



No Greater Love

John 15:12-17

Memorial Day Sunday, May 26th, 2019
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.

Text: There is no greater love than this, that an individual lay down their life for their friends. ... And you are my friends. (v. 13)

Near Chicago's Navy Pier there is a park in memory of Milton Olive III, the first African American to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor¹. Milton was the only child born to Clara Lee and "Big Milton". His mother died shortly after childbirth. For a few weeks it was touch and go as to whether or not Milton would survive, but he was a scrappy fellow...and determined.

As an only child and under the circumstances it is understandable that Milton was an "indulged" child. He had privileges that his cousins didn't have. It came as a total surprise to his family and neighborhood when he enlisted in the United States Army in 1964, one year before our active engagement in Vietnam. He wanted to be a paratrooper even though people said that his rifle and rucksack probably weighed more than he did. But, as I said, he was determined and scrappy. He was assigned to the 73rd Airborne, and in 1965 was sent to Vietnam.

Once there he made a pact with four other troopers; Vince, Lionel, John, and Jimmy. They pledged to watch out for one another and to do everything that they could to make sure that they returned home alive.

On October 22, 1965 Milton Oliver was part of a search and destroy mission in the jungles of Southeast Asia. It was hot and steamy. The jungle growth was so thick that it blocked out the sunlight and turned it into shadows. Suddenly the air was filled with the sound of gunfire and the smell of rounds hitting human flesh. In the midst of the screams and shouts and explosions a live grenade landed at the feet of the five friends. It seemed like time stood still as they froze waiting for the impending explosion that would take their lives. But Milton Olive moved quickly, though it seemed like slow motion. He picked up the grenade, tucked it into his belly and fell to the ground receiving the full impact of the explosion. His body was thrown into the air. He landed on the ground face up toward the jungle canopy.

Six months later in the White House Rose Garden President Lyndon Johnson, flanked by two of Milton buddies and Mayor Richard J. Daley presented the Congressional Medal of Honor to Milton Olive III's father. In his remarks President Johnson noted Milton's "instinct of loyalty" that caused him to pay the ultimate sacrifice for his friends. "In dying," the President said, "Pvt. Milton Oliver taught those of us who remain how we ought to live."

1. Don Terry, *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 2002

A few years ago a reporter for the Chicago tracked down Milton's four friends. Vince still has a scrap of Milton's dog tag. It is arguably his most valued possession. Lionel returned to Houston, got married, and owned several rental properties. He noted that if it wasn't for Milton, he would be where he is today. John returned from the war with the conviction that he had to live for two people. And Jimmy, a self-acknowledged racist who used the "n" word freely and intentionally said that Milton changed him.

Jesus told his disciples that there is no greater love than for an individual lay down their life for their friends. ... And you are my friends.

One of the Church's favorite hymns is "What a Friend We Have In Jesus." But the hymn begs the unspoken question, are we a friend to Jesus? Friendship is two-way street. One not only has a friend but is called to act like a friend. Friends look out for friends. I never understood how Natalie Holloway's friends could allow her to leave a bar one night in Aruba with a complete stranger. But I wasn't there so I do not know all of the circumstances. Still, I wonder.

Friendship also means being told the uncomfortable of the truth. And friendship with God has the unavoidable duty to love as God loves even if it means that we lay down our life if need be. The late Fred Craddock², a renowned preacher, teacher, and lecturer once said that "Most of us carry within us large areas of deliberate ignorance. From childhood we carry the warm and inspiring image of General George Washington with his troops in the biting snow at Valley Forge. Who wants the picture spoiled by the information that Washington was quartered in a large and comfortable farmhouse nearby?

Who wants to hear a poor child say, 'Mommy, I'm hungry', and to read a marquee announcing 'All you can eat, \$7.95' all on the same evening?

Comfort demands avoiding those rallies where passionate and informed speakers assail our ears with the news: 13 million children in America go to bed hungry every night; over 9 million have no health insurance; every 30 minutes a child is shot to death in the United States.

There is a lot of information that we would prefer not to know.

Milton Olive III lay down his life for his friends. Jesus laid down his life to show us the greatness of God's love for this world--for you and me. On this Memorial Day, let us not only remember those who died on the field of battle but let us also remember God's claim upon our lives and respond in holy gratitude.

To God be the Glory.

Amen.

2. Fred Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, c. 2011, pp. 191-192