***To You from Failing Hands We Throw The Torch***

A Sermon for Remembrance Day

Lawrence Park Community Church, November 11, 2018

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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.

John McCrae

In a certain way, Remembrance Day reminds me of my first visit to the Grand Canyon. Irene and I were on our year-long RV trip around North America. Our drive from Las Vegas to the South Rim was through a mostly dry landscape of rock and scrub.

We parked in a stand of trees. From there we took a path to the rim. And suddenly, there was the Grand Canyon, without warning. My first glance struck me almost physically. How do you describe the canyon to someone who has never seen it? Will you say it is a big hole? Amazing? Rocky?

Neither words nor pictures can contain or explain the Grand Canyon experience. And that is how I feel about what is asked of us on Remembrance Day.

In spite of history books and magazine articles with pictures and television documentaries, there is no way for us, today, to plumb the depths of what it is to be under fire. We remember the First World War, today, among others, very dimly, at best. We experience it not at all.

I try, mind you. I wonder what it would be like to sit in a foxhole with a rifle, wet and cold to my bones, and suffering from trench rot. What it would be like to hear my commander tell me to rise and run for the enemy’s trenches, even as I watch my comrades, who did the same thirty seconds ago, writhe in death before me. But imagining such things is hard.

Perhaps this failure of the imagination is one reason we don’t always honor returning vets the way we should. Our inability to truly empathize with their experiences may be why we do not always ensure that the resources vets need to deal with PTSD, depression, suicide, and homelessness are easily available to them.

Well, and there are other issues too, besides our failure to imagine or understand, not having seen war, personally. In his poem, McCrae also pleads with us to take up the quarrel with the foe, to carry the torch for the fight, on behalf of the dead.

But, as you listened to Di read “In Flanders Fields,” were you even able to recall what the First World War quarrel was actually about?

It goes something like this. In the First World War, one group of oppressive colonial Empires—the Brits, the French, the Russians—fought another group of oppressive colonial Empires—the Ottomans, the Austro-Hungarians, the Germans. Both sides wanted the other empires out of the way, the better to exploit the Middle East, Africa, and each other in Europe. Meanwhile, all the parties—including our side—competed all round the world in highly racialized and oppressive ways, with little regard or no regard for the people who lived in these places. Afterward, the peace treaties signed 100 years ago today, divided these territories up without regard to the desires of the local people mostly to maximize the spoils for the victors.

So that was the actual quarrel—simplified. While every war is fought to the tune of patriotic talk about “our way of life,” and “truth,” and “justice,” there was very, very little of that at the root of the First World War. The First World War was also a huge factor bringing on the Soviet revolution, and thus the Cold War, the Maoist Chinese revolution thirty years later, and thus Vietnam, and thus the Cuban missile crisis and the Angolan Civil War and on and on. The peace signed 100 years ago today laid the foundation for 100 years of fighting in the Middle East, which was carved up to suit the winners. The Second World war, perhaps the last truly just war, had to be fought largely because of the vindictive and opportunistic ruin that peace brought to half the world, and especially Germany. There are few historians who argue differently. Is this the quarrel, the torch, we want to pass on? Imperial gain?

Wars are that way—often fought for mixed motives that have little to do with ideals that Jesus, or the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, would recognize. Canada’s first overseas war, the Boer War in Southern Africa, was fought fifteen years before the First World War. In it, the British Empire conquered three Boer Republics whose independence Britain earlier acknowledged. Why? Because gold and diamonds were discovered there, and the British wanted those riches for themselves. But who paid the price? Mostly poor boys who fought in both armies, far from home. And Africans paid the price, Africans who died in concentration camps by the tens of thousands and who starved or were shot in the countryside and totally cut out of the peace, after. We romanticize the British Empire, but it was built on slavery and the oppression of the conquered, to extract the most possible wealth out of the conquered as quickly as possible. It was not just. It was not holy. It was, in hindsight, absolutely wrong. We should remember this too. So what quarrel, what torch, are we really committed to passing on?

I am not a pacifist. And I am not totally naïve. I grew up listening to my family stories about hiding Dutch underground fighters in their homes and barns. Irene’s family members in occupied Netherlands busted Canadian fliers out of jails and spirited them back to England. Irene’s family members are even commemorated as righteous among the gentiles in Israel’s war memorials for hiding Jews. I’m proud of my family, as many of you are of your own. Sometimes, evil demands armed resistance. I do not deny it.

But having opened the door, just a crack, to the possibility of a just war, I wonder whether or not far too often other factors have made us only too willing to fight. We have been wrong about more than a few of our wars, and soldiers who did not ask of their nation, “why,” died in those wars too. From the Plains of Abraham to the Red River Rebellion, from the Siege of Mafeking to the First World War, as a nation our motives have not always been above reproach.

So, what quarrels do we take up? All and any? Or a few? What torch are we supposed to hold high? What does it represent?

Is it the torch of “our national interest?” That’s how nations talk, and we rarely stop to question it. In the past, the national interest has been defined as preserving the British Empire’s mercantilist exploitation of half the world, incarcerating Japanese-Canadians but not German-Canadians, not honoring treaties we made with sovereign First Nations, lower taxes and more jobs for the sake of the economy rather than taking on climate change, and participating in Middle Eastern wars where no battle has ever resulted in the peace we crave. For the sake of the National Interest we sell armored vehicles to Saudi Arabia—one of the most repressive states in the world after China and North Korea. We trade with China while it interns tens of thousands of Uighurs for being, well, Uighurs. And we go as tourists to newly opened Myanmar even while they deny responsibility for their ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. What torch, exactly, are we talking about? What motivates our country?

And sure, profits and international standing and power are not bad things in themselves. But they must serve our values before our pride or prosperity. For what does it profit a nation if it gains the whole world but loses its soul? What does national interest matter if it goes before the fall? What does power matter if it doesn’t look like justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream? What torch are we holding high?

So maybe I am naïve after all. I sound naïve, I know. Imagine not trading with China, or imagine other nations’ trade with China increasing while we suffer job losses on a matter of principle. Or maybe we could use trade as a lever. I know all the arguments but have no answers on these specific policy matters.

So again this Remembrance Day, what is the torch we’re supposed to hold high? What quarrels do we want to perpetuate? Well, in the hearts and dreams of our boys fighting overseas, it wasn’t a torch for imperial expansion or national aggrandizement.

Listen. Remembrance Day is good. While it cannot help us really understand the depths of what war really feels like, we must honor and remember those men and women who served, who are the dead who lie in Flanders Fields. These soldiers are our heroes.

But Remembrance Day is also good because it forces us to ask, “what quarrels are really worth fighting for,” and “what torch do we want to hold on high.” We need these questions. Remembrance Day is a good day to examine ourselves, to see whether the freedoms we’ve enshrined in our Charter of Rights: freedom of religion, thought, movement, expression, freedom for peaceful assembly and freedom of the press, democracy, equal treatment for all before the law, and so on—whether these freedoms are really what most motivates us not only in international affairs, but here at home, too.

The Grand Canyon is a great metaphor for explaining how some things need to be experienced before they can be truly understood. But the canyon’s depths and grandeur, its wonder and beauty—all that is also a great metaphor for how deep and wide the values and dreams that we live by are, and how much they mean to us. Those rights and freedoms are the torch we want to pass on.