Sermon November 5, 2023 Tricia Gerhard

It was a simple trip to France – a magical getaway to see art galleries, the Eiffel Tower, Mont-St-Michael. But another piece was always in the background: see some cemeteries.

I had three great Uncles who had been killed in World War I – The “Great War” they called it back them. All I knew of them was a carefully preserved leather file my great grandmother had kept. With what I can only imagine was great pain, she put photographs of her three boys playing, and of them in their uniforms, neatly on pages.

Yet there was more, copies of official letters that read: “The King commands me…” signed with a rubber stamp, these notes from the Home Secretary offered cheap thanks. How do you do that for a life, a mere three lines of type on a standard piece of card? And there were photographs of the graves, sent by the Canadian Government. Graves that would probably never be seen by anyone in the family, never noticed by anyone who passed by.

I was determined to find them, to photograph them, to spend time in prayers that said: “I Have come to pay tribute.”

Did you know that there are over 3,000 cemeteries from WW1 scattered throughout France and Belgium? Three thousand places where men fought, died and were buried. Three thousand.

Three thousand.

The first grave was in a small, obscure village, the war cemetery that held graves for hundreds of years, graves of farmers, of mothers, and fathers and children. I wondered what it had been like for this village? The soldiers were buried where they fell – thus Mezieres-Santerre held the graves of about a hundred foreigners who died fighting to defend them. They said thank you by caring gently for a cemetery filled with names they didn’t know. How long would they remember what it all meant?

The second was a collection of some 1,200 graves pressed hard together in a potato field. People were harvesting when we went, oblivious to this massive memorial in their midst. With its brick fence and grass and numerous stones, it seem to interrupt life for a moment. But only a moment –the surrounding land demanded more attention the cemetery could be forgotten for now.

The last was in Belgium, but only barely – the French border was about 100 metres away. Here by the roadside lay some 400 Canadians and New Zealanders. And three Germans.

Someone, in burying the dead, undoubtedly found these bodies, and thought, “These are not the enemy. They are someone’s sons, brothers, maybe husbands or even fathers. They must not be forgotten either.” And so there they lay; friends in death. They were just doing what they were supposed to do, after all.

That’s the senselessness of it all, isn’t it? Doing what they are supposed to do. Except we aren’t supposed to do that. We’re not supposed to kill. We’re not supposed to hate. We’re just supposed to love one another, the same as we love ourselves.

In any language, and in any culture, that’s the simple lesson we all hear; if only we could grasp it.

Holy One, as we remember the violence of the past, we turn our attention to the present. As we witness the violence raging in Ukraine, in Palestine, in Israel, and in places all over this beautiful creation our hearts break. You call us to love one another, and yet the pull of power and greed still rages. May we, on this Remembrance Day and in the days that come, hold the words of peace and love of Jesus in our minds and our hearts so that they might pour from us into the world, redirecting hate and intolerance to a deep desire to seeing all of creation thrive in life. May peace, true and compassionate peace, find its way into the world, so that future Remembrance days can be a time of remembering instead of yearning.

Amen