their way. It was her FAITH, she said, that guided her and sustained her throughout her life and which she tried to pass along to her sons...not only in FORMAL kinds of ways – taking them to Sunday School and church, reading the Bible, saying their prayers before meals and at bedtime – but simply in the way she lived and the faith to which she gave witness throughout her whole life long.

As her boys grew up and moved out of their mother's home, they began to spread the wings their mother had given them and go their own way in life. The older son, being the more aggressive and forceful of the two, moved to a far away city across the country and began to make his mark in the business world...becoming more and more "successful" as the years went by. Having always resented the fact that he never "HAD" anything when he was younger, he was determined to make all the money he could and provide HIS children with the things HE never had as a youngster. And in fact, he was very successful at it. He was president of his own company by the time he was 30...a millionaire by the time he was 35...a business tycoon by the time he was 40...and well on his way to being a billionaire by the time he was 50. Everything he touched seemed to turn to gold – financially speaking, that is. His picture appeared on the cover of Business Week, Time and Fortune magazines and he was often written up in the Wall Street Journal for his natural ability in the field of business and finance.

A hard and driven man, he was always on the go – this week in New York...next week San Francisco...the following week in London, Paris, Hong Kong or Dubai. He regretted, of course, not being able to be at home with his family more...or so he claimed...but justified his being gone with the pride of what he was able to GIVE to his wife and children...which, of course, was the best of everything...the biggest house...the best of cars...the fanciest of furs and jewels...the most luxurious vacations...the best nannies and boarding schools available. WHATEVER his family wanted – materially, that is – they had. And wherever they wanted to go, they went. They were denied NOTHING – nothing, of course, except their husband and father.

And though the man's mother would write and call his house often to talk to her son, he man seldom had time for his mother, either. He was always TOO BUSY. Oh, he always sent her roses on Mother's Day and her birthday – he never missed those – 100 long-stemmed red roses for each occasion...and would have Saks 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue or Tiffany's send her an expensive piece of jewelry or a fancy silk scarf at Christmas. Don't get me wrong there. And he had often tried to convince his mother to move out of the tiny little dumpy old house in that deteriorating neighborhood in which she still lived. He would have GLADLY bought her the largest condominium available in Miami or Palm Springs or WHEREVER she would have moved. But she would always say "No," kindly thanking him for his expressions of love and asking him to come for a visit every now and then so that she could see him and get to know the grandchildren she had scarcely ever seen. Which, of course, her son always PROMISED he would do, but never quite seemed to find the time to actually make it happen.

The YOUNGER son also moved out into life, like his older brother. But UNLIKE his older brother, he never moved very far from his roots. In fact, he bought a house only a few blocks from where his mother lived and was there raising his family of two boys and a girl, who of course, spent a lot of their time at their Grandma's house. He was what you might call the classic "under-achiever"...or so his high-powered brother had often called him with that ever-present condescending tone in his voice that was always there whenever he talked about someone who was, in his opinion, "beneath" him.

The younger brother, on the other hand, considered himself anything BUT an under-achiever. Nor did anyone else for that matter...anyone who really KNEW him, that is. He had become an elementary teacher in the very same neighborhood school he and his brother had once attended, saying he wanted to give back to the kids some of the "good beginnings" he had been given when he was a child! The school had become increasingly multi-racial as the surrounding neighborhood had declined economically. But that never bothered the younger son...not in the slightest. In fact, he ran an after-school program for many of those multi-racial kids in the basement of his church and had become, in effect, the unofficial chief social worker and counselor for many of the troubled families in the area. Others also recognized the contributions he made, for he had recently been awarded the "good citizen" award by the mayor for all his volunteer work with needy families and had been recognized by the city school board for his efforts to keep kids in school. And on top of all of that, he had been given the "excellence in teaching" award by the state for his superior teaching, excellent test scores and ability to relate to young folks.

But above all, the younger son was a FAMILY man...and a man of FAITH...a RELIGIOUS man who never wore his religion on his sleeve, but LIVED his faith in a life of dedication and service and love to his fellow human beings. He was a man who gave himself totally and completely to his family...not only his IMMEDIATE family, but the larger family of his friends and neighbors and fellow church members who were his community...his "family." He was one of those rare people who always seemed to have time for anyone and everyone who came knocking at his door. No matter when it was or what he was doing, he always found time to listen...to help...to offer advice and encouragement...kindness and love. When he was asked by the newspaper during an interview following the awarding of the mayor's "Good Citizen" award who had served as his role model for all the kindness and love he showed toward people, he just smiled and gave a wink to the older, white-haired woman who sat quietly, but proudly in the corner of his living room...a woman whose love and devotion and kindness he never forgot and who served as the inspiration for his life.

Well, one day the mother of those two sons died after an extended illness. The older son, as you might well expect, had tried to pay for the best medical advice available and, the few times he did manage to find the time to call his mother, he offered to fly her to whatever clinic anywhere in the world that would get her well. But the mother would just smile and thank her son, telling him that what would really make her feel better was if he would come for a visit and bring the grandchildren so she could get to know them before she died. And her son always promised to do just that...just as soon as business slowed down... *"but, after all Mother, there'll be plenty of time for that when you get well. In fact, I bet you'll out live us all!"* the older son would say. And the mother would just smile again and say "okay," never letting her son know about the silent tear she shed inside...as she had so often done throughout the years.

The younger son, on the other hand, moved his mother into his home when she became ill, and despite all his other responsibilities, managed to give her all the loving care he could possibly muster...sitting up with her night after night, holding her hand, stroking her head when the pain became almost unbearable and reminding her how much he loved her and what a good mother she had been. But then, she died.

Well, the older son did finally come home...to the funeral, of course...which was, to be sure, the grandest, most lavish funeral that neighborhood had ever seen. Only the BEST would do for HIS mother, the older son had said – the most expensive casket...the fanciest hearse...the most elaborate array of flowers anyone could remember. The younger son didn't like such a showy display, of course – knowing that his mother wouldn't have liked it either...that it would have embarrassed her terribly. But he understood his older brother and didn't want to add to his grief by chiding him and asking him where he had been all those years when their mother was still alive. So he sat quietly and listened to his brother cry his loud tears and bemoan the fact that he was going to miss his beloved mother so very, very much.

When it came time to place a stone on his mother's grave just prior to Memorial Day, the younger brother wanted to have simple marker placed...a marker befitting their mother's simple life. But the older brother would have nothing to do with that! *"Absolutely NOT!"* he bellowed. And so he had erected the largest, most ostentatious pink granite marker the city had ever seen...a monument to rival any of the great tombstones erected by the wealthy and powerful aristocracy of the city soon after the turn of the last century. And on that monument of stone, the older brother had inscribed these words:

***"A Memorial to the Greatest Woman and Best Mother Who Ever Lived!"***

Well, that's the end of the story. Except, of course, its NOT the end of the story. The older son, after inspecting the monument and pronouncing himself proudly satisfied with the memorial he was offering his mother, left the city never to return again. Oh, he sent his obligatory 100 long-stem red roses every year on

Mother's Day and his mother's birthday, of course. But he returned to his pursuit of power and wealth and, quite naturally, accumulated even MORE than he already had...even though he had to step on many people's toes and destroy quite a few lives in the process.

The sad thing was he died just a few weeks after he had turned sixty...a broken, lonely and bitter – though exceedingly WEALTHY man. For you see, despite his great wealth, he had no friends, and, in reality, no family, either. His wife divorced him many years before. And his children...his "legacy" he liked to call them...well, they had fallen by the wayside too. His son died in a car wreck as he drove his Mazaratti over a hillside in France one night when he was stoned half out of his mind...which was, by the way, his usual condition. And his daughter...well, that was a different matter. She had "found religion" (Praise the Lord!) and had converted to a little known far-eastern religion, giving herself and all her worldly goods over to a commune in India where she went to live, never to be heard from again.

The younger son, however, continued to live his life after his mother died much the same way he had while she was living...living out his Christian faith and witnessing to the principles of goodness and kindness and love which his mother had taught him throughout his life. But then, of course, he too died one day. But unlike his brother, he died much the same way his mother had...surrounded by loved ones and friends who cared for him and honored him with the witness of their lives.

At his funeral...in the church to which he had been so faithful over the years...surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of people from the neighborhood to which he had given so much throughout the years...the minister encouraged those present to continue witnessing to the values and principles and most of all the FAITH which had been so much a part of not only the man's life, but his mother's life as well...a faith lived out NOT in empty promises and loud, showy displays of grandeur...but in quiet displays of kindness and love toward others that would truly give honor to God and memorial to the lives of those who had gone before.

The scripture passages the minister used that day were ones that might have a familiar ring for those of you who are gathered HERE this morning. The first set of readings were from the book of Genesis...the Jacob stories...and from Joshua...the story of the Israelites conquering of the Promised Land. "*Some people set up memorials of stone,*" the minister said, "*not only to those who have died, but sometimes to God as well, thinking that a stone will be a fitting memorial and a lasting remembrance to a person's life...or to the blessings and love of God. But a cold, hard stone is without LIFE,*" the minister said. "*And while we can gather around those stones and perform our religious rituals...or say our pious words...or lay our flowers of remembrance...we can also then WALK AWAY from those memorials, thinking we have paid fitting tribute and can therefore get back to our lives as they REALLY are.*"

And then the minister shared ANOTHER scripture passage...this one from the Book of Romans...which he contrasted with the memorials of stone we so often erect to those who have gone before. "*This passage,*" the minister said, "*characterized the life of a son whose faith was a LIVING faith and whose memorial to his mother was a LIVING memorial, lived out in all the days of his life. It is a passage,*" the minister added, "*that we would ALL be well advised to remember as we decide what kind of memorial WE want to give to our dearly departed loved ones. The passage comes from the Apostle Paul who wrote:*

*"So then, brothers and sisters, I appeal to you: Because of God's great mercy to us all, offer yourselves as LIVING MEMORIALS to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to Him. This is the TRUE MEMORIAL which you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to the standards of THIS world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know what is the will of God – what is good and perfect and is pleasing to him."* Romans 12:1-2

And so, our parable ends on this day before Memorial Day...the day which is set aside each year to HONOR the dead...to REMEMBER those who have gone before...to GIVE MEMORIAL to the fallen...and to PAY TRIBUTE to our ancestors in the faith.

And yet, of course, the parable doesn't end here, either. It continues on with you and with me...for WE now become the main characters in the story.

So as you think about Memorial Day, let me simply leave you with the question with which we began: WHAT KIND OF MEMORIAL DO YOU PLAN TO OFFER TO THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE? Will it be a memorial in name only...stone-cold and hard, offering only the ritual formalities of flowers laid or fancy words said, but none of the true spirit of what a memorial really OUGHT to be? Or will it be a LIVING MEMORIAL...alive and full of spirit...offering a true remembrance of your loved ones played out in the way you actually LIVE your life?

The decision, of course, it up to you. Just remember! The parable lives on in the choices WE make!

So which will it be? A memorial of stone...or the LIVING MEMORIAL of your very LIFE? The choice is yours!

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