

On this Memorial Day we gather to honor those men and women who “were good and faithful servants”. Today we give thanks for those who have served their country in the armed forces, and we mourn the loss of those brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice. Later today I will walk over to the military cemetery that is here on Arsenal Ave. and as I’ve done for a number of years now I will place a flag at the grave of one of the unknown soldiers who is buried there.

As Fr. Tom Healy mentioned at Mass yesterday, part of the goodness of Americans is that we have a deep respect for those who are willing to put themselves in harm’s way to defend the values of our country, and we especially honor those who have died on the battlefield. Perhaps the most famous speech to honor our war dead came on Nov. 19, 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln stood on the battlefield at Gettysburg to dedicate a portion of that land as a national cemetery. After his opening sentences, President Lincoln said:

"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 & proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living & 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 here 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, & that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Memorial Day is the unofficial beginning of summer; it is a great weekend for a trip to the beach or the lake; or a time for a family get-together. But if this day is to have a deep meaning, I think there is one line of the Gettysburg Address that merits some prophetic reflection. President Lincoln challenged us to be true to our noblest values when he said, "It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

It is easier to be sentimental rather than prophetic on a day such as this but permit me to take an honest look of what could be the endangered "unfinished work in our day."

- At our best we are a nation of immigrants that welcomes all who come in peace seeking a better life.**
- At our best we are a nation that takes justice seriously and would never subvert due process of law, even with those who are our enemies.**
- At our best we are a nation that places the highest possible value on human life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death.**
- At our best we will be a nation where our legislators can work together to face into the greed of insurance companies and fix our broken health care system so that everyone has basic health care.**
- At our best we will be a nation led by statesmen, not a career politician nor a TV personality.**
- At our best we can still be a nation with a government of the people, by the people and for the people, not simply of, by, and for the rich.**
- At our best we can still be a nation that is respected by the world, not for its great power, but for its greater goodness.**

The older we get, the more set in our ways and bad habits, the more used to our blindness we become, but as a people of faith we believe in the power of God to bring life giving change to even the most desperate of circumstances, to the darkest of worlds and lives.

And so it is for us, the living, to truly honor our war dead by taking up the unfinished work for which they made the ultimate sacrifice. Whatever it is that God is calling us to as individuals, as families, as a nation and as a world will not be achieved without effort or cost, but as we journey forward as people of faith we will know that our God does go with us and gives us what we need to be able to build a better world as we move ever closer to His Kingdom. Amen! Amen!