

*“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*

*You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”*

It all begins with a story. Even John’s Gospel.

We’ve been following the Fourth Gospel for some time now, since before Easter, and today is our conclusion. I’ve been gaining a greater appreciation for this Gospel week by week, for the insights shared about Jesus, for who he was to the first disciples, what he meant to John many years later as these words were written down, and how John’s words come to us centuries later with enough impact that we still believe that a powerful message of God is contained in them.

We call these words ‘holy scripture’ because we expect something of God to be revealed to us in them, both in our reading and sharing the word proclaimed.

This portion comes as part of Jesus’ final discourse (which goes on for a bit), written in answer to the question of what the risen and acknowledged Messiah (Christ) has to say to his followers of the Way, the fledgling church. How will they be able to continue without his physical presence, his wisdom, his miracles?

As much as I have tried to picture this in my mind’s eye throughout the week, imagining the setting of these words, where Jesus was- where the disciples were, I haven’t been able to settle on the right backdrop. So I wonder.... how do you see this playing out in your mind’s eye?

If you were a filmmaker, how would you envision this scene? Is it in the Upper Room, or on the Lakeshore, or the Mount of Olives? Is Jesus seated before them or walking and talking with them?

Picturing this in your mind's eye is an important exercise, not just because visualizing something makes it more real, but also because by doing so you can find touch points of how this passage- and Jesus' words and presence - can become more real; even internalized.

These words and stories of Jesus can then take on a life of their own; even in us.

The Catholic priest and storyteller John Shea shares the medieval tale of a King riding in a stately carriage on a rainy day. He sees a peasant walking along the road and decides to invite him in to get him out of the rain. The man is at first reluctant, but then accepts the offer. As he steps up into the carriage, he asks the King, 'what must I do to accept this ride?'

"You are accepted, now get in", the King tells him. And so, acknowledging his gratitude, the peasant begins his journey with a simple act.

If you can visualize this invitation and somehow translate it into some point in your life, then you can begin to understand these words of Jesus anew. There may be no rhyme or reason to Jesus' invitation to you, or it may be that you are one of a long line of followers, but because you are here, you are part of the long chain of those who have journeyed with Jesus. More than likely it was not you alone who made the decision (likely you are part of a chain of believers through the generations, one of many in a long line.) I'm really very curious about this (and I think it makes a difference...)

Can I have a show of hands — how many are one of a long line of Christian believers? How many here are first-generation believers? (\*Everyone present on Sunday 5/26- was part of a long line of believers.)

The question and answer is important because it gets to the root of understanding how we are part of the long chain of believers in the body of Christ and what we understand our role to be. Are we simply passengers on an aimless journey, or is there something more to it?

This is Memorial Day weekend. It is a time to tell stories of devotion and loyalty, continuing the chain of those faithful and true- who shared the last measure of devotion, and vowed if necessary, to lay down their life for their friends.

I have a couple of stories to share. The first is of my uncle, Foster J. Blair, who served as an aviator WWII. I've known parts, but not all of his story for years. The last part is what I've heard from his son, my cousin, Foster Jr., not long ago.

In 1941 my uncle enlisted in the Naval Aviation Cadet Program and was commissioned



VF-5 USS Saratoga en route to invasion of Guadalcanal 7/15/1942

This group includes survivors of the battle of Midway. Dick Harmer is Exec Officer.

39 F4F-4s Grumman Fighters: 1<sup>st</sup> mid-wing monoplane in Navy! (preceded by F3F-3 biplanes!) America almost went to war against the Japanese in biplanes! Dick's "Fighting 5" was in Bermuda on the Wasp aircraft carrier and had just trained on the F3F-3s in the prior six months when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor 12/7/41. The Navy only had 3 carriers in Guadalcanal: the Enterprise, the Saratoga, and the Wasp. They won Guadalcanal, but it was a very tough battle.

an Ensign in the U.S. Navy. He was an F4F Wildcat pilot aboard the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga from November 1941 to December 1942 in the Guadalcanal campaign and was officially credited with the destruction of 3 enemy aircraft in aerial combat. He later served as an F6F Hellcat pilot aboard the USS Nassau from April to June 1943, a pilot aboard the USS Independence from June to November 1943, and aboard the USS Liscome Bay in November 1943; having landed on another aircraft carrier when his ship was sunk by a Japanese submarine on November 23, 1943.

As a decorated veteran he had much to celebrate; but his air combat isn't the story that stayed with him the most. Uncle Foster never really talked about his service in the war, except for one thing, which he began to let on about in his later years.

It was in 1943 that it happened, when he had to land on a different aircraft carrier than planned because his own was sunk. The landings were uncoordinated, out of order and scattered; aircraft coming in were very low on fuel so the operation was sped up as much as possible, stretching the safety of the landings. He was able to land, but the restraining cables across the carrier got tangled in his aircraft, and he had to evacuate

with significant damage to his plane, now left on the runway. What happened next is what haunted him for years.

The aircraft following him came in hot and had no way of avoiding his abandoned aircraft. The ensuing crash killed the pilot. My uncle Foster felt guilty about this until the day he died. In fact, as I've heard from my cousin, my uncle searched out the pilot's family, visited them, and helped to pay for a younger brother's scholarship to college as a way to atone for what had happened in wartime. The collateral damage of war is incalculable....

There's more to that story, but it also serves as a good introduction for another story, from my alma mater, Lafayette College in Easton, PA. The story begins with Robert S. Johnstone, a freshman who was drafted into the War in 1944. He could have taken a college deferment, but he didn't. After three months of training in Georgia, he was deployed to the Philippines. The eighteen-year old served less than six months when he was killed by Japanese machine gunfire at Ipo Dam on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1945. After his death, his family decided to use his \$10,000 G.I. life insurance to provide a scholarship to Lafayette. This scholarship was to go to a native Japanese student who would receive full tuition at Lafayette.

The Johnstone family wanted the scholarship to promote peace through education. Mr. Johnstone said, "I established this fund because I don't think we are going to have peace by settling the war with hate and hard terms..... We are trying to do our small

share by helping other people to keep the peace." The vote by Lafayette's Board of Trustees to approve was unanimous. The first Japanese recipient of the Johnstone



Scholarship was Robert Nishiyama, a 22 year old veteran of the Japanese Imperial Navy – Kamikazi sector (for real). He never was

deployed because the war ended before he was scheduled to fly. The news of his enrollment in the Fall of 1948 spread across the country with articles published in Time and Life Magazines and caused both positive and negative reactions among Americans. Many expressed anger and disbelief at an American college accepting someone that was supposed to be the 'enemy', with others regarding it as an important step toward peace and reconciliation. Nishiyama himself was nervous about attending, but was quickly accepted among his American peers, saying they were nothing but friendly and welcoming. Not only did the Johnstone family fund the scholarship for Nishiyama, they got to know him on a personal level, inviting the student over for dinner often. He was invited to spend Christmas there; they exchanged gifts as though he were a member of the family. And he slept in their dead son's room. He was also afraid about how he'd be treated at Lafayette, but he met with almost no ill treatment. "In America I have found so much openhandedness," he wrote in 1949, "the desire to make friends and make a stranger feel at home." Robert Nishiyama graduated from Lafayette in 1952 with a degree in International Affairs. His grandson will be graduating from Lafayette this Spring.

This is Memorial Day Sunday, when we take time to consider the religious foundations of what our nation celebrates tomorrow; a recognition of the sacrifice made by so many, men and women who have served our nation in times of war and times of peace—those who have given themselves over, by sacred oath, to serve, protect and defend this nation and in so doing have placed the greater good of others above that of their own safety and security.

In our world filled with uncertainty, when our mortal security is never guaranteed, in a world too complex for quick and easy, casual and simplistic answers, we are always also at the same time undergirded by God's ever-creative presence, love and grace. When we know & trust that, down deep in our bones, that God is good and sovereign, & God's love is everlasting, we can muster up the courage to do the right thing, come what may.

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And then, as we make that act of gratitude part of our daily practice and

pattern, we can best honor the one who made us all, who loves us all, and who one day will bring us all safely home. Amen.

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### The Last Soldier

When the last soldier passes on,  
When armies are disbanded  
and militias discharged,  
When weapons are abandoned  
and armor discarded,  
Your mission will, at last, be  
over.

For you know the soldier's  
secret.

Yours was not a mission of war  
Nor a mission of ruin.

Yours was not a mission of  
destruction

Nor a mission of death.

Your mission was safety,  
security, protection.

Your mission was honor,  
loyalty, service.

Your mission was to end  
violence, tyranny, despair.

When the last soldier passes  
on,

When the uniforms are retired  
and the final grave filled,

We will remember all who  
served and sacrificed for our  
nation.



Until then God of Old,  
Watch over our soldiers and our veterans.  
Renew their courage.  
Rebuild their strength.  
Heal their wounds.  
Bind their hearts with Your steadfast love.  
Remember them,  
Bless them,  
Sustain them,  
And give them peace.

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