

W Thomas - Sermon (Memorial Day Weekend) - May 29, 2016

I was in Costco about two weeks ago, and I was dressed in my full priest outfit. You knew from the collar and the black shirt and the black pants what I did. And as I was getting ready to check out, a man came up to me.

He had a cross dangling from his neck. It looked quite lovely. And he said this, Father, I got a story to tell you.

And let me tell you, when you get Father, I got a story to tell you. And sometimes, you're just careful. He says, it's about a pizza delivery man.

And this pizza delivery man had a pizza to take to the pope in the Vatican. And I went, is this one of those pivot of popes in a pizza from Father Guido Sarducci stories? He says, no. It's about a pizza guy, a delivery man, who goes to the Swiss guard and says, I need to take the pizza to the pope.

And the Swiss guard looks at him and lets him through. Well, a half an hour later, after having made his delivery, he's going back past the Swiss guard. The Swiss guard says, now, wait a minute.

I didn't let you through. I didn't put you through anything. So I think I should get half of what the pope gave you.

So the guy goes, and he takes his hand up, and he goes, for those listening at home without the ability to watch the video, what the pope did was the horizontal version of the cross and stopped there is what the man did. The pope would have continued to the full side of the cross. We all appreciate and like signs.

It makes this easier. Sacraments, in many ways, are the ultimate approach to giving us that sense of security and knowledge of things that are seen beyond us. Today, in the passage from Kings in the Old Testament, which could have been a subtitled trash talking with Elijah.

I mean, listen to the way he's talking to the prophets of Baal, all 450 of them. He's just having a great old time because he knows what's gonna happen. They can create as big an altar and put the bull on there and do whatever they want, but the fire is not coming, and he's trying to make a point to the people of Israel.

Don't get pulled away. Remember where the good stuff is. And then in his faith and confidence and knowledge, his relationship with God, he goes and takes the 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel, gets it all ready, and then to really have a little bit more fun, he says, you know, it's not hard enough.

Throw a bunch more water on it, and by the time it's done, it doesn't look like it could possibly ignite. He says the prayer he calls upon God, and wow, the flames come and it's burnt. Even all the water is dried up.

That is an amazing sign. Those of us who have any affection for Ireland would know a little bit about what it was like for St. Patrick to come back and re-evangelize the island and deal with the high king, the high king of Ireland controlled through fire. So literally at the time of year when we would have the great vigil of Easter, everybody had to put their fires out and had to come to the king to get fire.

Well, St. Patrick is saying, no, you are not my king, you are the king of Ireland. My true king will provide in much the same way as Elijah. He builds a fire and he has water, water, water put on it.

It's almost as if you can imagine rain coming down and extinguishing it, and then he prays and the fire comes up, and that's one of the connections to the light of Christ that we remember at the great vigil of Easter, and all of a sudden, the king decides to be converted and so on and so forth. So it's a wonderful conversion story from the sense of this particular sign. But when Jesus comes upon our scene with the story of the centurion, remember our timeline.

This story is before the resurrection, before Jesus dies on the cross. This is a story, he is in a Gentile land in Capernaum and the centurion has heard of him coming. His friends know of this.

The Jewish community, because it's basically a Roman town, but the Jewish community has great affection for this centurion, because as it's said in the scripture, he built their synagogue, and they go to mediate on his behalf, knowing that he has got somebody he cares for, one of his slaves that needs healing. And Jesus says, yes, of course, I'll go. And on the way, the centurion, who is a Roman soldier of a very senior position, but a Roman soldier, sends some friends out and says, Lord, I am a man under authority.

I don't really need you to come. If you say it'll happen, I know it'll happen. It's gonna happen.

And Jesus stops, having been through all his walks, and speaks about how this one, who is not part of the faith community, the same community that Elijah is talking to, to say, wake up. He's saying, I have not seen such faith as I have seen in this man here. Oh, that all of Israel should have such faith.

It's faith born of confidence in relationship, in conviction. Remember, he's a soldier. And I could stop the sermon there, and you could say, oh, it's a warm day.

Let's get going home. But there's one other thing that can flow from this, which I think is important for today. Remember, I noted that we have a passage of scripture with somebody who is in the military, someone who is a soldier, the centurion.

This is Memorial Day weekend. This is more than three days at the beach. Think about the signs that the military, I'm gonna use the army because I'm a former army chaplain.

And I had to learn how to do military discipline, which is always fun, because since chaplains are borrowed from the civilian community, given a commission, we're trained just enough. And so when I learned to salute, which is the mark of recognition of authority higher, or a return to that which is recognizing your authority, I tried to do it as well as I could. And then back down, because that's the way you show respect and honor the relationship.

So I would ask you a pop quiz. Do you know the difference between Memorial Day, Armed Forces Day, and Veterans Day? We just had Armed Forces Day. It was May 21st.

It's the third Saturday of May. Armed Forces Day from 1949 was when they took all the separate branch days and put them into one. It's a day that we recognize people who are currently serving in the military.

Is there anyone amongst us right now currently serving in the military? But I didn't think so. We've got one or two people that show up from time to time. Veterans Day comes out of the tradition of Armistice Day, the end of World War I, the Great War, the war to end all wars.

And it was on November 11th, and the war ended on the 11th month, the 11th hour, the 11th minute. And that was the day that war ended. And as Veterans Day, it now honors anyone who has served in the military.

Do we have any military veterans here today? Would you be willing to stand up? Don't sit down, I haven't finished yet. Thank you. Now you may be seated.

Or, as might have been said, be seated. Be seated. Finally, Memorial Day.

Memorial Day honors those who have died in the service of our country. Those who have died in such a way that, well, we wouldn't be here without them. Jesus has said, greater love has no one for another than to lay down one's life for someone, or words to that effect.

So, on a Memorial Day weekend, it's important to realize that we remember those who have gone before us and have given their lives for us. Abraham Lincoln, I would say to you, one of our great presidents, if not the greatest president, went to the Gettysburg Battlefield a few months after that horrific conflict, after that horrific battle. He was an afterthought.

There was going to be a person there to do an oration of two and a half hours to extol what had gone on. Lincoln, who had been holding forth ideals. Lincoln, who, well, I ponder what it would have been like if his last full measure of devotion, words he used in the Gettysburg Address, had not found it in himself in days towards the end of the war, but had been there for the reconstruction.

How might things have been different? Because when you listen to the Gettysburg Address, which I think we all need to hear today, and I'm going to read it in a moment, I want you to hear it as the country may have heard it then, both North and South, and they may have heard it as opposed to the way it was heard differently when acrimony resurfaced again, when the sense of the cause came about. But if you hear it, there is a healing message because it speaks to all who fought and died on that day. All who fought and died for the ideals that have helped us be the country we ought to be.

So this is Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, appropriate to hear on Memorial Day. November 19, 1863. Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.

It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot honor, we cannot hollow this ground. The brave men living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.

The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead, we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.

That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. That this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. All these words and the words of Abraham Lincoln, I offer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.