

Honor Through Remembrance

1 Corinthians 16:13-18

Preached by Rev. Phyllis A. Norman May 25, 2008

Prospect Congregational Church, UCC

Decoration Day was a time set aside to honor the nation's war dead by decorating their graves. May 30, 1868 our nation commemorated those who died in the Civil War. General James Garfield gave a speech at Arlington National Cemetery, and the graves of 20,000 Confederate and Union soldiers were decorated. This celebration inspired more in the coming years. The Federal Government under President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966 declared Waterloo, NY the official birth place for what we now call Memorial Day because Waterloo first celebrated on May 5, 1866. After WWI many communities began to include all wars in which we participated and through which our men and women gave their lives.

Change scenes: it was a clear, cool Saturday morning November 29, 1941. Just a little past 9:00 fire broke out in the upper wooden sections of the fieldstone building known as the Prospect Congregational Church. All that remained of that church built in 1908 was the smoke-blackened stone edifice and tower. The once beautiful stained glass windows and the remainder of the structure, were gone.

The town of Prospect did not have a fire department in 1941—those who responded to the fire were from the neighboring towns of Cheshire, Naugatuck, and Waterbury, but they soon ran out of water. I watched the video of the fire last week for the gazillionth time—I watched as the frustrated firefighters, town residents, and church members stood on the green across the street as flames consumed the building. Barney Kathan wrote in [A Church Set Upon A Hill](#) that the Sunday Republican reported the only item saved was the Pulpit Bible.

Until the rubble was cleared away and a new foundation could be dug, the congregation worshipped in the Community School. One of the valuable lessons I have learned in life is no matter the tragedy, something good usually comes out of it. Tragically this congregation lost the church it had worshipped in for 34 years; for the town of Prospect the good that came out of the fire was a firehouse was built. We will not forget the story—it is a vital part of our history. We will not forget the firefighters who responded, nor will we forget the efforts of many to make sure this town would be protected in the future.

Today we speak of heroes and we pay tribute to them. A hero is so-called because of one, specific defining moment when he/she rises above and beyond the “call to duty.” Tomorrow we will gather on the green and remember the heroes of the Civil War, the Spanish American War, WWI and WWII, the Korean Conflict, Viet Nam Conflict, Desert Storm, and the War on Terror, which includes Afghanistan and Iraq. The men and women who served and who died are our greatest heroes, because out of sacrifice comes freedom.

Today we invited you the members of the Prospect Fire Department and the Auxiliary to be a part of this worship service so we can honor you, and pay tribute to you, our heroes. You are especially important to us because this is a volunteer fire department—you respond anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, whether it is snow, sleet, freezing rain or the hottest day/night of the summer. You respond to accidents, fire and extreme illness. Barely a month ago we needed you when one of our youth suddenly became ill—within minutes several of you dropped what you were doing and immediately responded to the call. Early last Sunday morning—3:30 AM to be precise—there was an accident at the intersection of Rts 68 & 69. You roused yourselves from sleep, quickly dressed and responded (sorry Chief, but Carl and I were there first!).

The “Best Little Town in Connecticut” is made safe because of your selfless, heroic acts. Now some would say a real hero is one who fights the injustices of the world; they stand alone and speak the truth, fighting the oppression of a foreign power. Heroes are about justice and power and destruction of enemies.

Truth be told, and in my way of thinking, there are lots of people waiting in the wings to be the hero of the day, to show off our TV and movie images of ripped biceps and washboard abs while standing next to an AK 47 just waiting to make it happen. However, I see another aspect of heroism that is often overlooked and sometimes even taken for granted, and that is the hero who has the courage to know who you are and whose you are, and a willingness to do what needs to be done no matter the circumstances.

Members of the Prospect Fire Department and Auxiliary, you have character and virtue, and that is what it takes to do the things you do. Character is what creates the unique fingerprints of our souls. This is not something we are born with—fingerprints of the soul come from endurance and hope, perseverance and stubbornness—I say stubbornness because what you do has to have an element of good old Yankee stick-to-itiveness which is that substance, character is derived from.

God’s love has been poured into your hearts to commit to do the work you do—you have made your love available to this town which allows the rest of us to see your deep faith and the strong fingerprints of your souls.

We honor the fallen volunteers, and we honor you today by remembering what you do and why you do it, and we say thank you.