One of my favorite musicals was released in 1971 – “Fiddler on the Roof”. The signature songs are Sunrise Sunset, Tradition and If I were a Rich Man. As we move through this strange time, traditions are challenged, practiced differently. For the Islamic community, the tradition of Ramadan was acted out in different ways in 2020. On Saturday, the end of Ramadan was marked by Eid al-Fitr, also known as the ‘Festival of Breaking the Fast’ and Muslims celebrated and finished their daily fasting without the traditional large gatherings. Rites of passage still happen – weddings and funerals, but they are smaller and often guests can only participate through Zoom. A UCC pastor was recently approached by a family who wanted their infant child baptized. Some of the Zoom participants jokingly suggested the pastor get a giant squirt gun – bad idea. The baptism will be with only the immediate family and gloves and mask will be worn by the pastor.

New traditions are emerging. There are Zoom birthday parties that go on for hours. Persons are agreeing to call one another at a set time each day – just to check in. Families are having to create places for work, family, and play, in their homes. The boundaries almost become sacred. Zoom is done with headphones so confidential conversations cannot be overheard by others. Smart phones, tablets, computers become the means by which we carry out traditions and long-distance conversations. And I hope, all are practicing the (new) traditions of writing diaries detailing whom you have come in contact with and when at the end of each day.

One of the traditions that is experiencing major changes is happening today. In any other year I would be participating in a Memorial Day Service either in Walker or Hackensack – services that are filled with remembering, honoring, meaning, and giving thanks for those who have died in service to their country. Originally known as Decoration Day, it originated in the years following the Civil War and became an official federal holiday in 1971 on the fourth Monday of May. In Hackensack, crosses are put up for every veteran who has died, their name is read, and a flag is placed in the top of their cross. Not today. Today a wreath will be placed in Leech Lake at the Walker Park, in honor of those who have died, a much smaller gathering and a less formal service. I was touched by the stories in our Virtual Coffee hour yesterday of family members who had died while serving. And there was mention of a family member whose service in Iraq has been extended because of Covid-19.

While a child, Memorial Day was a full day for me and my family who traveled from cemetery to cemetery in the Portland OR area and SW Washington. For weeks, my grandmother and her childhood friend Harvey – they would gather cedar branches and fashion them into wreathes, using the extra limbs as tripod stands. A ribbon would be tied to the wreath and there was poignant smell of cedar traveling in the Willis Jeep. A lunch was packed, kids and adults piled into cars, no exceptions. We honored
grandparents, parents, uncles, who all shared the common thread of serving country. We would end our day at a small church at a small country church in View WA. The church had an adjoining cemetery with family plots. First, we would pull weeds, trim the grass around the tombstones, sweep them clean, and then place the wreathes behind the tombstones. And then the picnic baskets came out, blankets to sit on, and more then enough food for all to share. When we finished, we would pick and eat the wild strawberries. It was also a day of storytelling. While driving through the countryside the elders would share the stories of their growing up – in a vastly different time.

Today, I would invite you to remember. Share the stories of those who served country. Give thanks for their service, especially those who died while serving. Talk about service to other and your memories of leaving through war and peace. Perhaps coming out of Covid-19 pandemic we could rededicate ourselves to the service of others. (An aside: I wish Congress would reintroduce of the universal mandatory draft for all 18-year-old males and females. No less than two years of service would be required, either in the military, hospitals, peace corps, Vista, building and repairing infrastructure badly in need of repair.)

On this Memorial Day, let us also honor and remember the almost 100,000 in the United States who have died of the novel coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic. Lives have been cut short, families have been devastated, too many have suffered, too many grieve as they walk “through the valleys of death” on these spring days.

Let us remember . . . !

In the ways, spirit and agape love of Jesus, Michael

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