

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
November 8, 2009
The Reverend Amy Hodges Morehous

“To Make Sacred”

Today, I'm going to begin with a story. A story about Harry. Harry was 20 years old, and a sophomore at UT. He liked three things – UT football, fraternity parties and pretty girls. Well, four things – he especially liked practical jokes. When his brother got married, he dressed up like a bride and sashayed down the aisle at the rehearsal, smoking a cigar the whole way. He was an average student with average grades. He didn't particularly like going to class or studying. In fact, he decided during his second semester his sophomore year that college wasn't the place for him after all. He dropped out of school and enlisted in the Navy – his brother was Army ROTC, but Harry didn't particularly care about being an officer. He was assigned to the 'SeaBees' – the Navy's construction battalion. He was trained to build helicopter bases ahead of advancing troops. It was hazardous duty – he got his first purple heart within six months. Of course, he got it when an artillery shell fell on his foot and broke it. He joked in a letter home that it was the easiest and klutziest medal anyone ever got.

While on medical furlough, he met his parents and fiancé for a week-long vacation in Hawaii. They celebrated his birthday, and spent Christmas Eve day on the beach, Harry crutching around with a plastic bag on his broken foot, so he could stick his toes in the ocean. They posed for goofy pictures, shells hanging off their ears and their noses. His parents and fiancée flew back to Tennessee, and Harry returned to duty.

Two weeks later, as soon as he could ditch the crutches, he returned to duty. On his first day back, there was a surprise attack, and he and his companions retreated into their bunker to return fire. After a few shots were exchanged, a live grenade landed in the bunker. Harry, without hesitation, threw himself on top of it. He was killed instantly. He was 20 years old.

We could have read it in the paper just yesterday, this story – Harry's story - of sacrifice and honor and duty. Things just as heroic and just as horrific happen every day these days in the Middle East. But Harry's life ended 41 years ago, in Da Nang, Vietnam.

I've told you Harry's story because today's readings are all about sacrifice. Not the showy burnt offerings so common in that time – but in the offering up of our very lives, our selves and our souls. The widow sacrifices her last morsels of grain and oil to make a meal for Elijah, and prepares to die. Another widow sacrifices her last two coins to God. Christ makes the ultimate sacrifice, offering up his very life, once for all. Sacrifice is from the Latin *sacrificium*: *sacer*, sacred; + *facere*, to make. To make sacred.

And what about Harry's sacrifice? Did it make a difference for his country, mired the middle of a war that was growing more unpopular everyday? I don't know that I can answer that. I hope so. But I do know that Harry's sacrifice mattered to the men who happened to be in the bunker that day with him. His decision in that moment meant that they lived to return home.

I know these things because Harry was my uncle, my father's younger brother. I know that those men kept in touch with my grandparents for a time after they returned home. It was one thing my grandfather and grandmother clung to, in their grief, to know that their loss and pain meant others survived.

I never knew my uncle – he was killed four years before I was born. But I grew up hearing his story, reading the letters he sent home to his parents. My sister inherited his gift for mischief, and her son, my nephew, inherited his blue, blue eyes. As the family storyteller, I've inherited his papers, his pictures, and his story. I also have his hat, which tells you something about the man who wore it, and the people who have saved it all this time. While I'm honored to have this, I have to admit I would rather have gotten to meet the man who wore it.

When I was a child, I used to fantasize that maybe those men who survived that day lived to cure cancer or win the Nobel Prize – something worthy of Harry's great sacrifice. Now that I'm older, I hope that they lived to be happy, that maybe they enjoy reading good books, or the peace of a quiet afternoon. I hope my uncle's sacrifice doesn't weigh too heavily on their hearts. And I hope they are somewhere even today, watching their grandchildren grow up.

So, what about us? Why do we tell these stories of sacrifice? Partly, we tell these stories to honor those in them in the telling. We tell them to celebrate and remember those whom we have loved, and who loved us. I have told you the story of my uncle so that he, and the thousands of men and women like him, won't be forgotten this Wednesday when we celebrate Veteran's Day. Their lives – their stories - live on in each of us. I know many of you

may have similar stories – stories of people you loved, people you served alongside. We remember and lift up our losses, and our hurts, that they may remind us of all those who have given of their best selves with noble intentions.

We tell these stories to acknowledge that our time in this life is brief, and that our decisions matter. My uncle's decision to put himself between a grenade and his fellow sailors mattered. The widow agreeing to provide Elijah with a meal in a time of drought, when food was scarce, mattered to her, to her family, and to Elijah. This has been a hard week for good news. We read the headlines from Cleveland, where one man snuffed out 11 women's lives. From Ft. Hood, Texas, where one man killed 13, and wounded another 30 people. It can be easy, in times when this kind of evil seems to be prevalent in the world, to think that we don't matter, that our lives are so tiny, that we can make little difference. But our sacrifices, our decisions – they each matter: to us, to our families, to our communities.

Granted, our sacrifices may not be as bold as the one my uncle made. (Indeed it would be my fervent prayer that none of us are faced with a moment where we must make that kind of sacrifice.) I would like to believe, more than anything, that there will come a time when all God's children will live in peace with one another. But for now, we know that's not true. We know that there are sons and daughters across the wide sea today who are making the same sacrifice. Many of them are there because they felt called to do something – I know my uncle did.

As Christians, we are each given a calling, something we have been given that we can offer in the service of the kingdom of God. We may not be called to be sailors or soldiers – after all, our gifts are as unique as our own fingerprints. We are given those gifts in order to help make something holy, to sanctify life in the midst of our living of it. We are giving of ourselves, each of us, to make our offering – we offer up our selves, our souls and bodies, in this sacred place – we help make it so with our shared communion, with our love and prayers, and with our time and talents.

But we are here, within these walls, only a small percentage of our short lives. God calls each of us to do the same out in the world. On this day, in remembrance and honor of Christ's sacrifice, in recognition of our shared humanity, what are you being called to give, so that others may have a more full life? How are you being called to be Christ's hands in the world?

In response to Christ's sacrifice of love, God asks each of us to love with our whole being, to offer up our lives, just as we are, to be a new creation in him, to give in the service of

Christ and our common humanity. When we allow ourselves to do that, with love and joy, then we are free to trust in the wideness of God's grace and mercy. We believe in "the Lord our God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps his promises forever." It does not mean we will have no grief or trial, that we will always make wise choices, or that life will always go smoothly, but it does mean that each of us held, just as we are, in the arms of a God who loves us too much to let us go.

Today, I pray that we will see the opportunities to sacrifice, to give up our cynicism and our selfish impulses, so that the greater good may prevail. I hope we let go of that small voice of doubt that says, "But, I can't." I hope that our response to the holy and all-encompassing sacrificial love of Christ is not obligation, but joy and hope in the giving.

The last words my family received from my uncle come from a handwritten letter containing his will, which they received after his death. He ended his letter with, "I must close now even though I have much more to say. But I just don't have the time. God bless you all, and may he see you through all walks of life. I'll be seeing you. Take care now."

Amen, and amen.