

DEVOTION, NOT EMOTION<sup>1</sup>  
John 14: 15-21  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
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Memorial Day, as we are aware, started out as Decoration Day in 1868, when Americans remembered the brutality of the Civil War and decorated the graves of all the war dead. Over two dozen cities and towns lay claim to being the birthplace of Memorial Day. That is not surprising because every community wanted to do something to remember the dead, and who was first is up for grabs. After the carnage of World War I the remembrance was extended to all those who died in wars.

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Today we do something that Christianity does very well: we remember. I know that we are called to do other things well, but remembering is one of the central acts of Christian faith. *Do this in remembrance of me*, said Jesus as he instituted the Lord's Supper. Thus one of our central acts of worship is the act of remembering.

Americans have an odd relationship with death and the process of grieving. We have this official holiday devoted to remembering the dead, but we have turned it into the first official day of summer, a time of picnics and trips to the beach. We all enjoy those things, but I wonder sometimes if they could be a distraction. We know that death will come to all of us, but we seem to want our grieving to be quick and tidy. A day or two of mourning, when the family gathers and tears are shed, stories are told, and services are held at church and cemetery. Those are important times, but so many people think that after that, we should get over it, cheerfully go back to our work or business. Grieving should be over and done with when the final words are said at the cemetery.

But we know better. Grief cannot be cut short or sanitized. When we lose someone we love, grieving can take a lifetime. The lives of the dead are part of us, and when they die, part of us dies too. So we learn to live with our loss, but we are never quite the same. We become veterans of grief.

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Grieving our war dead is especially painful for many reasons. For one thing, they often died violently, although many died in field hospitals or at home or by suicide. The Washington Post maintains a data base of US deaths in our current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The most recent, number 6,013, is a 33-year-old staff sergeant named Kristofferson Lorenzo, from Chula Vista, CA. You can often find out more about these veterans lost by clicking on their pictures.

But we keep faith with the purpose of Memorial Day, not by arguing over war in general or the current wars in particular, but by remembering that people like Kristofferson Lorenzo from Chula Vista, CA, were humans with families who love them. We may not know them personally, but the Washington Post does us a great service by putting faces and stories and memories to their names. I have never liked the term “casualty” to describe the war dead. The term itself is too casual. It covers up the grief and the pain and the tragedy of their deaths.

This week our hearts are also broken for people in Joplin, Missouri and other places where tornadoes have wreaked havoc. Worcester can appreciate the plight of Joplin more than most. Fifty-eight years ago the tornado that swept through Worcester killed 91 people and destroyed more than \$55 million worth of property in 1953 dollar values. Worcester knows what it is like, and our hearts go out to the people of Joplin.

## II

We are used to reading the first few verses of John 14 at funerals: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.* That is the way the chapter begins. But soon Jesus comes to grips with the reality of grief. *In a little while, he says, the world will no longer see me.*<sup>2</sup> What a clear description of death. We stand over the graves of those we have known and loved, and we can no longer see them.

But in this wonderful text, he makes a promise that he has kept over all the centuries. *I will not leave you orphaned.* And that is the exact word used in the original Greek: *orphanos*. You may notice that he did not say, “I will not leave you grief free; I will not leave you tragedy free.” The promise was this: I will not leave you alone to face your world. When your world falls apart, when by all apparent observations you are alone in the world, the promise is that the spirit of Christ will

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<sup>2</sup> John 14: 19.

be with you. You are not abandoned by God! As he said in another place, *I am with you always....*<sup>3</sup>

And along with the promise that we would not be orphaned, abandoned, deserted by God, there is a call for each of us to heed: *Those who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.*<sup>4</sup>

The love Jesus speaks about here is not so much a sentiment or emotion. Rather, it is devotion! Jesus is not commanding feelings for him. After all, you can't command feelings. The living Christ does not so much want our warm feelings as he wants our devotion, our commitment to prioritize our lives by his priorities. Devotion is a much more mature level of commitment than is feelings.

Two people can meet each other and the sparks fly. There is that tingly feeling just when you are together. These are feelings, and it eventually might lead to love and marriage. Then as the years go by, those tingly feelings move even deeper into a bond of love and commitment that we call devotion. Devotion is faithful even as feelings come and go. Devotion is not dependent on emotion.

### III

*If you love me*, he said, *you will keep my commandments*. And what commandments are those? It all starts with this: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...and your neighbor as yourself*. He later added another commandment: *that you love one another. Just as I have loved you*, he said, *you also should love one another*.

Those are the commandments he calls us to follow. All the accumulation of rules and regulations and traditions and practices may be important for various traditions, but true devotion, deep devotion, calls for us to follow those simple and fundamental words: love God, love your neighbor, love each other. That is not emotion, but devotion.

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<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 28: 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> John 14: 21.