

Meadowbrook Congregational Church
May 25, 2008
“On the Shoulders of Giants”
Reverend Art P. Ritter

Deuteronomy 11:13-28

13 If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul—¹⁴then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil;¹⁵ and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill.¹⁶ Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshipping them,¹⁷ for then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly from the good land that the LORD is giving you.

18 You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead.¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.²⁰ Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates,²¹ so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

22 If you will diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving the LORD your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him,²³ then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and mightier than yourselves.²⁴ Every place on which you set foot shall be yours; your territory shall extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the Western Sea.²⁵ No one will be able to stand against you; the LORD your God will put the fear and dread of you on all the land on which you set foot, as he promised you.

26 See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse:²⁷ the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today;²⁸ and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known.

The Memorial Day weekend has long been one of my favorite times of the year. For me it ranks up there with the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. I suppose that my feeling is based on the advent of warmer weather, the approaching end of the school year, the tradition of family gatherings, and the arrival of what I always hope to be a more relaxed summer pace.

I am really looking forward to tomorrow. For the first time in over 30 years, I am going to attend the Memorial Day observance in my hometown of Stanton, Michigan. When I think of Memorial Day, my picture in my mind is that

of what happens in my home town on that last Monday in May.

There is a small parade. There are no floats, clowns, or beauty queens waving from the back of convertibles. There is a police car with lights flashing but siren respectfully quiet. There is the high school band playing John Phillip Sousa. There is the local veteran's organization marching. As a child I worried about whether or not some of the veterans would make the long march through Main Street and to the cemetery. Unfortunately, many of those veterans I saw are not around yet modern conflicts have probably created a new generation of veterans to march in

parades. Then there is the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts carrying their flags. I got to be the Cub Scout flag bearer once. By the time we reached the cemetery, my arms were ready to fall off! Finally at the back of the parade will be the bicycles. They will be decorated in red, white, and blue. Toward the end of the parade they always sneak up and pass the Scouts and zero in on the veterans. My mother always hated such rude parade behavior, saying there was no place for bikes in such a solemn march. I always wanted to ride my bike in the parade but I was always too afraid to ask my mother because I knew she would say no.

The parade ends at the top of what everybody in Stanton knows as "Cemetery Hill." People gather around the Civil War monument for a short service commemorating our nation's war dead. The VFW post chaplain will give a talk, a talk that before always seemed too long and much too difficult for me to understand. And then will come the most moving part of the service. The honor guard will fire their weapons in a salute to their fallen comrades. From the top of the hill, a lone bugler will play "Taps." From over the hill, another bugler will echo a refrain. No matter how old I was, that part always gave me goose bumps.

I recall as a child thinking that everyone in town was there on Memorial Day. I remember watching the service from the same place every year, near the well-decorated gravestone of my Grandpa Ritter. If we couldn't see over the crowd, my Dad would pick us up and we would take turns sitting on top of his shoulders. Tomorrow I will stand and watch from a different place, near my mother's grave on the other side of the speaker's platform. I won't need my father's shoulders although we may be leaning on each other just a bit.

A couple of weeks ago Amelia brought home a science assignment. It was about Newton's laws of motion. She wasn't thrilled with it, nor with Newton. I wasn't much help. But I did remember that the opening page of my eighth grade history book contained a quote from Sir Issac Newton. But he said this, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." As an eighth grader, these words, like most of Newton's writing didn't make much

sense. I was more concerned about getting to the last page of the text book rather than reflecting on the first page. But as I consider my visit to my hometown's Memorial Day event, it suddenly makes a little more sense. That is what we do in this nation on this particular weekend. That is what we do within the community of faith as we examine the lessons of Scripture and tradition. We pause to acknowledge that today we do indeed see further because we have stood on the shoulders of giants.

Who are these giants upon whose shoulders we stand? Obviously the purpose of our national observance is to recall those who gave their lives for the cause of freedom, dying so that we might live in peace and with the blessings of God-given liberty. The giants are those who sacrificed years of life and much of their own comfort to battle tyranny and oppression and to serve the country they loved.

Today we may recall the giants here at Meadowbrook Congregational Church, the vision and sacrificial service of members and friends who have gone on to their eternal rest. We give thanks for the blessings of this worshipping community passed on to us.

The giants are loved one who live on today in our memory- parents, spouses, siblings, grandparents, uncles and aunts, children, and friends. They are those in whose lives we found love. They are those in whose words we found wisdom. They are those in whose example we found character. They are those in whose presence we experienced the very presence of God.

Some may see little value in history and tradition. Some may say that such things only serve to tie us down, to bind us to a dead past. But today is a day to understand that history is not a rope that enslaves or binds. It is a rope that anchors and gives us position and direction. If we cannot understand where we have been than it will be more difficult to understand where we might be going. If we can see further today, it is only because we have stood on the shoulders of giants.

The words from Deuteronomy are quite appropriate for a secular or religious observance of Memorial Day. The words are a reminder of how God's people are to live once they find themselves in the land of blessing. God says to the faithful, "Obey my commands that I have given you. Love the Lord your God and serve him with all your heart. Remember these commands and cherish them. Tie them on your arms and wear them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children. Talk about them at home and away. If you remember, then you and your children will live a long time in the land that I have promised you."

The words of this passage seem to speak against a kind of spiritual amnesia, a forgetting of the past that stifles the appreciation of the present and limits the promise of the future. The author warns the people of God that they can find their purpose, place, and meaning in the consideration of the larger story of God. And that larger story has a past, present, and future.

Life in the presence of God is enhanced when we remember the gifts of the past in the midst of the present. Give thanks for what has come before you by living in the way God has meant for you to live- in freedom, seeking justice and offering mercy. When living in the promised land, never settle for less than seeing the highest and best in yourself. Pick up the small and vulnerable ones about you. Lift them higher and you will see further. Teach your children of God's promises. Do this and you will find yourself as part of a larger story of what God has done, of what God is doing, and of what God will do.

Native American poet and writer, N. Scott Momaday, a member of the Kiowa nation, tells of his life as a young boy. One morning his father took him to the cottage of an old Kiowa woman and left him. All day long the old woman told the young boy story after story of the Kiowa. She told him of the beginnings of the tribe near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River. She told him of the movement of the tribe into what is now Nebraska and Kansas. She told him of the wars with other nations, of the buffalo hunts,

and of the coming of the white man. She told him of the terrible winters and of finally being conquered by the white soldiers and settlers and moved forcibly to a reservation in southern Oklahoma. All day long she told her stories and sang her songs. At sunset, the boy's father finally returned for him. Momaday wrote of his feelings when he left the old woman's cottage. His mind was full of stories and memories. His heart was full of thanksgiving and appreciation. He said simply, "I left her house a Kiowa."

Remembering is a sacred thing. Remembering who and what has gone before us is an act of gratitude. As we remember the giants upon whose shoulders we have stood, we soon recognize that the hand of God has indeed been part of our past. As we recognize the giants upon whose shoulders we continue to stand, we give thanks for our life of abundant blessing. We also remember that there will be others who follow us, who will be looking for a higher place to stand. May our words and deeds impart to them the gifts of the blessings we have received. May they see from the perspective of our shoulders, a clear and bright picture of the promised land of God' presence in the midst of human life.