

“No Greater Love”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Fourth sermon in the series, “The Gospel in Great Movies”
“Sacrifice” as seen in “Saving Private Ryan”

Psalm 86:1-7

John 15:9-13

When I first started out in ministry, there was something that bothered me every single year. What bothered me was how few people actually attended and participated in Holy Week services - not Palm Sunday or Easter Sunday, mind you - but all the services in between - like Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. In the church I served back then, the average attendance on Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday would be about 700 and 1000 respectively, but the services in between would garner only a couple of hundred each.

The same has proven to be true here. On Palm Sunday we'll have in the range of 400 people and on Easter in the range of 700, but Maundy Thursday and Good Friday bring in less than a hundred people.

And, as I say, that used to bother me - a lot. But now, it doesn't bother me so much, because I understand it more. What I have come to understand is that a lot of people do not want to go through the suffering, sacrificial part of Jesus' journey with him. It's too hard. It's too much. It's way easier to go from the joy of the entry into Jerusalem right into the joy of the resurrection.

I understand that now, and rather than being bothered by it, now I actually feel sorry for those who don't make the entire journey. For how much more is the joy of Easter morning after having gone through the agony of Gethsemane and the cross at Calvary! And more importantly, especially in light of today's service, how much more do we remember and appreciate the incredible sacrifice made for us on that cross.

If we don't remember and make that journey with Jesus through the struggle and sacrifice of Holy Week, there's a very real chance that we'll begin to take it for granted, and that we'll begin to take what our incredible gift of salvation bought with that sacrifice for granted.

Likewise, on this weekend, our nation celebrates Memorial Day, and I'm sad to say that more often than that, I think, we forget what it's all about too. We forget the reason the day was set aside as a holiday. Too often, our cause for observing

Memorial Day is that it's a day off from work or school; it's a day for the beach and picnics; it's the day that marks the unofficial start of summer. Lost in all of that revelry is the real reason for Memorial Day, and friends, if we're not careful, we forget the incredible sacrifices made for us that we might live in this land of freedom.

So, to help us remember on this Memorial Day weekend, as we find ourselves in the fourth week of "The Gospel in Great Movies" sermon series, I chose the movie "Saving Private Ryan." I don't know how many of you have seen it, but it is an unbelievably powerful movie.

I have to tell you that, when this movie first came out, which was in the late 90's, I went to see it in the theater. It was a shocking experience. You have to understand that I don't do intense movies. You know me - you know how much I like "chick flicks." Those are my kind of movies - you know, "The Sound of Music," "Sleepless in Seattle," - the kind of movies that make my brothers wretch!

But I went to see "Saving Private Ryan" and I'll never forget it. It is probably the most accurate portrayal of the horror and brutality of war ever put on the screen. The first twenty minutes or so showed the landing on the beach on D-Day - and it is horrifyingly gruesome. It shows the real toll of war.

It was so bad, that after I had seen the movie, I was talking to my parents and told them never to see it. I figured that anyone who had lived through that, who had been in the military or even been through that war time and experienced some of that, shouldn't see it. It would be too much, it would bring up too many memories.

But I also thought then, and maybe still do, that those of us who didn't live through warfare like that, should see it - so that we can keep that kind of carnage and brutality from ever happening again.

At any rate, I still chose to focus on this particular movie for this sermon, because a) I knew we wouldn't be showing much of it; b) I knew we wouldn't be showing any of the gruesome parts; and c) most of all, because it portrays so incredibly well the theme of sacrifice, which is what we're remembering this day.

Let me tell you the story of the movie -

The star of the movie is the great Tom Hanks, who plays Captain John Miller. Captain Miller's unit is part of the D-Day invasion and, like most of the units on D-Day, they suffered heavily. After they survived that battle, they then received a very unique mission.

It seems that there was a family by the name of Ryan back in the states - a family which included four sons. Unbelievably and incredibly sadly, three of the four sons were killed in battle about the same time, and unbelievably, their mother in the states was about to receive three separate telegrams on the very same day informing her that her sons had been killed on the field of battle. Only one son remained alive - his name was James - Private James Ryan.

Well, the powers that be found out about this incredible tragedy for the Ryan family, and was determined that this mother would not lose all four of her sons. So Captain Miller's unit's mission was to find Private Ryan so he could get home safe and sound.

The movie is about the great lengths they went to to find Private Ryan. Over and over again, sacrifice after sacrifice was paid. They had no real idea where he was, so it took a while to track him down, and of course, all of it was done under fierce conditions.

When they finally track him down, and get ready to move on with him, Captain Miller himself is struck down. Captain Miller is an incredible leader, a man commanding deep respect from his men, and his loss is an unbelievable blow to them who have followed his leadership to the letter.

The scene you are about to see is just after Captain Miller has been wounded. Private Ryan is played by Matt Damon, and we'll pick it up where he approaches Captain Miller.

Movie Clip

What a powerful moment! "Earn this," he said. "Earn this."

You know what? There's no way he could ever adequately earn it, just as there is no way that we can adequately earn the sacrifice paid for our lives by Christ on the cross. But we can remember it always, and we can be grateful for it always, and we can cherish it always.

And perhaps, best of all, we can live lives worthy of the sacrifice that was paid for us.

That's what James Ryan tried to do. Throughout all of his life, he tried to live a good and faithful life, a life caring for his responsibilities, a life serving others, a life not focused on "what can I get for myself" but "what can I do for others?"

Isn't that, in the end, the best way we can earn the price paid for us - whether by the Lord Himself, or by those who give their lives to protect us? Isn't it by living good and faithful lives, carrying out our responsibilities, serving others, focusing on what we can do for others, rather than for ourselves?

Every Sunday, we gather together here in worship to cherish what we have been given by Christ Himself - freedom from sin, freedom from death, freedom to live whole and productive lives, freedom to care for others. We gather and remember His sacrifice for us with gratefulness and thanksgiving. We gather so that we never, ever forget His love and His sacrifice, and to urge each other on to faithful responses to His great gift.

Likewise, on this Memorial Day weekend, let us not forget. Let us not forget the millions of our brothers and sisters who have laid down their lives for us, and for our freedom. Let us cherish the gift they have given us, and let us earn the price they paid by living good and faithful lives in this land of freedom.

At the end of the film, many, many years later, Private Ryan comes back to the land where those incredible battles were fought and his life was saved, to visit the graveyard where many of his comrades were buried - among them, Captain Miller. He visits with his wife, his children and grandchildren.

He comes with one question on his mind. Let us watch -

Film Clip

Today, on this Memorial Day weekend, and as children of the God who sacrificed His Son that we might have life in all its abundance and life for all eternity, we give thanks for all those, who, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "have laid so costly a sacrifice on the altar of freedom." May we go forth from this place to cherish every moment of the life that our Lord and they died to give us.

Amen.

The hymn that we're about to sing is entitled "Eternal Father" but we also know it as the Navy hymn. Let us sing it as a way to remember all of the fallen from all branches of the military, and let us sing it in thanksgiving and gratefulness for those who serve us still.