

Veterans Day Service
All Saints Church
November 11, 2019

One hundred years ago today, on November 11, 1919, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson issued a message to the country on the first Armistice Day, in which he expressed what he felt the day meant to Americans:

ADDRESS TO FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN (Countrywomen included!)

The White House, November 11, 1919.

A year ago today our enemies laid down their arms in accordance with an armistice which rendered them impotent to renew hostilities, and gave to the world an assured opportunity to reconstruct its shattered order and to work out in peace a new and just set of international relations. The soldiers and people of the European Allies had fought and endured for more than four years to uphold the barrier of civilization against the aggressions of armed force. We ourselves had been in the conflict something more than a year and a half.

President Wilson continued to speak about the **splendid forgetfulness of mere personal concerns**, about our capacity to bring together **our vast resources, material and moral, of a great and free people to the assistance of our associates in Europe who had suffered and sacrificed without limit in the cause for which we fought.**

He closed by saying, **To us in America the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service, and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of nations.**

1919, a hundred years ago today. We should be very proud that our town of Peterborough in this beautiful Monadnock region of southwest New Hampshire has been the home of the Cheney-Armstrong American Legion Post #5 **since 1919.**

The Post was named after two men. 1st Lt. William H. Cheney, Army, and Navy Lieutenant John Parkhurst “Jock” Armstrong. Both men died in the war as pilots.

1st Lt. William Cheney was the youngest son of Mary Lyon Cheney Schofield, the inspiration, visionary, and benefactor of All Saints Church. His body, as well as his father, his step-father, and his mother, rests in the crypt just below us.

The first Peterborough resident to die during WW II was Navy Lieutenant Jock Armstrong. On November 1st (coincidentally All Saints Day) he was killed when his bomber crashed. He is buried at the Pine Hill Cemetery.

These two men, like so many men and women, served their country with dignity and courage and gave their lives to protect our nation and her citizens. We honor them this morning, along with all the other members of our military who have served or who are serving today, protecting the welfare of our country.

We also honor today, our American Legion Posts which can be found throughout the nation, town by town, county by county, state by state. And in those Posts, we find places and people who honor and dignify the service of our military. (We thank Dee and Wayne Thomas for their service of love here in Peterborough).

Today, we also honor people, like Jim Webb, a Vietnam War Veteran, former Secretary of the Navy and Senator from Virginia, who continues to lead a life of service.

In late 2017, Jim Webb discovered something that he wanted rectified.

Here's a known fact: in late 1965 an American c-123 was shot down in a contested area during the Vietnam War, killing all four American crew members and 81 unidentified South Vietnamese (ARVN, Army of the Republic of Viet Nam) who fought side by side with the Americans. In 1986, all of the remains were finally sent to Hawaii but remained unclaimed. But then, the American crew's remains were identified through DNA testing and were given proper burial.

But the crew's ARVN allies were not. This is what Senator Jim Webb discovered, and for the past two years he has been working with the State Department, the Department of Defense, U.S. diplomats in Vietnam, and through them, with the Vietnamese to resolve the situation.

"My sole motivation in this endeavor," said Senator Webb, "has been to properly honor the dignity of service and to bring respect to all of those who did serve, on whichever side, no matter their nationality.

"They have indeed become 'Men Without a Country,' after having given their lives on behalf of a country that no longer exists."

Webb used his influence and his authority and his moral convictions to arrange for the transfer of the remains from Hawaii to California for interment, nearly 55 years after their deaths. To give these men a home and to honor them. Their final resting place is at Freedom Park in Westminster, California (commemorated October 26th of this year). The casket with these remains was interred next to the memorial for boat people who fled communist Vietnam to come to the states.

"We will never know the names of the men we honor," said current Navy Secretary Richard Spencer. "We'll never know the loved ones that they left behind- mothers,

fathers, brothers, sisters, wives and children- who never learned of their fate and never had the opportunity to say goodbye.”

I tell you this story this morning because it is so current and because it gives me hope. In the midst of our political turmoil and conflict, when we seem to have lost our way, especially in our fight against ISIS with the Kurds who fought side by side with our armies in Syria. We need to keep the Kurds in our prayers. We need to remember our stories like the story of Senator Jim Webb as they are the ones that remind us of who we are and what we are made of as Americans. Today we hold onto these stories of dignity.

I never enlisted in the military, though my father was a decorated Korean vet and my cousin who is like a brother to me was deployed to Iraq twice. What I have learned from their stories about war is that in the midst of the large gesture to serve, there are small gestures, and they matter: moments of comradeship, intimate glances at special photographs, letters from home, songs sung, shared blankets, a hug, empathy about fear and “losing one’s nerve,” meals shared, especially if it’s fresh bread, corn beef, chocolate, café au lait, and maybe even a cigarette. (Let us take a moment of silence to think about those small gestures that gave each of you hope, courage, and resiliency).

The weight of these small gestures are precious because they make our service REAL. Why is that? Because in these small gestures of love and support, we honor the fact that each life matters. You matter. And you serve and have served because each life matters. The gift of you and others in the world is to be celebrated and protected. Or as one of my favorite theologians, Frederick Buechner puts it, “The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you.”

That’s why we go to war. To fight against tyranny and destruction and evil. To protect the capacity for all of us to flourish in freedom, love, liberty and justice. And the men and women who serve to protect us so that we can flourish, tell us, that beautiful and terrible things will happen, but don’t be afraid. We will protect you. This selfless act of service is what we honor today.

I want to close with a powerful poem written in 1916 by WW I veteran, Ivor Gurney.

He is honoring the loss of his friend, and writing to his friend’s fiancé:

To His Love

He’s gone, and all our plans
 Are tireless indeed,
 We’ll walk no more on Cotswold
 Where the sheep feed
 Quietly and take no heed.

His body that was so quick
Is not as you
Knew it, on Severn river
Under the blue
Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now ...
But still he died
Nobly, so cover him over
With violets of pride
Purple from Severn side.

Cover him, cover him soon!
And with thick-set
Masses of memorized flowers ...
Hide that red wet
Things I must somehow forget.

In the midst of honoring our soldiers, past, present and future and knowing that in their hardships, in their pain, in their strength, in their service, in their valor, in their times of needing to forget about the horrors they have witnessed and experienced, we must never forget..... never forget the power of their grand gesture to serve and their small gestures of love, commitment, grace and power to give us the opportunity to flourish and to know that this party, this full life, would not be complete without each and every one of us.... The gift of life and love and peace... the gift of who you are. And our service men and women protect this gift of life every day.

Amen