



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Integrity

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

June 9, 2024

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Like many of you, I have watched this week's moving remembrance and ceremonies surrounding the 80th anniversary of D-Day, the landing of Allied troops on the shores of Normandy beginning the liberation of Europe in World War II. Leading up to D-Day, there was a lot of speculation about which general would lead the invasion of France. Most people thought it would not be Dwight Eisenhower, but would instead be George Marshall. After all, Marshall was the highest-ranking officer in the United States Army as Chief of Staff. He had organized and built the American military into the successful power that it was during World War II. Marshall was the most trusted military advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt. He was universally respected for his integrity. And it was a job that Marshall himself wanted and felt that he had earned.

For a while, President Roosevelt leaned toward Marshall. In fact, he told Eisenhower, "I hate to think that fifty years from now practically nobody will know who George Marshall was. That is one of the reasons I want him to have this big command – he is entitled to establish his place in history as a great general." But, as time got closer to the invasion, Roosevelt had doubts. He told one of his advisors, "It is dangerous to mess around with a winning team." Finally, the President called Marshall into his office. He asked Marshall if he wanted the job. If Marshall had simply uttered the word, "Yes", he would have gotten the European command. Instead, he told the President to do what *he* thought was best. After a few moments Roosevelt said, "Well, I don't think I could sleep at ease if you were out of Washington. Then it will be Eisenhower."

So, Dwight Eisenhower was in the highly visible role of leading the D-Day invasion, became an American hero, and later was elected President of the United States. But historians and military scholars credit George Marshall with being the real organizer of the Allied victory. Though his public role was invisible.

In our Scripture lesson from Second Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes that what can be *seen* is temporary, but what *cannot be seen* is eternal. Jesus renews us from the inside out, radiating guidance from the unseen eternal within to transform how we see and act outwardly in the midst of the temporary conditions of life.

The apostle Paul often uses the metaphors of tents and buildings to describe the Christian life. This is not surprising since his day job was working as a tentmaker. He would have known how important it was for any structure he built to have integrity. We use the word 'integrity' to describe someone of good character, like George Marshall. But this term originated in the construction industry. For a building to have integrity means that its supporting columns and beams must be without gaps and must be solid. They must be well connected to the foundation and roof in such a manner that they all work as one integrated structure. The walls must be firmly attached to the beams in a way that the outer and the inner, the seen and the unseen, become unified into one. A building must have integrity to withstand wind, storms, and any other tests, whether external or internal.

Paul sees the mission of Jesus as renewing the unseen foundation of humankind. Christ's mission teaches us that the pathway to the eternal is not through temporary outward fame or success, but through an inner core of gratitude, humility and service. His mission is to draw us into the ultimate peace that comes from serving a being and a community greater than ourselves.

George Marshall learned these lessons. He set aside his personal ambition and placed his life on the altar for serving the greater good – in whatever ways he could best serve. After the war, he was asked by President Harry Truman to serve as Secretary of State. He put the same gift he had for organizing the liberation of Europe into organizing the reconstruction of that ravaged continent. His plan for this effort became known as the Marshall Plan. He never called it that. He always called it the European Recovery Plan. In whatever task he undertook, he always saw the mission as being much larger than him.

Our passage from Second Corinthians is one of the recommended scriptures for funerals. It includes this phrase: "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." We can mistakenly see this as a dichotomy, a split, between body and soul. Instead, it may be a deeper dichotomy that is a fight for our very essence. Who we are. Is our being oriented toward the temporary or the eternal?

Ten years ago, David Brooks wrote a book entitled *The Road to Character*. In it, he studies a few persons, including George Marshall, seeking to find out what it was at their inner core that made their lives transformative. The whole premise of his book is that there is a difference between what he calls “resume virtues” and “eulogy virtues”. Resume virtues are the things that point to outer success. They are often listed in our obituaries. The eulogy virtues go deeper. They are the virtues that get talked about during or long after our funerals – what sort of relationships we have formed and whether we are kind, brave, honest, or faithful.

George Marshall wrote out these instructions for his funeral: “Bury me simply, like any ordinary officer of the United States Army who has served his country honorably. No fuss. No elaborate ceremonials. Keep the service short, confine the guest-list to the family. And, above everything else, do it quietly.”

There was a short, plain service at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia. It used the standard order for the Burial of the Dead from our Book of Common Prayer. There was no eulogy.

For Marshall’s devotion to a mission larger than himself, his humble inner core that radiated outward
to liberate,
to rebuild,
and to renew –
that was his eulogy.
That *is* integrity.
Amen.