

HOLY TRINITY - May 27th 2018
They Gave Their Sons
(John 3:1-17)

Many years ago, during the early days of World War II in fact, a mother walked her youngest son down to the local draft board. Once there, she had a rather unusual request. Her son – not this one, but his older brother – had just been drafted. As a widow with several children still living at home, however, she relied almost exclusively on the income this older son brought into the household. Income necessary to put food on the table, clothes on their backs, and a roof over their heads.

So she came to the draft board that day with this unusual request. “Could you see fit,” she asked, “to let my older son (who again was supporting the family) “*not* be drafted? And, in his place,” she offered, “could you take *this son* instead?” – motioning to the one standing there by her side.

Now I have no idea how the men who made up that local draft board reacted to her request that day – whether or not they were shocked or surprised. But I *can* tell you how they responded. They took her *up* on her offer and allowed the younger son to take his brother’s place. In essence, then, this mother *gave* her son to the draft board, to the army of course, and ultimately to the *country* as well.

She gave him, in a sense, to the war effort. Gave him away... and sent him off to war...

I know this story because that younger son was my father. In other words, my *dad* was the one my grandmother gave away and sent off to war in his brother’s place.

Two years later, he was shipped off to Scotland and, from there, to Utah Beach as part of the Normandy Invasion. He later fought in General Patton's 3rd Army in their mad dash across France, was wounded three times, and along the way also won a Bronze Star for heroism during the legendary Battle of the Bulge

The good news, of course, is that he *survived* the war. Otherwise I wouldn't be standing here before you this morning, would I?! Although he did not survive completely unscathed, however. You see, he carried shrapnel in his arm and legs from those combat wounds for the rest of his life. And he struggled, especially initially, with what he used to describe as being a "lost soul." It wasn't until near the end of his life, when we *all* became aware of veterans returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan and suffering from what we now know today as "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, that this is what he himself had to deal with after he too returned home from war.

But at least he lived. He endured the absolute *horror* that is war, and came home to resume his life; to get a job, get married and raise a family. And, most of all, to live in peace.

In that respect, of course, he was one of the lucky ones. Despite the mental and physical wounds he suffered from for the next 70 years – especially the throbbing, aching pain he felt on a nearly daily basis from that embedded shrapnel – he returned home relatively intact; able to lead a full, normal life until he passed away at the age of 93...

Many of his contemporaries, however, did not. In many cases, their bodies remain near where they fell in death, where they paid the ultimate sacrifice, in countless military cemeteries and final resting places scattered across the globe from Europe to the Pacific and nearly every point in between. In humid jungles, in mountainous regions, and even in the deep, dark, depths of the

ocean, young men – cut down in the prime of their lives – their earthly remains a solemn reminder of the terrible price they paid and the ultimate sacrifice they made...

This weekend, of course, we remember and honor all those men... and *women*... who paid the ultimate price with their lives. Not only those who died on the battlefields of World War II, but also Korea, Vietnam and, more, recently, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And those are only the major conflicts. American heroes have sacrificed their lives on the altar of freedom in dozens of other faraway places over the years. American heroes whose mothers... and fathers... *gave them away* to military service in the hope that their efforts would somehow serve a greater good. Mothers and fathers who were not as fortunate as my grandmother was when *their* sons and daughter did *not* come home... Countless, largely anonymous – at least to *us* – but true heroes

In fact, I have a question for you. Have you ever heard of Philip A. Reynolds? Have you heard the name before? Do you know anything about him – who he is, or was? If the answer is no, that's okay. Because I had no idea who he was *either*; that is, until recently.

I was in my office, looking at the lessons assigned for today and also thinking about the Memorial Day holiday, and I was trying to find some way to link the two. Then I had an inspiration! Perhaps you remember that several weeks ago I told the story of the officer who, by sacrificing his *own* life, had saved the lives of his men during the Korean War, including the father of one of my high school classmates – Gunnar Mariano. In fact, Gunnar, as I shared, was actually *named* after this officer. You see, Tom Mariano, Gunnar's father, had taken this brave lieutenant's final words to heart. "Remember me to your children," he had said to his men. And in naming his first-born son after his lieutenant, Mr. Mariano had done just that.

Anyway, it suddenly struck me that maybe I could do a *follow-up* by looking to see if I could find out any more details about this man and his courageous sacrifice. So I went online, thinking that such gallantry must have earned the lieutenant some kind of medal. And, starting at the top with the *highest* award, I went down the list of those who had won the Medal of Honor; looking for one with the first name of Gunnar. But I didn't find one.

Then I went down the list of the Korean War winners of the Navy Cross, the *second* highest medal of valor awarded specifically to members of the Navy and Marine Corps. Again, nothing.

So, next, I brought up the list of those who had earned the Silver Star, the *third* highest medal awarded. Once again, nothing.

And then I discovered that there *are* no comprehensive lists of those who have been awarded the Bronze Star. So, apparently, I had hit a dead-end.

Disappointed, I also read, however, that the current lists (except, of course, for the Medal of Honor winners) were only 90 to 95% complete. So there was still a chance, albeit a small one, that his name was among those that were missing on those online lists.

But, nevertheless, it was while I was scrolling down the list of Silver Star recipients, and reading the actual citations of their heroism, that something caught my eye. It wasn't the name, at first, but rather his hometown – Freehold, New Jersey – *my* hometown. So I stopped, and scrolled back up to the beginning of the citation and that's when I saw the name: Philip A. Reynolds. And I began to read...

The President of the United States takes great pride in presenting the Silver Star Medal (Posthumously) to Philip A. Reynolds, U.S.

Marine Corps for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity (I had to look that word up – it means “fearlessness”) while serving as a machine gunner of Company E, Second Battalion, First Marine Regiment, First Marine Division, in action against enemy aggressor forces in Korea on 29 November 1950. With his company under attack by a vastly outnumbering hostile force, Corporal Reynolds repeatedly exposed himself to a devastating barrage of enemy automatic weapons and small arms fire to deliver a large volume of accurate fire on the attackers. Mortally wounded while attempting to clear his gun and put it back in operation after it had jammed during the furious action, Corporal Reynolds served to inspire his comrades to heroic efforts and contributed immeasurably to the successful repulse of the enemy attack. His outstanding courage and loyal devotion to duty in the face of overwhelming odds were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country....

When I was done reading, it occurred to me that I had never heard or read a single thing about Corporal Reynolds and his heroic efforts, even though I had grown up in the very same hometown. It also occurred to me, after having scrolled through, literally, hundreds and hundreds of *other* names, and accompanying citations, that there were many *more* men, just like Corporal Reynolds – and now woman as well; apparently ordinary, everyday individuals who suddenly found themselves thrust into *extra-*ordinary and incredibly dangerous situations and who, then, acquitted themselves with unusual courage and bravery.

So often we think of these brave men and women, like Corporal Reynolds, who have done such courageous things – even, at times, sacrificing their own lives for a greater cause – as being so different and so much braver than we are ourselves. Now perhaps that’s true in some cases. But the more I learn, and the more I hear about such courage and bravery, the more I’m convinced that these

aren't "*super* men and women," but rather people just like you and me who simply rose to the challenge in difficult circumstances.

"Courage," someone once said, "is not the absence of fear; it is taking a step forward when you *are* afraid." Similarly, Mark Twain is quoted as saying, "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not *absence* of fear." But perhaps actor John Wayne put it best. "Courage," he said, "is being scared to death... but saddling up anyway."

And it was at this point that it clicked; that it all finally came together and fell into place for me. You see, it finally dawned on me that this notion of ordinary men and women willingly giving their lives for a greater good, and this idea of everyday moms and dads literally *giving away* those sons and daughter for the benefit of others – for you and me, gives us a particularly powerful insight into this morning's gospel reading...

Without a doubt, John 3:16 is not only the most famous verse in that passage. But it's also perhaps the most famous verse in the entire New Testament, indeed the entire Bible as well. That opening clause, "For God so loved the world..." you see, has brought immeasurable comfort and inspiration to literally millions of people for nearly two millennia now.

And the closing words of that verse, "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life," have just as assuredly offered hope and promise to all those consumed by a paralyzing fear of death and its consequences.

But it's the middle section of that verse that caught my eye: "...that he gave his only Son." For God so loved the world... *that he gave his only Son...*

Notice it doesn't just say that God *sent* his Son into the world. Like on a brief tour or training mission. Or even *lent* his_Son, as if the Son was somehow "on loan" to us, or something. No, it says that God *gave* his son, gave him *away* for the sake of the world. Now, when my grandmother marched my dad down to the draft board that day many years ago, I'm pretty sure that she was not thinking in terms of a *permanent* arrangement; I'm sure she didn't think it would be forever. She undoubtedly knew the very real risks involved, of course, but at the same time her hope and prayer was always that he would someday come home to her... which fortunately he did.

But when God gave *his only Son* for the sake of the world it was with full knowledge; the terrible, tragic knowledge, that Jesus would suffer and die. If my grandmother somehow knew that her son, my dad, was destined to suffer and die, she never would have given him away in the first place! Of that, I'm absolutely certain.

And the same is true, I'm sure, for all those other mothers and father who have similarly given their sons and daughters to serve our country. Suffering and death were real possibilities, to be sure. But not *certainties*. Yet, for Jesus... suffering and death would prove to be unavoidable; indeed they were his destiny.

And whenever I think about my grandmother – faced with the difficult, but apparently necessary, decision to send one of her sons off to war in place of another – I think about Mary, *Jesus' mother*. And I think of the agony that must have seized *her heart* as she increasingly began to realize, and to understand, and then to contemplate, and finally to witness firsthand, the tragic destiny that awaited him on the cross; his slow, agonizing death.

My simple point here is that, on this Memorial Day holiday weekend, as we remember and honor those who sacrificed their lives in the pursuit of freedom, we also have to remember and

focus on the one whose sacrifice saved the *entire world!* Whose death utterly destroyed the *power* of death. And whose rising again offers the promise of new life to us all!

As Christian people, as much as the sacrifice of our fellow Americans may fill us with a sense of pride and gratitude – and rightfully so – it is the memory of Jesus Christ on the cross that represents the *greatest* sacrifice in the history of the world. To think that God knowingly, willingly, purposely, gave his only Son to die for us, so that we might live, is a staggering consideration; almost beyond comprehension.

My grandmother, in a sense, “gave” my dad to the draft board *in place* of his brother. Corporal Reynolds’ parents gave their son to the service of his country. But, consider this, God gave his only Son *in place* of the entire world! Jesus took upon himself that which we ourselves rightfully deserved. And in dying, he died *for us!*

On the cross, Jesus paid the terrible price for our sin. On the cross, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus bought our freedom...

Memorial Day comes around once a year, and the sacrifice of our fellow country-men, and women, should never be forgotten. But *each and every Sunday* should be an occasion to remember our Lord’s sacrifice on our behalf. Each and every Sunday is an opportunity to recall how God gave his only Son, out of his love for the world. And how that Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, willingly gave his life on the altar of freedom for all of humanity.

Amen.