



## Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

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### For Something Greater than Themselves

What will you remember—and memorialize—on this Memorial Day?

My thoughts go back to an unexpectedly and ambiguously moving experience I shared with my family while vacationing in the Low Countries some years ago. After passing through Bastogne in Belgium, the focal point of World War II's famous Battle of the Bulge, we drove into the little country of Luxembourg and stopped at the largest and most striking cemetery I have ever seen.

Arising out of a meticulously manicured lush carpet of soft green grass were hundreds and hundreds (or was it thousands?) of pure white marble crosses and Stars of David, each one laid out with geometric precision in crisscrossing rows and all graced by small American flags flapping in the gentle breeze. What a fitting way to remember these valorous young men!

I thought of how so many of my parents' generation had given their lives in the cause of liberty both for our nation and for our neighbors in Europe and Asia. They died in service for their country and their country's ideals, selflessly surrendering their lives for something truly noble and greater than themselves.

I stood there in awe of their devotion, their courage, and their extraordinary sacrifice. Soon my eyes became a little blurry. Was it the blinding reflection of the sunlight on so many thousands of bleached white crosses, or was it instead the memory of these soldiers' noble sacrifice? I was moved to give thanks.

No sooner had we gotten back onto the Autobahn than we encountered a sign for yet another WWII cemetery. This one happened to be a "Friedhof" for the German troops who had likewise perished in that terrible Christmas season of 1944. We pulled off the highway and drove onto the cemetery grounds.

And once again we found ourselves standing before countless rows of cruciform gravestones. But these silent crosses were made of more economical stone: bespeckled granite had been selected rather than the radiant

white marble that adorned the nearby American cemetery. Tall trees lined the Friedhof, causing many of the stone memorials to rest in an unpleasantly cool and somber shade.

The grounds were not all that well maintained either. It was as if these who had died in the same great battle as the American soldiers were almost a forgotten memory. These men too had given their lives for their country and hence for something greater than themselves, but in their case their lives were sacrificed for a cause that was anything but spiritually uplifting.

As I drove away I pondered the significance of these two cemeteries—each one dedicated to remembering the lives of young soldiers who had made the ultimate sacrifice of devotion and patriotism for something much greater than themselves.

For one group of men, their heroic sacrifice could be celebrated as something noble, valorous, and even righteous.

But for the other group of men—many no doubt as devoted and brave as their American counterparts—their sacrifice was ... well ... how does one characterize their deaths? Senseless? Tragic? *Immoral*?

Two cemeteries, commemorating two corporate expressions of valorous sacrifice. But also pointing to two very different moral perceptions of the greater good.

On this Memorial Day I remember the sacrifice of those who died in the cause of freedom for people threatened by or living under the tyranny of political oppression. So I give thanks that they were willing to die for something very noble that was greater than themselves.

But also on this Memorial Day I remember that sometimes people can be called upon to make sacrifices for something greater than themselves that is not worthy of their shed blood. So I pray that we who send young men and women into harm's way will not do so for reasons that are senseless, tragic, and immoral.

Even *Christian* nations can get mixed up about what is a just war and what is not. After all, crosses adorned both cemeteries.

May God grant the citizens of our nation the courage and humility to assess our engagements in world affairs according to that righteous template by which God judges all human enterprise!

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