

“What’s After The Dash?”

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” 1 John 3:16

You’re in Washington D.C., on the mall. You descend a sloping sidewalk, and there it is. The Washington Monument to your left, the Lincoln Memorial behind you. Before you stretches the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

It’s the “wailing wall” of a generation. Black marble tablets carved with names that read more like the roster of a high school football team, than a list of dead soldiers -- Walter Faith, Richard Sala, Michael Andrews, Roy Burris, Emmet Stanton.

Each name, a young life. Behind each name is a bereaved widow, an anguished mother, a fatherless child.

You look down at your feet. There lay a dozen roses, soggy from the weather. They were left there by a wife, or an old girl-friend who came to say, “I still remember. I haven’t forgotten.”

Next to you stand a trio. By the emotion on their faces, it’s obvious they hadn’t come out of curiosity. They came out of grief. The one in the center catches your attention. He wears a green army coat. He’s big. He’s black. He’s bearded. Angry tears stream down his face. 25 years of emotion still trying to find an exit.

Then as you look at the monument, you stop concentrating on the names etched in the granite. You relax your focus from the lettering, and look at the tablet. What you see is sobering. You see yourself. You see your own reflection. Your face looks back from the shiny marble. And you realize that in this place that commemorates so many who have died, still, you’re alive! They died. And you continue to enjoy today.

This is the Memorial Day weekend. In 1869 Congress set aside May 30th as Decoration Day -- a day to honor veterans who died in the Civil War. 618,000 men were killed between the years 1861 and 1865. In the South, virtually every family experienced at least one loss. The last casualty of the war occurred 4 days after the surrender. On Good Friday, 1865 President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

My grandfather was born in 1908 in a German farm community in the Saginaw bay area. He used to tell me of the time when the Army came through, and bought all the farmers' strong draft horses. They were needed in Europe for World War 1. 10 million died in that conflict; 20 million were wounded.

In World War 2, the numbers are even more staggering. 100 million men and women were involved in the conflict. 16 million soldiers were killed, 6 million dead from Russia alone. 300,000 U.S. service personnel were lost. The number of civilians killed were another 20 million people; 10 million of those in German concentration camps.

This weekend, the tombstone, the military cemetery becomes the focal point of our nation. The rows upon rows of white crosses remind us of sacrifice -- of men and women who gave their all, their lives, so that you and I today could live. What they did in past years, has directly blessed you and me today.

-As Christians, we know sacrifice as well. We know of pioneers who cleared the wilderness. People who used their sheer muscle and determination to build towns and villages, schools and churches. We know of ancestors who left everything to sail across the sea, to start over, often with nothing, on a new life in a new land. We know of parents and grandparents who worked, scrimped and saved; fed and clothed our families; taught and disciplined and loved children. They didn't have an easy life. They battled the odds.

Yet, if you were to go to the grave yard, what would you see on the tombstone? There carved in granite you find the name of the soldier, or the name of your deceased parent or grand parent. The date of birth is listed. And then there is a dash -- followed by the date of death. All of that person's life. All that they did -- all that they were, their personality their hopes and dreams -- all is summed up in one dash.

And now we come after their dash. What we have today is a direct result of what they have given to us. We stand on their shoulders. We build on the foundation of those who have gone before. Their sacrifices have brought blessings to us who follow. We don't deserve this. We haven't earned it. We can't ever pay them back, can we?

Every week, we gather here. And our focal point isn't a tomb stone. Yet, there is another symbol we focus on -- not just on Memorial Day, but every week. That symbol, is for us Christians a symbol of sacrifice. The ultimate sacrifice given for you and me. The cross here, reminds us all year long of a life given, so that you and I can live in the benefits of that life.

Jesus gave Himself. He sacrificed His life on the cross. He gave His highest and best. "This is how we know what love is:" our Bible text says, "Jesus Christ laid down His life for us."

He gave up His comfortable life in heaven, to enter the battlefield here on earth. He took on the powers of evil that are in the world and in each one of us. He lived a perfect life *for us*. He died a horrific death *for us*. He didn't *have* to. He did it *for you*.

Now, you live in the benefits, the blessings of Jesus' life and death. Now you have forgiveness, because in His death He paid with His life the price you owe for your wrongs and sins. Now you enjoy a hope for tomorrow. You are given the power to love and live as never before. Now you have the promise of God with you always. And in the future, you look forward to a forever in heaven.

Do you *deserve* this? Do we *earn* it? Can we *pay* Him *back*? No! This is simply a gift from God to you. "This is how we know what love is:" John wrote in our Bible text, "Jesus Christ laid down His life for us."

Like the soldiers and ancestors who have gone before us, who gave to us blessings we enjoy today; ... even more, Jesus Christ, God's Son, gave Himself for you and me, and we now live in the blessings of His death. We come after His dash. The tombstone and even more the cross are symbols of sacrifice and symbols of the blessings we have now.

It seems to me that every week we hear about Jesus' giving His life for us. We know all the facts in our heads. But we maybe we don't let it settle into our hearts into our souls. When was the last time you really *felt* and *experienced* God's love for you? ... felt His *acceptance* of you? When was the last time that Jesus' death on the

The second half of our Bible verse says, "Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. **And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (for others).**" We live in the blessings of those who have gone before us. Will others yet to come live in blessings from your life? "Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. **And we ought to lay down our lives for [others].**"

Coretta Scott King wrote in her book *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* "Day and night our phone would ring, and someone would pour out a string of obscene [language] Frequently the calls ended with a threat to kill us if we didn't get out of town. But in spite of all the danger, the chaos of our private lives, I felt inspired, almost elated."

While leading the civil rights movement, King was arrested and jailed on many occasions. He was stoned, stabbed, and physically attacked. His house was bombed. Yet his vision and his influence continued to increase. In the end, he sacrificed everything he had. In his last speech, delivered the night before his assassination in Memphis, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said,

I don't know what will happen to me now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. I won't mind. Like anybody else, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight . . . I'm not fearing any man. 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'"

The next day he paid the ultimate price of sacrifice. King's impact has swept through all of American society. We live today in the blessings of his life. We are after his dash.

What's going to be after your dash?

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this; that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) The moment to sacrifice for others is here and now. In the verses before and after our Bible text, John is saying, if you have some material possessions and you see someone in need, *and*

you choose *not* to have pity on him, then, he says, THE LOVE OF GOD CANNOT POSSIBLY BE IN YOU. That's a harsh accusation.

The point, you see, is that sacrificing yourself for others isn't only for a crisis situation ... it's DAILY LIVING. The need of the world isn't for heroic acts of dying for others. The real need of our world is for sacrificing every day for others' benefit ... starting with you and me.

Jesus' love for us is a practical love. He goes way beyond just feelings of pity, to actually living and giving His life for us. He lived each day for *our* benefit! Will *your* love be a *reflection* of His? Will you love not just in words, but in what you do? Will you love unconditionally as Jesus' love is unconditional, so that others yet to come might receive blessings through your life?

President Abraham Lincoln understood this principle. When dedicating a portion of the battlefield at Gettysburg to be a cemetery, 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. ... 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 his nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

One day you'll die. Your life will go by fast. On your tombstone your whole life -- your loves, your hopes, your efforts, your dreams -- it will all be summed up in a simple dash. What's after *your* dash?

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for [others]."

It's my prayer that God fill you with gratitude this Memorial Day at what others have given to you ... and especially may the blessings of Jesus Christ your Savior touch your heart. Then may this love of God move you to ask: "What's God Leading YOU to do today so that you become a blessing to those who come after your dash.

(AMEN.)