

“The Wall and the Book”

Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:112-17; John 3:1-17

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 26, 2024, Trinity Sunday, dedicated to Adam Wade for the Wall and the Book, to my oldest son Luke Timothy Sitler Ahrens on his 37th birthday today, to my newest granddaughter Aurelia Ivy Stadie born to Sarah and Nathan Stadie and sister Hazel, to my friend, Cantor Jack Chomsky and his faithful service to the Conservative movement of Judaism throughout his lifetime in the USA and now in Israel, and to all the women and men who served and sacrificed their lives in service to our nation in the United States Military and among all our allied nations and always to the glory of God!

Protestant Reformer, and the Original Lutheran, Martin Luther once warned, “*To deny the Trinity is to risk our salvation; to try and explain the Trinity is to risk our sanity.*” I have good news and bad news. My final Trinity Sunday, I will neither or explain the Trinity. By doing this, I risk neither my salvation nor my sanity. I refer you back to 24 years of preaching in which I talked about the Trinity, Salvation and Sanity. I have had lots to say about each.

Today, my final Memorial Sunday with you, I want to lift up one of the most unique and beautiful parts of our sanctuary. It is the Wall of Honor and the Book to Honor Service found in the southwest corner of our sanctuary – next to the US flag and above the kneeler. The wall was put together with glue and cork board beginning in December 1941 – as our soldiers went to war.

It named the 238 men and women who served in WWII from this congregation. Think about that number. That was 20% of the congregation at that time. One out of every five members of First Church served in the United States Military during WWII. Thanks be to God!

In 2015, as part of his Eagle Scout Project, Adam Wade beautified the wall – alphabetizing and redoing the entire wall and adding a book for anyone to sign – celebrating or remembering those who are serving or have served our Nation’s service branches. Over the past nine years 257 names have been written in the book – including 28 members. Today, I invite everyone to add your name, as you served or the names of others in your family who served. Adam Wade is here today. Adam please stand so we can thank you. Now, “The Wall and the Book.”

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

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On the second Sunday of Advent in 1941, a 17 year-old Ohio teen was thinking about one thing in church that day. He was thinking about a pretty young teenager in his congregation. He wasn’t giving much consideration to the baby Jesus due on Christmas Day in just a few weeks. He would write about it in his journal that night noting that “she didn’t even look at me in church” that day. He also mentioned (in passing) that “something bad happened today” and President Roosevelt had just spoken about it on the radio to the whole nation. Lots of focus on the young woman, not so much on the president who had served our nation since he was six years old and his

talk to the nation. The date was Sunday, December 7, 1941 – a date – which the president declared that night “would live in infamy.” The date of Pearl Harbor. The young high school senior was my father Herman Ahrens, Jr. and his home was Marion, Ohio.

Three years and nine days later, December 16, 1944, a 20-year-old Herman Ahrens, along with 500,000 American troops and a total of 1,000,000 allied troops were all fighting for their lives as Hitler’s Nazi forces mounted a massive offensive in the Ardennes Forest. My father was on the front lines of that assault. This Bloodiest Battle in which the Americans fought in WWII became known as The Battle of the Bulge – because of the penetrating bulge that the Nazis blew through the defenses of our forces. More than 19,000 soldiers perished in this battle and another 75,000 casualties in this battle that lasted six weeks. We had 23,000 prisoners of war taken and 749 US POWS were massacred by the Nazis in the Ardennes Forest. One of the lucky ones who was not massacred by the Nazis in the forest and was held by the Nazis as a Prisoner of War beginning in December 1944 was our beloved Twink Starr.

My father’s name is in “The Book” by the wall of honor right next to another beloved man, and a hero of the war, First Lieutenant, in the US Army, Rupert “Twink” Starr, was also in the Battle of the Bulge – captured as a Prisoner of War. They were only a few miles apart in the Ardennes Forest, but their names will forever be connected in the Honor in Service Book.

There are 257 men and women whose names appear in The Book – which has been and still does receive your names of service members who have served through the years. Every Single service branch is mentioned and honored by their names. 28 are or have been members of First Church. There are many who received the Purple Heart (including my father) for wounds received during their service. We have Bronze Star and Silver Star recipients as well. We have five identified Gold Star service members, meaning they died while serving in the Armed Services. They are John Sitler, Aaron Floyd Jones, Louis James Bamberger, Douglas A Bricker and Douglas Zembiec. The Book

is filled with names of loved ones – some living and most now deceased and now of blessed memory – all patriots.

Sadly, we have now buried everyone listed on the Wall. No one is left. When I arrived twenty-five years ago, at least fifty or more (who I knew) were still alive as listed on the Wall. They are all gone. Just their memories remain.

On Friday, following my First Reflection, I heard from Jim Woodard about one of the 238 on the wall – his uncle – William F. Woodard. Jim shared this:

“After reading your article in Reflections, I must stop and think of my late uncle, William F. Woodard. Uncle Bill served in WWII in the European theatre. His chief responsibility was to be the assigned Jeep driver for General George F. Patton. He drove Patton’s Jeep for most of his time while in Europe, and particularly in Germany. Uncle Bill (as I always called him) had many interesting stories to tell about Patton. He always said Patton was a great General.

In my view, even though Uncle Bill only drove Patton’s Jeep, he was still part of those who helped win the war, and hopefully preserve our Republic for many years to come. I honor his service to our Country.”

Thank you Jim. Uncle Bill definitely served our country well. If we had lost Patton, we might have lost the war! Uncle Jim was instrumental in preserving our Republic.

Thanks be to God for Bill Woodard and all the patriots on the Wall and for Herman Ahrens and Twink Starr and all the women and men in the Book!

In his book *The Things They Carried* (1990), American short story writer and novelist Tim O’Brien tells stories about his platoon of American soldiers fighting on the ground in the Vietnam War. His third book about the war, it is based upon his experiences as a soldier in the 23rd Infantry Division. O’Brien generally refrains from political debate and discourse regarding the Vietnam War. But he shares the pain of being dismayed that people in his hometown seemed to have so little understanding of the war and its world. That is the foundation of his writing, *The Things They Carried*.

In 1990 he wrote: *“Forty-three years old, and the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.”*

Tim O’Brien is right. Remembering them means everything. Each week when we celebrate communion at 9am and each first Sunday at 11, we say the Eucharist prayers in which Jesus says time and time again, “Remember me, Remember me, Remember me.” It was carved into our table. It should be carved into memories and into our hearts. We can and we must remember them and their stories. Their stories are so much more than the honors pinned on their chests and handed them for actions they took in the conflict of war. Their stories are our forever touchstones to our collective future.

The stories of my father in war didn’t touch my soul deeply until I was a grown man and asked him about his experiences. When he returned from WWII, he packed away his uniform, went to college on the GI bill, met and married my mom and became a husband, a dad, an editor and then a grandfather. My father was a Pacifist who was gently shamed into conscription by his third generation German immigrant father. My dad did not want to carry or fire a rifle. So, he did everything in his power not to do so. That is a story in itself. But, the ultimate sign of his commitment was that he was willing to lay down his life for his soldier friends. He was nonviolence in war was when he volunteered to be a Runner. Runners carried no weapons. Running their missions two-by-two, the Runners carried top secret messages that couldn’t be sent by radio or Morse Code. He would run – often crossing enemy lines – to get a message to units in danger. He was wounded by the blast of German Panzer tank on one such mission and pulled to safety and hidden by French farmers.

One day, my second oldest child, Dani, was interviewing his grandpa and was talking about the Runners. Standing apart from the conversation drinking my morning coffee, having heard these stories in the past, and never having asked, I piped in, “Dad, how many runners were there in your unit?” He looked up and answered, “there were six.” I followed up, “how many of them survived your mission during the war?” And he raised his index finger and smiled ever so slightly and said shyly and almost regretfully said, “one.”

He was the solitary survivor. Through the years, he had shared their stories – one by one, story by story, and I really hadn’t paid attention. We had visited the grave of his best friend in the unit, “Braunie” – a first generation German immigrant and in fact ran into trouble because he spoke with a German accent, so it was sometimes hard to understand his English – for he got shot at a lot by his own troops as he approached their lines. Braunie was buried in Toledo, Ohio. All of them had died beside him. He was the only keeper of their stories. That is why he had told so many “War Stories.” They weren’t stories of big things. They were stories of a few men. These stories were not about human conquest and violence, they were all about the men who carried no weapons – but instead carried vital messages on foot through the fields and villages in Belgium, France, Holland and Germany. Whatever their stories are, we must hear them and tell them.

I am reminded of something else Tim O’Brien wrote – something simple and profound. O’Brien remembers his very first encounter with a dead body, that of his childhood sweetheart Linda. Suffering from a brain tumor, Linda died at the age of nine and O’Brien was deeply affected by her funeral. In Vietnam, O’Brien explains, the soldiers would tell the stories to one another of those they had loved and lost back home – as though to tell that story would keep death away from them. In this way, he kept Linda alive by telling her story.

Do you see? It is not just the stories of soldiers we must tell. It the stories of lost friends and classmates which shape our lives and our future. For me that includes Sammy Bloom and Sal Lanciano – two friends I lost at an early age.

Upon reading O'Brien's story of Linda on Friday morning, Ruth Decker and told me she had a story to tell. It was the story of her childhood classmate named Freddy. Ruth wrote:

Your First Reflections this morning moves me to tell about one whose memory I carry. I may be the only one by now who remembers Freddie Stillerman. Freddie was a skinny Jewish boy in my first and second grade classes. One day he was not in class; this went on for several weeks. My mother said that Freddie was sick. Finally our teacher told us that Freddie would be coming back to school but that he would "look different."

Indeed he looked different; he looked fat. Our teacher had warned us, and everyone was kind and did not ridicule him. Finally my mother told me that Freddie had leukemia and that he would not live very long. The treatment had made him look fat.

I pondered this for several days and began to worry that Freddie would not go to heaven because he didn't believe in Jesus. My (limited) Lutheran knowledge was "believe in Jesus and you go to heaven" and for the others, too bad. I finally mentioned my concern to my mother. She was washing dishes, and I was on the kitchen floor playing on the blackboard hung on the side of the counter. She paused, and then without turning around, she simply said "I think God understands." (I think it could be said the other way, too. From the Jewish perspective, I think "God understands" when Christians die and are accepted into the Heavenly realm. We are all united there with Him).

Ruth finished with this: *"These are words I've carried for 80 years; I think of Freddie often; his memory is alive with me, but I need to pass it on."*

Thank you my friend. I would add – I think God more than understands. God received Freddie into his loving arms long ago and has held him eternally. Now we will hold him too – in all our hearts – thanks to you and right along with you. Together, all of us will keep his memory alive.

For the 238 souls whose names are memorialized on the Wall of Honor, for the 257 whose names are memorialized in the book of honor, and **for names you will add today** – we give thanks to God. We give thanks to God for all the brave men and women fighting for freedom today around the globe. We give thanks to God for the tens of thousands of lives of the innocents lost in war – caught in the crossfire between combatants. We give thanks to God for the survivors of war who live to tell the stories of others. We give thanks to God for the freedom gained when soldiers and others through the ages have laid down their lives to gain freedom and to preserve and to protect us. We give thanks to God for all who remember through our lifetime who have inspired us and guided us to be better people – by the examples of their lives – like Freddie.

So, today, let us remember. Let us always Remember. Amen.