

## “Decoration Day”

by Brian Russo

[Ezekiel 37:1-11; Romans 5:1-11]

Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by *their* blood, will we be saved through *them* (Romans 5:9).

What does Memorial Day mean to you? To most of us I imagine, it marks the beginning of the vacation season; when we begin to think about leaving our normal surroundings, either literally or figuratively, to finally kick back and relax – no doubt a mentality that has contributed to the pitiful attendance here this morning... The 21<sup>st</sup> century Memorial Day for most of us then has become a universal symbol of leisure: when we leave to go to barbeques, pool parties, and even sometimes to the beach; when we go shopping for discounts, to watch the Indy 500 (though I can never understand why, as it’s so dreadfully boring), and even when some of us go out in search of a small town parade when overtaken by a spirit of commemoration.

But really, how many of us do that; that is, spend the upcoming holiday in a spirit of commemoration? How many of us dedicate tomorrow’s Monday to memorializing those who had served to give us a free day to be just that? Surely, our ex-military and those intimately connected might, but what of the rest of us? Do we take it as seriously; do we remember and realize Memorial Day’s deeply rooted significance? If we’re honest, probably not.

But, in our defense, that task has been made considerably harder since most of us have simply been uneducated about those very roots. You see, Memorial Day wasn’t always called Memorial Day, rather, it was originally known as Decoration Day, accordingly named as the graves of those who had passed were cleaned and decorated by those who had served adjacently. Originating in 1865, Decoration Day was founded by those bound by a common interest to pay their sincere respects to they who baptized by blood paved the path for the benefit of those who met the future. As you can probably discern then, it not was a day to be observed lightly. Nor was it the holiday as we now know it – a day of vacation which could be enjoyed by anyone not required to be at work; no, this was a day of service, a day of bearing witness. The amazing thing too was that all people observed it, no matter religion, class, or siding in arms; and for one day, May 30<sup>th</sup>, a day when there was no anniversary of a battle fought, everyone came together as one in devout worship, honoring those who were laid six feet under beneath them.

So what happened then? How did something as serious as Decoration Day become the Memorial Day that we all now celebrate in swim trunks? Well, as that which frequently comes with the passing of time, detachment gave way to complacency, and in 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Holidays Bill which declared that Decoration Day, now to be called Memorial Day, would be celebrated on the final Monday of May irrespective if that Monday actually coincided with May 30<sup>th</sup> (which as you will remember was the date specifically chosen for its lack of a battle’s anniversary). [It’s only by coincidence that tomorrow is indeed May 30<sup>th</sup>, as next year Memorial Day will be on May 28<sup>th</sup>.]

Now you might be thinking, “well, how does that really lead to a ‘detached complacency’ – there’s a million examples of when we proudly celebrate a day on a date for which it didn’t actually occur: Jesus’ birth perhaps being the greatest of which.” And even though that is somewhat true, for a holiday as nationally important and symbolic as that defined by remembering those who died in battle on a day for which there wasn’t one, it was plainly unacceptable to alter its commemorated date, especially to those who were so closely tied to everything May 30<sup>th</sup> originally meant. The VFW for instance, or the Veterans of Foreign Wars, warned in a statement saying, “Changing the date merely to create three-day weekends has undermined the very meaning of the day. No doubt, this has contributed a lot to the general public’s nonchalant observance of Memorial Day.”

And I think they were right when saying that. I mean, what would happen if some future generation declared that July 4<sup>th</sup> was to be moved to whatever the first Monday in July was, simply because it was more convenient for holiday travel and work schedules? It would completely water down its meaning, wouldn't it? And surely there would be an outcry, wouldn't there? You can just imagine our national elders vigorously protesting the move, just like the VFW did with the Memorial Day switch. But, what if over time, in their weakened age of importance and societal presence, they're figurative voices died out with the literal drying of their bones such that no one listened, and July 4<sup>th</sup> in fact became July 1<sup>st</sup> or July 2<sup>nd</sup>? Would we as a society then complacently greet one another with, "Happy July 2<sup>nd</sup>"? Harrowingly, the history of Decoration Day tells us that yes, we would, and that distant generations would go on celebrating it as such without question; and in doing so, become slowly disengaged from observing its true and original significance.

And this, my friends, is all just a daunting metaphor for what is happening to church. The church, even perhaps this one, is like Ezekiel's dry bones in the valley, sustained by a time and a people, the pillars of our tradition, whose vision couldn't have been any more different than that which now exists. Dedication, observance and commitment have been replaced by whatever is tepid, convenient, and unchallenging to one's other priorities. Church has lost its significance and finds itself competing with entities and events that can hardly be considered life-giving, or as much. And it is such a sad thing... isn't it?

Now, I'm not blind to the stress and pressures of our presently hyper-driven culture. Though not a parent, I can absolutely sympathize with how difficult it must be to craft an adequate schedule that is well-balanced and beneficial to both maturation and growth. In fact, more than sympathize, I can barely imagine how any of you do it. And that's the truth. I mean just fifteen years ago when I lettered in two sports, I never had a Sunday morning conflict, or if I did, it was maybe once, twice or thrice a year. It was simply unheard of to have something on the calendar for 10 or 11am that wasn't Sunday worship. So it was easier on both me as a youth and on my parents to get our family in through the narthex. That is the truth.

And as Jesus exclaimed, you can't force old wine into new wineskins. We simply can't go back to the way things were – it's too incompatible and frankly it just wouldn't work. It wouldn't work to force our children or our young families to come through these doors every Sunday morning, giving up everything else that they have come to do, enjoy and cherish. That would more than possibly make them antagonistic towards this place, which is the last thing any of us here would want.

And yet, do we just let the change in the times dictate how and when we are to observe this holy-day? Are we to sit idly by, watching complacently as the cycle evolves itself completely such that Sunday becomes as forgotten as the original Decoration Day? Shall we not unite in voice and number, even standing by our neighbors of differing denominations, and say "no more" to this pattern? Shall we not?

Because my friends, it is true, we are in the first if not the middle stages of crisis. The pillars of this church are the figurative bones drying and indeed dying in the valley. And they need to be literally reawakened, redecorated and realigned, just as the good prophet exclaimed. Up until now, these bones have justified us and indeed saved us through their blood – the spiritual commitment of their lives – with an unwithering observance of worship and all that that encompasses. But they can't go on forever. They will in the end dry out. And the only way this place can endure is if we pick up where they left off and mend our understanding of church, indeed the bones of one's faith, to theirs.

*Goodnight and Good Luck*, a truly brilliant movie, closes with a paraphrased speech by the great and indeed prophetic Edward R. Murrow about the changing state of television: from something that was once

informative to something that was quickly becoming increasingly watered-down. And today, that speech speaks to us in the form of a jarring parable, transparent through time, mirroring all too exactly our present situation. Listen to it then with consternation, and when you hear the term “the instrument,” which in the context of the quote is meant to illustrate a TV, mentally substitute it with a visual of a church, even perhaps our church.

“History will be what we make it.

To those who say people wouldn't look; they wouldn't be interested; they're too complacent, indifferent and insulated, I can only reply: There is, in one reporter's opinion, considerable evidence against that contention. But if they are right, and this instrument is good for nothing but to entertain, amuse and insulate, then the tube is flickering now and we will soon see that the whole struggle is lost.

This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.”

Amen.