

The Holy Trinity (B/RCL)/Memorial Day: "Legacy Left for the Living By Those Who Have Died"
Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17
May 26-27, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Every Memorial Day weekend members of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars stand at the entrances to local supermarkets inviting us to make a donation and accept a crepe paper poppy to wear. Do you know why??

We have a new book for our Sunday School children's library¹ that tells the tale of a woman who must have been standing there at some point when the Lord asked, as in today's first lesson from Isaiah (6:8):

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Like Isaiah she, too, answered,

"Here I am; send me!"

Her name was Moina Belle Michael, and she was born near a place called Good Hope, Georgia, in the wake of the Civil War, on August 15, 1869. The sad straits of the veterans of that war, and of the widows and orphans it created, touched her even as a child. When Woodrow Wilson declared on April 6, 1917, that the U.S. was entering World War I (the Great War, the War to End All Wars), Moina was a teacher. She was saddened at the loss of life and destruction she knew would ensue, but she was also galvanized to do whatever she could to support those who fought. She:

- Knit sweaters and socks
- Rolled bandages for the Red Cross
- Dropped off candy, magazines, books, to soldiers stationed nearby
- Went to the railroad station to wave the troops off when they were deployed
- Traveled to NY City to be trained as a YMCA canteen worker.

Moina had hoped to travel overseas and work with our service people there, but she was judged “too old” at 49 years old. Instead she worked at a gathering place for soldiers, sailors, airmen, in the basement of a hall at Columbia University. A group of men were so grateful they pooled their resources and gave her a gift of \$10. Around that time another service member left her a copy of a magazine that included Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae’s poem, “We Shall Not Sleep” (written in May 1915, after Lt. Col. McCrae buried a fellow soldier):

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

Moina decided that with the money the soldiers gave her she’d buy silk poppies for the service men and women with whom she worked. Easier said than done. She scoured NY department stores and finally found 24 small poppies and 1 large one at Wanamaker’s. She purchased them. Two days later, November 11, 1918, the war ended. But Moina’s devotion didn’t. She used the sale of crepe paper poppies made by disabled and hospitalized vets as a source of funding for their treatment and care, and as a way to raise money for the families the dead had left behind. She came to refer to the Flanders Fields Memorial Poppy as “the Miracle

Flower.” Because of the widespread popularity of McCrae’s poem and because of Moina’s persistence, the idea caught on and was adopted by veterans’ organizations within and beyond the U.S. Moina became a professor at the University of Georgia and had a special interest in teaching disabled vets. When she died in 1944 at the age of 74, her funeral was at First Baptist Church in Athens, GA. Members of the American Legion and soldiers from the U. of Georgia formed a military honor guard. At the end of each bayonet was a poppy. 3,223 crepe paper poppies were woven into a blanket that was laid on her grave.

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

Moina answered, lifelong,

“Here I am; send me!”

Moina Belle Michael honored the memory of the dead and worked tirelessly to help the living.

That’s a holy combination. The Lord calls each of us to do the same.

The night before He died our Lord said, “There is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friend” (John 15:13). In *The Hungering Dark* Frederick Buechner writes:

...[T]hey eat supper together for the last time, [Jesus] and his friends... As was the custom, [He] gets up to bless the bread, gives thanks for it; and as was the custom, he takes the loaf up into his hands and breaks it for them. Then the unaccustomed thing. He gives the loaf a name, his body, the dark wine a name, his blood... and tells them to eat and drink... In other words, he tells them to take his life into themselves and live it for him.

Ever since, the bread has been broken, the wine poured out, in commemoration of his death. Some come, not so many any more but always some, always enough, and the Lord knows why they do, why we do... because although there is much that we cannot understand, much that we cannot believe, the inexorable life in him draws us to him the way a glimmer of light draws a man who has lost his way in the dark. Because we are hungry for more than bread. Because we are thirsty for more than wine. That is the reason you have for coming to such a table, the reason I have for coming, and that is the only reason we need to have, thank God.

War is hell, but sometimes in the midst of that hell [people] do things that heaven itself must be proud of. A hand grenade is thrown into a group of men. One

of the men throws himself on top of it, making his body a living shield. In the burst of wild fire he dies, and the others live... This is an action for which there is no good word because we can hardly imagine it... Very literally, one man takes death into his bowels, takes fire into his own sweet flesh, so that the other men can take life, some of them men he hardly knows.

Who knows why a man does such a thing or what thoughts pass through his mind just before he does it. Maybe no thoughts at all. Maybe if he stopped to think, he would never do it. Maybe he just acts spontaneously out of his passion the way, when you are a child and somebody attacks your brother, you attack the attacker with no fear for yourself but just because he is your brother and somebody is attacking him. Or if you are a cynic, you might say that a man must be temporarily insane to do such a thing because no [one] in his right mind would ever willingly give his life away, hardly even for somebody he loved, let alone for people he barely knows... [cf. Romans 5:7] Or if you are an idealist, you might insist that although the human spirit is full of darkness, every once in a while it is capable of the Godlike act...

But I think that it is not so hard to imagine how the men whose lives are saved might react to the one who died to save them... I have the feeling that given the choice, we would not have let him do it, not for his sake but for our own sakes.

Because we have our pride, after all. We make our own way in the world, we fight our own battles, we are not looking for any handouts, we do not want something for nothing. It threatens our self-esteem, our self-reliance. And because to accept such a gift from another would be to bind us closer to him than we like to be bound to anybody. And maybe most of all because if another man dies so that I can live, it imposes a terrible burden on my life. From that point on, I cannot live any longer just for myself. I have got to live also somehow for him, as though in some sense he lives through me now as, in another sense, I live through him. If what he would have done with his life is going to be done, then I have got to do it. My debt to him is so great that the only way I can approach paying it is by living a life as brave and beautiful as his death. So maybe I would have prevented his dying if I could, but since it is too late for that, I can only live my life for what it truly is: not a life that is mine... to live any way I choose, but a life that is mine only because he gave it to me, and I have got to live it in a way that he also would have chosen.²

From Galatians, chapter 2, verse 20:

... and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" "Here I am; send me!" Amen

¹Barbara Elizabeth Walsh. *The Poppy Lady: Moina Belle Michael and Her Tribute to Veterans*. (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek. 2012).

²Frederick Buechner. *The Hungering Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), pp. 106-109.