

May 7, 2006

“The World Needs to Hear Our Salty Language”

Matthew 5:13-20

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

I really don't want to shock anybody, so I'm going to say something straight up this morning – my message today is full of salty language. Oh, and I may have my tongue-in-cheek as I speak. But I have to use salty language, even with my mom here joining us for worship today. I have no choice because Jesus and every respectable Jew of his day used salty language. In order to emphasize the importance of this for our modern day faith journeys, I too have to pepper my sermon ... with talk of salt.

How do we preserve stuff today? More than anything, we refrigerate. As anyone who heard this year's Easter sermon can attest, refrigeration as a means of preservation didn't work out so well for one family. But, that strange story aside, refrigeration is a reliable way for us to save perishable items – most especially food.

The folks back in the first century, however, didn't have this luxury. Yet vegetables and fish needed to be saved and stored. To do so, they would dry their food out by salting it. This practice also had a purpose in worship, because when grain was given as a praise offering to God, it was salted to keep it from rotting. Similarly, salt was needed in battle. Horribly painful, but absolutely necessary, salt was rubbed into open wounds as a means of cleansing and healing.

Salt was also used for a different kind of preservation. When two people made a verbal contract with one another, it was common to toss salt over each other's shoulders to seal the deal. To break the deal would be as foolish and unforgivable as throwing a bag of precious salt out in the garbage.

So, all in all, for these reasons and more, salt was a very valuable commodity that everyone needed. People's quality of life depended on salt. No salt ... no quality, no preservation.

Our God is in the same way a “salty” God – giving us many things to preserve us. God's teachings throughout the Bible and all the spiritual gifts bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit exist to make it possible for us to have a well-seasoned spiritual life, one that empowers us to flavor other people's lives with faith, hope and love. Jesus was the incarnation, the exact imprint of our “salty” God and therefore sternly warns us not to lose our saltiness as His followers. He isn't whispering to us in this morning's lesson from Matthew's Gospel ... he's shouting a reminder that we are the salt of the earth! We

are the one's who must go out from this sanctuary and *preserve* the Good News of the Gospel in our homes, our workplaces, our social outlets and beyond. Our language and our actions must always be salty. When this isn't so, the quality of Christian faith looks cheap and dispensable.

Heaven knows our world needs to know the preserving power of Jesus Christ. There is much in this world that corrodes self-esteem, families, society at large. There is much that pokes at wounds and just watches our goodness fester into a bad infection. We need our salty God to preserve us and to graciously work through us to improve the quality of our neighbor's lives with holy love.

Now when you read this morning's lesson about being the salt of the earth, you'll notice it is tucked inside the same chapter as the Beatitudes. This was Matthew's way of making it very clear what Jesus taught being salty is all about. It's helpful to consider the Beatitudes as a recipe for every season of our life in Christ. We are to be and to bless the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, etc.

Though we all know this sounds great, and that it is indeed our true, daily calling as those wanting to follow the example of Jesus, being the salt of the earth is not easy. Tony Campolo, a well known pastor, author and professor, tells a story about a student who once talked about a church that didn't seem to have a salty taste to it at all. The student told him "if you put together a committee and asked them to take the Beatitudes and create a religion that contradicted every one of them, you would come pretty close to what I'm hearing down there at the church. Whereas Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor,' down there they make it clear that it is the rich who are blessed. Jesus said, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' but the people at that church have a religion that promises happiness with no crucifixions. Whereas Jesus talked about the meek being blessed, they talk as if they took assertiveness-training courses. Jesus may have talked about the merciful and peacemakers," the student continued, "but those people are the most enthusiastic supporters of American militarism and capital punishment I have ever met. Jesus may have lifted up those who endured persecution because they dared to embrace a radical gospel, but that church declares a gospel that espouses success and affirms a lifestyle marked by social prestige."

Campolo listened to these words of accusation and realized that they could have been aimed at him. He says that ever since that encounter, he's wondered whether or not his lifestyle is really Christian. I confess that often times I feel the same.

Another respected preacher, Tom Long, echoes this difficulty of being salt in the world by saying, "The ordeal of Matthew's church is representative of the experience of

the church in many times and places ... a small group trying with mixed results to live out an alternative life, set down in the midst of a teeming, fast-changing culture that neither appreciates nor understands them. The hardest part is not being Christian for a day, but being faithful day after day, maintaining confidence in what, for all the world, appears to be a losing cause.”

Still, not to fret. We don't need to be all the Beatitudes at once. We just need to remember that a little pinch of salt can go a long way to seasoning a whole pot. We keep this in mind by disciplining ourselves not to leave our Bibles on shelves the way we leave saltshakers in cabinets. We do so by striving daily to not waste our knowledge of God in Jesus Christ the way we so easily toss salt away that's been tipped over.

What can you do today, and throughout this week to salt the various areas of your life with the salvation seasoning of Christ? Is there a friend or family member whose life feels hopelessly bland, unable to taste and see the goodness of God? Go, pour out your faith upon them. Is there something happening in society you consider a dangerous wound to your fellow citizens and others around the world? Go, add pinch of Christian perspective and compassion and peacemaking here and there.

I've been pouring some of my salty language into the Middle East for a couple months now. I don't receive any salt in return, but that's alright. It was last fall when I heard about an organization called "Adopt-A-Platoon." This group takes note of American soldiers stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq who do not receive mail on any kind of regular basis. Affirming the importance of mail in keeping a soldier's spirit up, they then seek sponsors. Well, I sponsor a soldier by the first name of Mark. I don't write to him as often as I would like, but I've kept my handwritten notes to him going at a fairly good clip. And, I was delighted that our Sunday School children spread their salt by sending Mark a package at Christmastime. I don't preach to Mark. I don't even identify myself as a pastor. But by reminding him that he's got someone thinking about him and taking the time to write to him, I hope I'm helping to flavor his service with hope and love. It's just a pinch of peace I can offer in a time of disheartening war.

When we help God spread the word about the life-preserving good news, we also shine light in darkness. We are not only the salt of the earth, we are also the light of the earth. Did you know that in biblical times salt was used to create light as well? It was light in the form of glowing heat. Again, folks back then didn't have modern conveniences, including ovens. So they created kilns in the side of hills. To create glowing heat, they laid down giant salt licks and spread ... get this ... dung on it. I'm no chemist, but apparently, this creates a transforming, glowing heat. This is why this

same teaching in Luke's Gospel says that if salt loses its saltiness it's not even fit to be used with a dung heap. In other words, if you cease to help preserve the Good News in this world and therefore fail to help improve the quality of people's lives, then you will be a bland and dim disciple.

Here's my great hope. I hope everyone who sees the symbol of the Cross and see each of us abiding by it will feel empowered and preserved in divine goodness and grace. Just like the Morton Umbrella girl logo reminds people that even when it rains, their salt is reliable ... I hope we can let people know that even when life is terribly stormy, Christ is reliable. The world needs our salty language. The world needs our glowing light. Let's go from here today and be the salt and be the light!

Amen.

Sunday, May 14, 2006 - Mother's Day

Praying, Not Prestidigitating!

Psalm 34

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Last Saturday evening, I traveled to New Providence with my mom and her youngest sister to attend a concert by a Christian singer/songwriter named Chris Rice. Think James Taylor and Jim Croce and you'll get a feel for Chris Rice's wonderful music. It was one of those intimate shows where he did not have his band -- just his acoustic guitar and a grand piano. His lyrics and music are truly gifts of the spirit, especially in the way they talk about how we live our faith with both joy and struggle.

One song, in particular, struck me as especially poignant. It was a song about prestidigitating. Well, okay, it was actually a song about the importance of prayer. But to make his point, Chris Rice confesses that instead of praying, he wishes he could be prestidigitating to make changes in his life and the world.

You know what that is? It's slight of hand magic, the kind that makes things appear and disappear. David Blaine, when not locked into a homemade aquarium in NYC and on national television trying to escape it, is an expert prestidigitator. Chris Rice is not, but if praying worked like magic, then, according to his song lyric, he could be "working up a miracle, puttin' on a show, changing what I thought to be unchangeable reality." Yes, if praying was like prestidigitating, then any of us could vanish sin and strife like a bad penny and make good stuff appear like a quarter from behind a child's ear.

But praying is not any kind of magic. Chris Rice, as a Christian, knows this well and so continues on in his song saying, “the only way to really change is simple choices everyday, obey the Spirit-whisper in my soul, with the help of God, a little time can change a heart, renew a mind ... without a magic wand He’ll work a miracle.”

After the concert, this song sparked some conversation with my mom. I listened closely as she talked about how fervently she has been praying for me all my life -- nothing formal, since my mom doesn’t have much of any religious education, just sincere requests to the God of Amazing Grace to guide and protect me. More than anything, she prayed I would not slip into the sewage of addictions and abuse running all along the gutter of my family. There were times, especially in my first year or two of college, when I’m sure she wanted to quickly wave a magic wand to make sure I would stay upright and safe, headed toward the narrow gate. But such times, she knew, and as every mother knows, she could really only entrust her child to the care of God.

Put another way, she knew she had to *fear* God. Verse seven of Psalm 34 reminds us all, and I’ll say especially mothers, that the Lord encamps around those who fear him. We hear this phrase about fearing God often around church, don’t we? Is this saying we need to cower before God, scared to death that God might smite us on a whim? Or because, yes, we in our sin indeed deserve it? Is it saying God sets up all around the perimeter of our lives ready to strike so ... watch out?! No, this is not fear in the way we commonly interpret it. If we lived as though we needed to constantly dodge lightning bolts, life would be too stormy to bear. And, frankly, this is not a divine being I and perhaps most of you would find worth loving, following and praying to.

This phrase appears throughout the Psalms not to make us shy away from God, but to teach us how to move closer to God’s bosom like a nursing babe. It appears in order to convey our most human, most intimate need to trust and to depend on the One who gives us life. Fearing God -- that is, prayerfully trusting and depending on the One we know has the presence and the power to sustain us -- is always our very first step toward discerning who God desires us and created us to be. God encamps around those who take this first step. When we step forward faithfully in this way, we gain a deep, inner assurance that God will deliver us and our loved ones from evil and that we and our loved ones will lack nothing truly needed.

This does beg the question ... do you know what you and others truly need and how long any of us are willing to wait for such things? If you don’t have an answer, then chances are you won’t be very good at fearing God. And, you might start impatiently prestidigitating instead of honestly praying and depending on God to provide your sense

of security.

This is easy to do given that our culture today is one of convenience and efficiency. As such, there are many things readily available to us that want to feed our sense of security. We no longer need to wait, for example, for the bank to open on Monday morning. It's now open on Sundays and 24-7 through our computers on the internet. Convenience and efficiency make for contented customers. And isn't it amazing how quickly we can obtain things from anywhere around the world these days? Clicked, shipped, delivered to our doorsteps. The good Lord knows how Jenny's Stampin' Up home business depends on near daily arrivals from our friendly neighborhood UPS guy. Even more ... we've got electronic road maps in our cars, slim-fitting cell phones, Blackberry's making it possible to be in our offices on the go, strip malls devouring field and flower with a ferocious appetite, and new signs for soon to be built neighborhoods that read "If you lived here, you'd be home by now."

I'm concerned, though, that despite its practicality, this culture of quick acquisition can cause us to be terribly impatient with ourselves, others, our loved ones, and most hazardously, with our God. We can get terribly spoiled, lulled into a belief that we will always be able to get what we want when we want it. But that's really not how it is with our family members or with our God. Those relationships can't be manufactured to meet our needs on our terms alone. They require flexibility, patience and abiding trust. But if we are accustomed to point and click, quick fix service ... we may come to think we can change others, ourselves, and certain circumstances at the wave of a magic wand. And our prayer life – the very center of our remaining reverently fearful of God – can take the form of zapping an instant message to heaven and expecting an instant reply.

There is a very funny scene in the movie Bruce Almighty. Actually, there are many funny scenes in that movie. The one I'm presently thinking of shows the main character, a newscaster who has been granted the power to be like God only in the region of Buffalo, NY, sitting at his computer. He's made it so that every prayer request comes to him in the form of an email (he did this so he'd stop hearing them all in his head!). Every time he logs in, the email inbox absolutely overflows. At first, he tries maintaining a personal touch. He tries answering each email. But this quickly turns out to be inefficient. He can't keep up. So instead, he decides to conveniently reply to every single one of them at the same time with a simple "Yes." Everyone gets their prayers answered in the way they wanted. The main character figures he's solved the problem and kept everyone happy with him in his role as God. He soon realizes,

however, answering “yes” to every prayer request causes disasters. He realizes, for example, that the person praying locally for a clear and starry night, has disturbed the cycle of the moon and therefore triggered a tsunami on the other side of the world. His effort to be a culturally convenient God ends up overlooking the big picture, and that praying to God needs to be about more than ordering up personal requests.

This is a funny scene because the actor Jim Carrey makes some great faces as he tries to answer so many prayers at once. But it’s also very poignant when his comical rubber face settles into seriousness, realizing that how to answer God fearing people is a process beyond his comprehension. By the end of the movie, he discovers how to truly fear God, to put his sense of what is personally and socially secure in God’s care alone.

Praying is the pulse of fearing God. It is what gives us the rhythm of trusting that God knows best and is acting in the best interested of all whom He loves and cares for. This is why the Psalms repeatedly remind us that fearing God is the *beginning* of wisdom, of knowing how to live out our faith. It’s not for us to fully know God’s will – that’s the thing Adam and Eve learned pretty quickly. God just wants us to lift up our lives and believe He’s got our backs and the backs of those we love.

I’m so grateful my mother has understood this for so many years. So much about her ability to care for me was beyond her control. This was especially true when she made the decision to give primary care of me to her mother when I was three years old. This was no magic solution, but a faithful one.

The Lord indeed, Psalm 34 also reminds us, “is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit ... the Lord redeems his servants, no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him.” What more could a mother need to believe on behalf of her children? What more could her children need to believe on behalf of their mother? May we all step forward in faith ... patiently, prayerfully believing the Lord is encamped around our families always. Amen.

Mother’s Day Prayers from Creighton University

<http://www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Mothers>

Prayer for an Expectant Mother

God of Life,

We thank you for the expectant mother who carries this growing hope in her life and into our world. Bless her and the living promise of this child and help her to manage the mix of joys, fears and anxieties she may have about the time ahead.

As she watches her body change, may she grow in your own loving kindness and compassion. Let her be inspired by Mary and Joseph who model a loving family life and give her the courage to guide her children in a faith-filled life.

Be with her in her gladness these days and deepen her faith, so that labor might be a time of strength and prayer. Guard the health of her baby and give her the peace of mind that may so often seem elusive in this time.

With your grace, she will be ready for the end of this expectant time and ready to take on the joys and challenges of parenthood.

May she praise you with Mary: *"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exalts in God my savior."*

The Cathedral of Home

Dearest Lord,

I sit here quietly in my room, opening my heart to you. It is so silent! But if I listen intently, I become aware of the breathing of my children in beds down the hall. They sigh softly or move in their beds quietly, nestled warmly into their dreams. These most intimate sounds, coming from the people I love most in the world, transform this room. It becomes a place of honoring you, a cathedral of joy and gratitude toward you for giving me these children.

May I always treasure these gifts you have given me. In each moment of loving them, from kisses to laundry to kitchen, may I be aware of your presence in my life in this way. Thank you!

Prayer of a Mother whose children are no longer at home

"Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" - Isaiah 43:18-19

Loving Spirit,

What is this new thing you are doing in me?

My life is and has been so very full. Each day it has been shaped by the miracle of being a mother. For so many years my every moment was intently set on the world of raising my children. I was so keenly aware that my family was some wondrous way that you and I share our love for each other. You have given my children and husband as a way of showing me your great love - and the way I love my family was a response to you.

But Lord, I am lonesome now. I miss my children! They are growing and moving off and they no longer rely on me in the same way. My time is less taken up with them and at moments I just want to turn back the clock. Help me to see what you have in store for me now. You are doing something new in me. You are preparing me for a new phase, a new service and a new way of loving you.

Keep my eyes clear and my heart open to the ways you call me, Lord. And help me always to be grateful for the many gifts of each day.

Prayer of a Mother concerned about her adult children

As I turn to you, Lord, my heart is troubled. You know the journey that brought my children to where they are today. I am so sorry for whatever my husband or I might have done wrong, Lord. Our children don't seem to practice the faith we tried to hand on to them. Their values are so different from ours. It breaks my heart to see them passing those same values on to their children, my grandchildren.

Oh, Lord, I place them in your hands. I surrender the judgments and anger that can fill me. I know that, at times, in my frustration and desire to help them, I have pushed them farther away. Give me the graces I need to change my heart. Fill me with your mercy and forgiveness for my sins so that I might grow in the ability to forgive and embrace my kids with compassionate love. Let me be a healer of wounds, rather than a wounder. Let me build bridges of understanding. I know that is the only way I will be able, with your grace, to heal our relationship.

Father of Love, help my kids grow in gratitude to you. Help them to find you in their busy lives. Help me to affirm them and support them with love, that they might recognize authentic faith and love, and turn to you in their time of need.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you.

Prayer for a Mother with Alzheimer's

*"Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding,
my entire will... Give me only your love and your grace and that is enough for me."*

Ignatius of Loyola

Loving God,

Please bless every mother who has Alzheimer's disease.

She was with us children as we learned to walk.

-- Guide her uncertain steps today as her balance fails her.

She taught us to cross streets and be safe.

-- Help her not to get lost, even in her familiar surroundings.

She held us close in the terrors of the darkest nightmares.

-- May she not be frightened today by the reality of her life, which is strange and totally out of her control.

She cooked thousands of meals over decades of time.

-- Please allow her to accept the caring hand that now feeds her.

She changed diapers, Lord, and served you each time she did.

-- Please give her now the humility and grace to be served in this way.

Loving God, the familiar eyes of my mother
now respond with a blank stare.

She is unable to carry on a conversation,
to ask about her family

or to serve in the central role she has in our family.

Help her accept the surrender of her life these days.

Open her prayerful heart and fading mind

to be aware of your presence with her,

perhaps now closer than ever.

Give us, her family, the patience, courage and acceptance
to love her as she is and to support her in her daily needs.

Prayer for a Mother who has died

Dear Lord, relying on your promises to us, I turn to you in trust that my mother is with you and that she is enjoying your loving embrace. You alone know how she loved the best she could and how she faithfully endured the struggles that she faced. You know the graces you gave her and you know the grace she was for me and for so many. For all the ways she truly loved the way you loved her, please reward her, Lord. May she enjoy the communion of all her family and friends who are with you.

Lord, I know my mother still loves us who are still here on earth. I ask you that you might listen to her fervent prayers for us. Help me to grow into a new and deeper relationship with my mother now, as I long for the day when we will both meet in your embrace - freed from all that might have hindered our relationship on earth, knowing and understanding everything we did not know or understand on this earth.

I ask you this with faith in the resurrection, trusting my mother's love, and desiring that she know my love for her. Amen.

May 21, 2006, Ascension Sunday

The Buddy System

Acts 1:1-14

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Splish, splash! No running on the sides! Splish, splash! No dunking, no diving! Splish, splash! The pool at Camp Johnsonburg had some very clear rules for safety and well trained lifeguards to remind everyone of this. As staff counselors, we were glad for this. Splish, splash! Whistle, whistle, whistle! Of all the rules, the most helpful one was the buddy check. Each camper, before they were allowed in the pool, had to be assigned a buddy. This way, when a lifeguard blew the whistle, they would know to stop, seek out their buddy, join hands, raise arms, and stand in place until they were counted. A chaotic kids-in-the-pool scene would quickly transform into something resembling a synchronized swimming routine.

While I valued the buddy checks greatly, it wasn't fun when that whistle blew. There I'd be, pretending to be a shark chasing little giggling, taunting guppies and everything would have to cease. But, safety first, and the buddy checks were really "body" checks, providing the lifeguards and counselors a way to manage a potentially dangerous situation. Even more, it taught the kids that accountability happens in community. There is safety in numbers, especially in partnerships.

We grow up learning the value of partnerships. We partner for love. We partner for friendship. We partner for business. And sometimes, partnerships that begin as friendships turn into business partnerships. There is one example of this for which I'm very grateful. It was 1963. Two seventh graders in Merrick, NY, which is basically Long Island, become friends. The friendship grows as they live experience the late sixties and early seventies together. By 1977, they decide Vermont is more to their liking, and so decide to move there as roommates. While there, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield decide to take a \$5 correspondence course from Penn State. It was open book, so they each got a perfect score. Good thing, too, because it was a correspondence course on how to make ice-cream. The next year, they invest \$12,000 in a renovated gas station at the corner of St. Paul and College Streets in Burlington, Vermont. They called their little storefront "Ben and Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream Scoop Shop." This

friendship blossomed into a pretty sweet partnership, wouldn't you say? My life would so much poorer – and thinner – had Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream not been born!

The paradigm of partnering to enrich our lives and our world has a solid base in the Bible. Why did God create Eve? To partner with Adam as a steward of God's good creation. And when that partnership didn't work out as well as God had intended, what did God do in the midst of anger and disappointment to preserve a remnant of life? He told Noah to partner up every living creature, two by two. I wonder what buddy checks on that floating zoo were like. I imagine counting the elephants was rather easy. But trying to count creature like bumblebee bats – the world's smallest mammals – couldn't have been easy!

God maintained his covenant promise in the years that followed the flood by forging new partnerships. Partners the likes of Abraham, Isaac, Deborah, David, Elijah, and Isaiah were called upon to advance the message of holy life and love and to stress the importance of accountability before God and among the people of God. Unfortunately, these partnerships also didn't pan out as well as God had intended.

So God decided to partner with us in the most personal way possible. God became incarnate in the person of Jesus ... decided to buddy up close and personal like never before. Walk our walk. Talk our talk. Blow the whistle and make sure we know who and where our true buddies are in this world. He led, by example, what it means to have accountability in community for the sake of safety and triumphal life.

But then forty days after Jesus amazingly arose from the grave to demonstrate the strength and power of partnering with God above all else, he mysteriously ascended up into a cloud never more his face to be seen. What impact did this have on His principle partnership group – the disciples? Did they feel abandoned, severed from their sacred head?

Well, they might have if Jesus himself hadn't told them about the buddy system he was leaving them to inaugurate. One man, even the Son of God, would not be able to partner up with every person in the world. Such a mission needed Jesus to somehow multiply himself. And so God in the flesh departed in one form, promising to come back in another form, one that would make partnership with God as easy and intimate as taking a breath. We'll celebrate that arrival of this new buddy system more fully in two weeks, on Pentecost. For today, it's the promise of the Holy Spirit as the further fulfillment of God's promise to remain partnered with us that I want to express.

Even before I spoke a word of this sermon, we've been reminded of this. We partnered up with God – through the Holy Spirit -- for a very special reason, and in

doing so, were reminded of how God, through accountability in community, has been partnered with us since our earliest years.

Baptism, you see, is a buddy check. We've been commanded to go out and baptize, making disciples of all nations, so that the whole world gets the message that there is safety in numbers through the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And so we all did a buddy check for the Kathleen Marie Gilligan and her family today. Through the water of baptism and words of prayer, we symbolically joined her hand to God's heart and welcomed her to be part of Christ's Body with us. In a world where things are, or at least can seem, very chaotic, we all synchronized in the Spirit for the assurance of faith and strengthening of the church.

My seminary book on baptism makes an uncomfortable but very excellent point about the importance of what we have witnessed here today. It proclaims, for the newly and not so baptized among us, that "Those who seek baptism renounce by word and action the popular attitude 'I can be a committed Christian without being a member of the church.' Harsh as this judgment may seem," the book continues, "we must hold that baptism is not intended for such people. Through baptism, Christ creates the church, both local and [universal]. We can no more be baptized and avoid participation in the community than water can be boiled without becoming steam."

This book's strong word to us clearly aimed against our taking baptism as anything less than absolutely vital to community life in the Christian faith. It's not some ritual to do because it's beautiful. It's foundational. It isn't to be offered and administered lightly, but diligently. This is why, in the case of an infant baptism like Katie's, I make sure the parents and I have a mutual understanding before hand. It's why the parents themselves reaffirm their faith in Christ, and why the sponsors pledge their faithful support. It's why all of you reaffirmed God's partnership with you as well through the question presented by one of your elders. Yes baptism is, my friends, a buddy check.

I mentioned Pentecost is coming in two weeks. This year it will be an extra special celebration because we will honor the partnership with God made through our baptisms in two wonderful ways – we will recognize the faithful efforts of our confirmation class as well as ordain and install a new elder. Both of these worshipful practices are further evidence the Holy Spirit promised to us by Christ (before he lifted off!) continues to keep us united to God through accountable community.

A final reinforcing image to take home with you this morning. It came to me while taking a break from writing the sermon a few days ago. I was reading my favorite

newsmagazine, The Week, when I happened to read an article about military basic training. I was surprised to learn, not having any military experience, that every new recruit is assigned a buddy. The primary purpose of this, apparently, is to learn that your security depends on someone other than yourself. You are never to go anywhere or do anything without your buddy. If your buddy is singled out for punishment, you take it with him. The author of the article writes that “When a company is composed of battle-buddy couples, there are no loners.”

To this I add ... may there not be any in the family of Christ either. May each of us so steadfastly companioned by God by the partnering presence of the Holy Spirit ... affirmed through our baptisms, our confirmations, our ordinations, and because we've all shown up here this morning ... find ourselves engaging in buddy checks day in and day out. Safety in numbers, especially in partnerships. Amen.

May 28, 2006 - Memorial Day

“THOSE WE REMEMBER”

John 15, 12-13

Elder Nancy Babb, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

“In New York harbor stands a lady,
With a torch raised to the sky.
And all who see her, know she stands for
Liberty for you and I.

I'm so proud to be called an American
To be named with the brave and the free.
I will honor our flag and our trust in God,
And the Statue of Liberty.”

This morning, the day before Memorial Day, I wanted to share those words with you.

Last summer I took our, then, 7 year old grandson Justin to see the Statue of Liberty for the first time. It also gave me an opportunity to explain to him the importance of this beautiful symbol.

Memorial Day is unique to our nation. The observance was begun, unofficially, during

the Civil War when some concerned ladies decided to decorate the graves of those who had bravely given their lives in that destructive civil conflict between the states. Memorial Day was officially proclaimed on May 5, 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, in his General Order No. 11, and was first observed on May 30, 1868, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. The first state to officially recognize the holiday was New York in 1873.

By 1890 it was recognized by all of the Northern states. The South refused to acknowledge the day, honoring their dead on separate days until after W.W.I when the holiday changed from honoring just those who died fighting in the Civil War to honoring Americans who died fighting in any war. It is now celebrated in almost every state, on the last Monday in May, passed by Congress with the National Holiday Act of 1971.

I came across a letter written by Major Sullivan Ballou, with the 2nd R.I. volunteers, to his wife Sarah in Smithfield, on July 7th, 1861, a week before the first battle of Bull Run. There is no better illustration of commitment to principle and honor than is seen in this letter.

My Very Dear Sarah,

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days - perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more.

I have no misgivings about or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing, perfectly willing, to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this Government and to pay that debt...

Sarah, my love for you is deathless: it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break, and yet my love

for country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistible yon, with all these chains to the battle-field.

The memories of all the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most deeply grateful to God, and you, that I have enjoyed them so long.

And how hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grown up to honorable manhood around us.

If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle-field, it will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless, how foolish I have often-times been.

O Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth and fit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you in the gladdest day and in the darkest night, amidst your happiest scenes and gloomiest hours - always, always; and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, or a cool air cools your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by

Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone, and wait for me, for we shall meet again...Sullivan

Major Ballou was killed one week later at the first battle of Bull Run.

As we hear in the reading of John 15:13, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends", and as I have just read the letter written by Major Ballou, we are reminded of the debt of gratitude we owe to those who have paid the extreme sacrifice and have given their lives for others. Freedom has a price.

The desire for freedom is one of the strongest desires of the human soul. It truly is the

one thing worth dying for!

Men over the centuries have given their very lives and fortunes for this desire.

It was the desire of Hebrew slaves in Egypt!

It was the desire of Babylonian Captives.

It was the desire of a group of pilgrims that founded our nation!

Recorded in the first Document - the Mayflower Pact, it was the desire of our founding fathers in ridding the nation of the rule of the British as expressed in a Declaration of Independence, on July the 4th, 1776. In Philadelphia, in Constitution Hall we see a document signed that we now call the Declaration on Independence. It says "We proclaim ourselves independent from the tyranny of those who would hold sway over the minds, the souls, the lives of Americans. It went on to say "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights."

It was the desire of the black slaves in American History.

It was the desire of Martin Luther King, "I have a dream"

It was the desire of an Indian by the name of Mahatma Gandhi.

It was the desire of Nelson Mandela.

It is the desire of every oppressed peoples.

The desire for freedom has even overpowered the need for love.

Men, and women have left fathers and mothers, sister and brothers, husbands, wives and children.

It is a desire that has been placed with every human from the time of Creation.

My Great-Great-Great-Great-Great Maternal Grandfather and Grandmother Hans Georg and Eva Gerster, on April 28th 1736 left their home in Basel Switzerland to sail to America seeking religious freedom and a fuller life for themselves, their family and their descendants

They arrived on Sept. 15, 1736 at the port of Phila., and settled in that city for a few years. Hans Georg wrote home to his Pastor and friends in Basel in a letter dated Nov. 20, 1737; "Here we have precious freedom of spiritual and worldly belief".

After moving to the Germantown section of Phila., their 3rd son Jacob was born in 1742.

He was to become my Great-Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather At this point in time the family name was changed to Castor.

Memorial Day not only recognizes a national sacrifice, but a spiritual sacrifice as well. In other words, we not only commemorate the blood that was shed to ensure our national freedom; but, we also commemorate the blood that was shed to ensure our spiritual freedom, as well, by our Lord Jesus Christ.

In 3 of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and John we find a special Memorial Day moment. It involves a lady by the name of Mary who came to pay a special tribute to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Most of the Memorial Day observations in our nation will look to graves filled with the bodies of those soldiers who died in service to their country. However, as believers, our Memorial Day can also look to a vacant cross, and an empty grave to the greatest sacrifice ever given.

The following e-mail was sent to me with it's author unknown., and I thought the magnitude and the simplicity were awesome.

A mother asked President Bush, "why did my son have to die in Iraq?"

Another mother asked President Kennedy, "why did my son have to die in Viet Nam?"

Another mother asked President Truman, "why did my son have to die in Korea?"

Another mother asked President Franklin Roosevelt, "why did my son have to die at Iwo Jima?"

Another mother asked President Woodrow Wilson, "why did my son have to die on the battlefield of France?"

Another mother asked President Lincoln, "why did my son have to die at Gettysburg?"

And yet another mother asked President George Washington, "why did my son have to die at Valley Forge?"

Then long, long ago, a mother asked "Heavenly Father, why did my son have to die on a cross outside of Jerusalem?"

The answer to all these are similar. "So that others may have life and dwell in peace, happiness and freedom."

My family is especially patriotic;

My Great-Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather Jacob Castor was commissioned in 1777 - 2nd Lt. of the 7th Co., 2nd Battalion of Bucks County militia and served during the American Revolution.

His great-great-great grandson, my maternal great-great-grandfather, Lewis Castor, even though a Quaker, chose to enlist in the Civil War, at the age of 17, in the 28th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Volunteers in Sept. 1861. It took him 3 times to successfully join. His father, a conscientious objector, went into Philadelphia, twice, and took him home. On the 3rd try, Lewis was successful and when he wrote home to his mother on Sept. 15, 1861 from Maryland that he was sorry to go against their beliefs, but this was something he strongly felt he had to do.

When W.W.I broke out, my maternal grandfather enlisted in the Army and saw action in several areas in Europe. I remember hearing him talk about how passionate he was to serve his country. He, a very devout Presbyterian, felt this was a duty.

Several weeks before Pearl Harbor, my father received his letter for the draft. My parents had their wedding planned for Dec. 13, 1941. My Mother tells the story that on Sunday, Dec.7, she was having her wedding gown fitted when the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor came over the radio. She said the emotions that everyone felt were so strong, that there never was a doubt about the U.S. entering the war.

Her 2 brothers, aged 17 and 20 enlisted right away after the attack. They both enlisted in the Army Air Corps and saw action in Europe. On August 25, 1944, her oldest brother George was shot down and died over Belgium, he was a tail gunner. My grandparents and the rest of the family were so devastated by this loss, but I never remember my grandparents voicing the feeling that George lost his life in vain. In fact, a Rose window was dedicated to Uncle George, at our home Presbyterian Church, with the inscription "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends"

Interestingly, 54 years later, to the day, August 25, 1997 our first grandson was born. Both my husband and our son served, proudly, in the armed forces.

In 2005 my brother took my father to The Mall in Washington DC to see the Memorial to the WW II veterans. Dad was so humbled and glad to share this memorial with other aging WW II vets. Those who tally such grim statistics tell us that already two thirds of them have passed on and over one thousand join the ranks each day. They have every right to be proud of their service to our country and the memorial raised in their honor. Each star in the memorial represents one hundred war dead, we are told - and the stars stretch forever.

Four hundred and seven thousand men and women....From the European theater to the Pacific. On a small island called Saipan, 3,500 dead - Philippines - Okinawa (12,500 dead) - Iwo Jima (4 ½ miles long, by 2 ½ miles wide - 19,000 wounded in action and 7,000 killed in action)

58,000 names are carved in stone on the Vietnam veterans memorial, one of the most visited sites in the DC area, and yet I wonder how many without friends or family members included on the Wall are able to see through the beauty of this awe inspiring monument and look into the life of one person or their grieving family who is listed there.

I am one of those people who can look at the Wall and remember a very dear friend whose name is listed. Lt. Joseph Yatsko, married to my college roommate. We shared many fun times together. He lost his life, when his helicopter was shot down on December 18, 1965 - the same day that our son, Scott was born. Bittersweet, to say the least.

You see sometimes I get to thinking that it's easy to lump men and women into a report of numbers and forget that each of them died, one at a time, for a cause beyond their understanding. Individual men and women who wanted to live as badly as you and I. Men and women who wanted to raise families. Men and women with dreams and hopes for the future, just as you and I have. How do we keep them from becoming just statistics or numbers? How do we keep ever before us the fact they were someone's Father or Uncle or Aunt or Sister or Friend?

I am not sure we can. The numbers are too large - The contributors too diverse - The

time span is too great. We cannot memorialize each fallen hero personally, BUT we can “show honor or esteem for - hold in high regard; and consider or treat with deference or dutiful regard”. And we must.

Do you prefer peace over war? I do. What we seem to differ on is the way to attain it. Critics believe the way to peace is through negotiations, “peace talks” etc. BUT this only works if everyone agrees to it. Those who know tell us that someone like a Napoleon, or a Hitler or any Banana Republic dictator.....or Saddam Hussein or a Bin Laden.....ONLY respond to force. They want us dead.

Justice and fairness are not concepts that are understood or practiced by a large portion of the world and as a general rule, according to Plato “order must be imposed.” “Justice without force”, Pascal wrote, “is a myth”. “History has shown us that when a people declare they will not fight to defend themselves or protect their rights then they will surely be over run and subjugated by those with no such qualms” another philosopher wrote. St. Augustine said “War and conquest are a sad necessity in the eyes of men of principle, yet it would be still more unfortunate if wrong-doers should dominate just men”.

When you go to bed tonight, thank God for that man or woman in uniform who is standing between our nation and the wrong doers of this world. I pray for the families and loved ones of that one who was killed this week to spare my life and yours. I do not know them personally. I don't have to, to respect their contribution to my life, my liberty and my pursuit of happiness.

Think of the many battles, in the Old Testament, in which the Israelites engaged and the men and women who were involved. The Old Testament is simply filled with “after action” reports. Some of those names who contributed to the success of the mission include;

Moses, who God told to bring His people, the Israelites, out of Egypt and bondage - Deborah, who led the Israelites to a great victory over the Canaanites - Joshua, ruler of the Israelites after Moses died. God charged him ‘be strong and of good courage’. He led the Israelites to take the city of Jericho and won the land of Canaan, later known as Israel. - Gideon, With an army of 300 brave men, won victories over the Midianites - David, as a boy, slew the giant Philistines warrior Goliath, and as King of Israel he and his ‘mighty men’, took the city of Jerusalem from their enemies and drove out the Philistines. - Samson, who began the process of setting Israel free from the Philistines by pulling down the temple on them - Saul - The first King of Israel who drove away the enemies of Israel, to name a few. Perhaps David's ‘mighty men’ could be compared to The Green Berets - Navy Seals - Rangers - Force Recon of modern times.

So....How will we celebrate our heros this Memorial Day?

Hopefully - with respect for their sacrifice.

Memorial Day is made to order for sharing with your children and grandchildren the fact that we would not be living life as we now know if someone had not paid the price of liberty for us. Our freedom - the social order we now enjoy - the democratic process - justice and justness - health - freedom from fear - the ability to seek the employment we prefer - All these things and more, we owe to those who paid the price for them. And often times, that price can be measured only in blood and human lives.

Memorial Day 2006 - is also a time to celebrate Americans coming together in the face of a common enemy. In the days following the 9-11 attack on the twin towers in NYC, the Pentagon, and the field in western PA I couldn't help but think that if President John F. Kennedy were alive today, I'm sure he would be pleased to see that even 45 years after his stirring call to 'ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country' Americans are still capable of rising to meet his challenge.

I would like at this time for all people in the Congregation, who have served proudly in the military, to please rise and receive our heart felt gratitude for their sacrifice.

I would like to quote Moina Michael, who in 1915 was so inspired by the poem "In Flanders Field" she wrote her own poem;

We cherish too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies.

Let us pray;

Father, thank you for the freedom to be here today to talk, to worship, to pray, and for the freedom to bring this message. Bless all of our armed forces, keep them safe, help their families through very difficult times. We are so blessed to be living in a country of the free and the brave. We remember those who have gone before us and have given the ultimate sacrifice of their lives for our freedom. May we always show honor to our veterans, past and present. Let us join together in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. Saying Our Father....