

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 29, 2011, Easter 6, dedicated to the memory of Sgt. Benjamin C. Edinger, to Rose and Randy, and to all those who have lost their loved ones in our nation's longest war, to Elin Catharina Chambers on her baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Put Flowers on Their Graves”

I Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

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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 salvation. Amen.

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The Holy Land is filled with stories and graves of “beloved ones” who died for their love of God and country. Across the Middle East there are tombs, shrines, markers, plaques and art work dedicated to Biblical and national heroes who fought and died on holy ground. Their stories and memories are cherished in the land of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohamed. Some tombs and shrines are thousands of years old. All too many are fresh and recently filled.

I came to know one of these “beloved ones” this past August. He is a man who lived, loved and served his country in the Holy Land, more specifically in Iraq. I met him through the memorable stories, smiles, laughter and tears of his mother and stepfather, Rose and Randy.

His name is Ben Edinger. Ben was known to many as Sgt. Benjamin C. Edinger, United States Marine Corp. He

was on his second tour of Iraq, assigned to 2nd Force Reconnaissance Company, II Marine Expeditionary Force out of Camp Lejeune, N.C. He died Nov. 23, 2004, at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Md., of injuries sustained November 14 from an enemy attack in Babil Province, Iraq. Randy and Rose had come from Green Bay, Wis., to be at his side. He was recovering from the injuries when he took a turn toward death. Randy was holding Ben's hand when he passed from this life. Ben was 24 years old when he died.

As Randy and Rose told me of Ben's life and death, I felt as though I knew him. From childhood through his time in the Marines, they shared stories of Ben's life. I was inspired by Ben's amazing courage and quite strength. As I read comments on the "Fallen Heroes Memorial" Web site and one friend after another spoke of their love and admiration for Ben, all my feelings were confirmed.

The Force Recon Association writes on its Web site:

On November, 14, during a mission to extract from an Observation Post (OP), Sergeant Edinger's team was again engaged by an IED ambush. Although mortally wounded, Sergeant Edinger continued to man his gun, fighting for air, until he was relieved of it in order to receive medical attention. Sergeant Edinger was an inspiration to those around him with his physical courage, buoyant fighting spirit, and "never quit" attitude. He is sorely missed by his platoon, and the Reconnaissance Brotherhood.

(www.forcerecon.com/Sgt-Benjamin-C-Edinger.htm).

Baghdad is about 500 miles from Jerusalem, about the distance of Columbus from Washington D.C. While conflict is always simmering in Jerusalem, a war has been raging in Iraq for almost nine years and almost 10 years in Afghanistan. 4,430 American soldiers have died in Iraq, 185 from Ohio. We have had 31,695 wounded in the battle, or 36,395 casualties of war. Couple with 1,413 dead in Afghanistan and 9,971 wounded, the total of dead is 5,796 and the total casualties of

war number 47,017. This does not include the walking wounded who struggle emotionally or mentally in the aftermath of war.

In addition to our casualties of war, estimates of Iraqi deaths (insurgents and civilians) range from 150,000 to 1.2 million and over 35,000 in Afghanistan. We have no clear records of the losses faced by Iraqis and Afghans.

The numbers of American, Afghani and Iraqi graves are growing and they are as fresh as the memories that Rose and Randy hold on their son Ben.

Benjamin C. Edinger is one man who lost his life in the war of those heroes. Written on the wall above Ben's bed, to which he never returned the night of November 14, was one question: ***"What's your level of commitment?"*** That is a question each of us must answer every day in the work we do and in the lives that we live? Moreover, what is our level of commitment to the faith we proclaim and follow?

I am struck by the words of Jesus today coupled with the question from Benjamin Edinger. In John 13:34, Jesus COMMANDS his disciples to "love one another." Again in John 14:15, he speaks of the command to love. In both cases, the word Jesus uses is ***"agapao,"*** which means to "love" in a moral or social and ethical sense. He is not telling his disciples to feel emotional love, but a love based on compassion, which leads people to "do the right thing." Jesus orders us to love. While we often speak about the Ten Commandments, God, in Jesus Christ, gives us only ONE Commandment – "LOVE ONE ANOTHER."

Something is painfully wrong and twisted in our nation which so often claims to be Christian, yet continues to see a rise in gun violence and murder; a rise in executions of those who have murdered others; and a spreading of our weaponry and violence across the globe.

More stunning than the Holy Land's graves and shrines are the vast and growing number of fresh graves we are seeing in Columbus and across Ohio that hold the bodies of young men and women killed in gun violence on the streets of our city and our state. I encourage each of us to read the three part series opening in the *Columbus Dispatch* today on gun violence. When the number of guns in circulation keep growing, it is inevitable that the number of violent crimes caused by guns will grow, too.

Did you know, that is in all the American wars and conflicts we have fought in over the past 246 years, we have lost 2.4 million soldiers to death? However, since April 4, 1968, the day the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered by a single bullet (just 43 years), more than a million Americans have died from gun violence, whether by murders, suicides or accidents. Statistically, it is more dangerous to be home living in America than to be away defending our freedom to bear arms.

The United States has by far the highest gun homicide rate in the industrialized world. In a study of 23 advanced nations, the American rate was nearly 20 times higher than next highest on the list. Some 100,000 shootings take place in the U.S. every year, 30,000 of them fatal. In Canada, with about one-tenth the U.S. population, 190 people were killed by guns in 2006. In 2010, there were at least 15 shootings at American schools from elementary to college level. Such incidents rarely make much news any longer unless the death and injury toll is huge, as with Columbine and Virginia Tech.

Gun violence is spreading in epidemic proportions. How do we even grasp the magnitude of this epidemic? Perhaps through one story.

In her National Public Radio "This I Believe" essay, 22-year-old, Elvia Bautista calls us to "remember all the boys." Her brother, Rogelio Bautista, was killed in the war between gangs being waged on the streets of Los Angeles. Elvia puts

flowers on Rogelio's grave. Buried near him are the graves of his "enemies." Elvia puts flowers on their graves, too.

She says: "Some people say it's a bad idea. Others think I am a hero. I think they're both being silly. I don't go to try to disrespect some special rules or stop any kind of war. I go because I believe no matter where you came from or what you believed in, when you die, you want flowers on your grave and people who visit you and remember you that way. When we remember, we put flowers on their graves."

On this Memorial Day weekend, the words of Sergeant Benjamin C. Edinger and Jesus Christ should come together for us as followers of the way of love and justice. **What is our level of commitment to love another?**

Perhaps we should begin by stopping by the fresh graves of the young who are dying and place flowers on their graves. Perhaps in the tears shed at their gravesides, we will find answers to our prayers for peace - and find resolve in our commitment to love another. I will stop by a grave and put flowers there. I will lift a prayer for that person and for Ben Edinger. Amen.

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