

“Bud and Walter”

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 8

*Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18; Jeremiah 28:5-9; Romans 6:12-23;
Matthew 10:40-42*

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From the Pulpit

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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2, 2017, the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 8, dedicated to memory of Walter Henry Kropp and Paul Jacob “Bud” Ebert, Adam Wade on this day of his Eagle Scout Court, to the memory of our 7th pastor, Washington Gladden (1882-1918) who passed to eternal life 99 years ago today and always to the glory of God!

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On Tuesday, we celebrate the 241st Birthday of our nation. Like this faith community and all communities of faith, our nation and all great nations are built on a foundation of faith, love and trust in God (or a Higher Power), faith love and trust in one another, commitment to seek and strengthen the common good and a spirit of striving for higher ground and a better way to live and work together. Along the way of making a great church and a great nation there are exceptional, extraordinary men and women who rise to give themselves completely for God and country. Today, I would like to lift up

two men who were like this: Bud Ebert and Walter Kropp.
Bud and Walter.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

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My father, Herman C. Ahrens, Jr., was a veteran of World War II. Nevertheless, as a child, I remembered very few war stories from the lips of my father because he rarely spoke about his years in the war and his battlefield memories. Although he had been in combat in Europe, the Battle of the Bulge, he was wounded and awarded the Purple Heart, like most men of his generation, he was not prone to talk about the war. Maybe that is one reason we call them the Greatest Generation.

But there was one man dad talked about a lot. His name was “Bud” Ebert – that is - Paul Jacob Ebert. Bud was my father’s hero. 12 years older than my dad, Bud was a young leader of Salem Evangelical and Reformed Church in Marion, Ohio where my grandfather, Rev. H.C. Ahrens served as pastor from 1932-1944.

Bud taught the Torchbearer's Class, led the Dramatic Guild and directed plays. He became the church's youngest Sunday School Superintendent at 24 years old, their youngest Elder at 25, their youngest Church Vice-President at 28 and their youngest Church President (or Moderator) at 30 years old in January 1942. But, 100 days after Pearl Harbor and the outbreak of war, (and only weeks after becoming the lay leader of the congregation) Bud enlisted in the 82nd Airborne Division as a Glider Infantryman and went to war.

It was March 1942. He was shipped overseas in April 1943 and started fighting in Casablanca in North Africa; then on to Sicily where he was in combat in Italy. Ascending to a Staff Sergeant, Bud was shipped to Ireland and on to England where he participated in the invasion force at Normandy, June 1944. He was wounded at Normandy in July, 1944 and was awarded the Purple Heart. After recovering from his wounds, Bud was redeployed to Holland where he killed in action, September 27, 1944. (The story I remember dad telling was that Bud landed in a tree in Holland and was shot to death there by German snipers).

73 years after Paul Jacob Ebert was killed in action, I found a box while cleaning out my parents' home last month. The lid had this note penciled in: "*Marion soldier letters including Bud's last.*" Buried in a box with many letters from soldiers and their

families was a letter from the man I had heard about for more than 55 years, Bud Ebert. He wrote to my grandfather, his pastor, about Pastor Ahrens' leaving the parish to take a new "call" in Chattanooga (also known today as St. Paul's UCC, Rockford) Ohio. Dated August 11, 1944, one month after being wounded in Normandy and 48 days before his death as the 82nd Airborne paratroopers were landing in Holland, Sergeant Paul Ebert wrote:

Dear Rev. Ahrens – Whether this will reach you in Marion or (Rockford), I don't know, but I guess it doesn't make much difference just so you know I am thinking of you. I have wanted to write you for some time yet I hardly know what to say in view of your leaving Salem... (He goes on to talk about the struggles in the church which my grandfather faced. But, I will leave this out) ... In the twelve years you spent with us as our pastor Salem has asserted herself as a spiritual force in the community. You can look with pride and satisfaction on the accomplishments that were only possible with the approval and help of God. The church is now debt free and has produced more Christian leadership among its young people than ever before and that influence has been felt throughout the state.... I can't help but wonder what there will be at Salem to return to.... God bless you in your work, Bud.

My grandfather wrote a monthly newsletter to all the soldiers of Salem Church and others who requested them. Each letter began with the salutation, “Dear Soldier of the Cross.”

One newsletter, addressed to Sgt. Paul Ebert was in the box. It was marked, “return to sender.” Then stamped in red under the return address was one word, “DECEASED.” This returned letter had never been opened. Carefully I opened this sacred, never delivered epistle. The date on the letter was Sept. 28, 1944 – the day after Bud was killed in action (which of course my grandfather would have had no way of knowing in 1944). Like all grandpa’s newsletters, it was beautifully typed – without any errors – and addressed to all the soldiers. Then, at the bottom of the newsletter were penned these words to Bud:

Last night I dreamed that you came into our home and surprised us. I was so happy that in my excitement I nearly shoved Mrs. Ahrens out of bed. We hope you will surprise us some day. Herman is on his way over.... God be with you and keep you. Love, your pastor, H.C. Ahrens

My dad had told me this story about grandpa’s dream. But now I was looking at his own words telling it to Bud. A vision of heaven, An angel on his way from battlefield to glory? A final farewell - this visitation in the night? I don’t know. But,

I do know that my grandpa had other “night” visions of other soldiers later in the war – including my father on the night he was wounded in battle.

I also know that grandpa never opened this letter once it was returned. I do know it remained sealed for 73 years until this week. Other deeply moving letters from Paul’s parents and other parents tell a story that Sgt. Paul Jacob Ebert was memorialized with another Salem soldier, Army Corp. Wayne Eibling, on December 3, 1944. (Wayne and Bud died one week apart and only a few miles apart on the battlefield of war in Holland). On December 3, they held a candlelight service in the sanctuary. It was brief, with a few songs, including “Have your own way, Lord” Bud’s favorite. They kept it short because there were too many services and too many words being said about too many soldiers. It was short and dignified. As Wayne mother, Faye Eibling wrote, “All these boys were not raised to kill. And now some of them are dead. With heaviness of heart I walk the streets of Marion and see the stars of death and think, Why O Lord, why?”

“Why O Lord, Why?”

Thanks be to God for Bud Ebert and for Wayne Eibling.

Walter Henry Kropp was a child of this church. He was a Lieutenant in the United States Army and a Silver Star

awardee. Five months after his death, in January 2012, Walter was inducted into the Ohio Military Hall of Fame for Valor – at the time joining just 218 men and women so recognized in our state’s 215-year history. But people who knew Walter didn’t know about his Army service during World War II. His family members recall him talking about it only once, during a radio interview. They mostly had to piece together his service from history books.

Walter won the Silver Star for actions taken at midnight on March 29, 1945, as 1st Lt. Kropp led an assault on Oberstar, Germany. By the way, a Silver Star is awarded only for a heroic action in battle. It is not given for meritorious service over an extended period of time. On March 29th, *Walter charged into a house, braving enemy fire alone. He killed two Germans and captured three others. Consistently out in front of his company, he led it with such aggressiveness and skill that a force of 300 Germans was routed, the town (was) wrested from the enemy, 35 (were) killed, 50 (were) captured, and (the company) itself suffering but seven casualties.*

What is not recorded is that Walter always led the charge. As a single man, he never put the married men in his unit up front. He once said, “I wasn’t a hero. I was simply protecting my men and their families.” (By the way- that is what a hero sounds like). Miraculously, God saved him from the constant

battle. When he finished the war, Captain Kropp returned home and married Lucille. They settled in Bexley, raised Walter and Karl there and for 60 years had a wonderful life. Walter Kropp is the one person from our 230 WWII men and women on the First Church Wall of Honor that is recognized in The Military Hall of Fame.

Walter rarely spoke about the war to me, although we spent much time together across the 12 years I knew him. The one story he told me was not of war but of peace. In the fierce fighting in the battle of the Bulge and nine days into the worst battle we fought – in which we had 75,000 casualties – there was a ceasefire on Christmas Eve. Walter said, “as soldiers sang ‘Stille Nacht’ from the German side, we responded with singing ‘Silent Night’ from the American lines. It was the most beautiful night of the war.

Walter returned to be our church treasurer for a number of years and served the Trustees and Deacons as well. I found a letter he once sent to the congregation at Stewardship time. He wrote, *“The church needs your money to continue operations. You know what to do. Be generous. Thank you.”* When I asked him about it, he responded in his typical Walter-way, “What more do you need to say? Too many words and people get confused.” I loved Walter Kropp. He was a straight-shooter – in war and in peace. He didn’t mince words. But, he was never

unkind. He was always faithful and sure in his worship, his witness and his life. Thanks be to God for Walter Kropp.

In Matthew 10:40-42, Jesus teaches his disciples words of unity and acceptance -words needed for this time and for all time. Eugene Peterson, in The Message translates it this way:

We are intimately linked in this harvest work. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help. This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing.

Today, across time, we are intimately linked to the harvest of our ancestors work in this faith and in our nation's history. Today, I am so grateful for one person who ties us to the generations. His name is Adam Wade. His work in this sanctuary has tied us intimately together across time. Later today, Adam will be received into the Eagle Scout Court here in the sanctuary of First Church. Part of Adam's project was to "fix" the wall of honor in the southwest corner of our sanctuary. It was established in 1941 by Dr. Boynton Merrill

and the members of First Church to honor the men and women serving our nation in the war. Their names were posted there on a cork board as they headed out to serve in WWII.

Please take time to stop and read the Wall of Honor today. Give thanks for the 230 men and women who served in WWII from this congregation. Then, I ask you to write in the book of honor the names of those who are in your family, this church family, or your circle of friends who have served our nation – perhaps – like Bud Ebert, laying down their lives for this country or perhaps, like Walter Kropp, returning from war to live out their lives in service to God and country.

Pause to pray at the wall. Remember, that through our 241 years as a nation, we have always been led by God who will not let us go and by extraordinary men and women who lay down their lives for their friends – just as Jesus taught them to do. Thanks be to God for Walter and Bud **and Adam**. Thanks be to God for every man and woman from this church and from our nation who has served God and served our nation in their time and their generation. We are intimately linked to them through this “harvest work.” Amen.

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