

**Don Brown
St. Mary The Virgin
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Proper 4 C**

Tomorrow our country observes Memorial Day, a federal holiday set aside to remember the hundreds of thousands of people who died while serving in our country's armed forces. In an earlier time in our history, this was a day set aside to visit cemeteries and place flowers on the graves of soldiers who had given their last full measure of devotion to defend their country serving in the armies of the North and South in our nation's devastating Civil War.

Now for the vast majority of our citizens, this has morphed into a three day holiday where it becomes appropriate to drag out our seersucker clothing and then head off to the country or the beach or at least to the mall or a big box store to pick up some super bargains and maybe find time to work in a family picnic.

It was Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman who observed, "War is hell" and then he added, "and I mean to make it so." He and many others in the Civil War and so many wars before and since have validated the general's observation. War is hell.

At the battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1862 after four days of fierce fighting between the Union and Confederate armies, the Union army suffered hundreds of casualties. In the large field that separated the defensive lines of both armies, countless wounded Union soldiers were lying in the field for a night and a day, begging for help, even just a drink of water. But shots continued to be fired and no one was willing to put themselves in the line of fire to assist.

Finally Richard Kirkland, a sergeant in the Confederate army went to his commanding officer and said, "General! I can't stand this. All night and all day I have heard those poor people crying for water, and I can stand it no longer. I come to ask permission to go and

give them water.” The brave young soldier leapt over the stonewall that marked the Confederate battle line. The General would later write, “Unharmd he reached the nearest sufferer. He knelt beside him, tenderly raised the drooping head, rested it gently upon his own noble breast, and poured the precious life-giving fluid down the fever-scorched throat. This done, he laid him tenderly down, placed his knapsack under the soldiers head, straightened out his broken limb, spread his overcoat over him, replaced his empty canteen with a full one, and turned to another sufferer.

By this time his purpose was well understood on both sides, and all danger was over. From every part of the field arose fresh cries of “Water, water, for God’s sake, water!” (Southern Historical Society Papers, Vol. VIII.Richmond, VA, April 1880. No.4)

That soldier was an angel of God’s mercy. In today’s Gospel lesson we encounter another angel of mercy, the centurion. This man was a soldier, the

commander of the occupying force sent by the Roman emperor to maintain control of the poor but strategic territory known as Palestine.

Given his power and the fact that as the leader of an occupying force who kept a tight reign on the Jewish people of the region, the centurion should have been hated and despised because he was a pagan and a symbol of the overbearing, oppressive Roman occupier. However this centurion seems to have been honored and appreciated by the Jews of Capernaum.

Just as the Confederate soldier who took it upon himself to offer comfort to his enemy, so too the centurion cared for the people of Capernaum. He had even paid for the building of the community’s synagogue. He was a man of philanthropy, a person of faith and good character. He had a beloved servant who was dying and from what the centurion knew of Jesus, he had faith that this itinerant rabbi could heal his servant.

The centurion could have forced Jesus to come to his home and commanded Jesus to heal his slave. Instead, evidencing the virtue of true humility, knowing that mercy cannot be commanded, he asked some Jewish leaders to approach Jesus to seek healing for the servant.

But before Jesus could reach the home, the centurion sent other emissaries asking Jesus just to say the word and the servant would be healed. The centurion realized if Jesus had come into a pagan home, according to Jewish religious rules, Jesus would be declared ritually unclean. The servant was in fact healed and Jesus declares of the centurion, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”

Often life seems like a battle where lines are drawn, we make determinations about who are our worthy friends and who are those deemed to be despicable enemies. In this contentious election year, lines are drawn not just between Democrats and Republicans, but between Hillary

supporters and Bernie supporters, Trump devotees and those who say, “anyone but Trump.”

We live in a period of great polarization where anger and suspicion abound...people and groups are in conflict...pro immigrant, anti immigrant; supporters of gender neutral restrooms and others who are appalled by such a suggestion, people who support a woman’s right to choose, and those who would oppose all forms of birth control, people who see the results of climate change all around us and others who believe such talk is “pseudo science.” Each of us has our own similar list.

And in the midst of these battles there are the people who, in the nomenclature of war, are collateral damage, people who cry out for mercy. The communities in Alaska and on South Pacific islands who have had to abandon their homes because of rising oceans, the children of illegal immigrants to the country who live in fear they will be deported back to countries where they don’t know anyone or even speak the languages, teens

who are trying to navigate the complex realities of sexual identity only to be labeled as fags or freaks by their classmates, beggars on our streets who are fighting battles with mental health and addiction. Each in his or her own way is a child of God whose cries for mercy are often ignored or dismissed.

Mercy....so much needed in our troubled world and in our own troubled lives. In the Rite I service of the Holy Eucharist there is a prayer before communion that is known as the Prayer of Humble Access where we pray, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy."

As followers of Jesus we are the recipients of his mercy and he calls us, in turn, to be angels of his mercy in the world. What does it mean to be merciful? I think of the members of our Youth Group who soon will travel to Kenya to help with projects at a school there that mostly serves the needs of the poorest of the poor.

Mercy is evidenced by those of you who were present a week ago Saturday to package 10,128 meals to be shipped to hungry people in the Philippines. There are many stories of mercy at work in this congregation that I hope you will read about in the latest edition of the Cow Hollow Church News which should be arriving in your mail boxes this week or you can find them on St. Mary's website.

I realize there are so many other stories of acts of mercy lived by you or known to you that perhaps aren't spoken of or recognized by others. Known or unknown, acts of mercy are always signs of God's abundant love. May mercy continue to thrive and grow in our lives and in the life and many ministries of St. Mary's. AMEN

