

Church & Nation – Our Story

Acts 2:41-47 – May 24, 2026

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Welcome to Memorial Day Weekend 2026 which also happens to coincide with the Christian observance of Pentecost when the tongues of flame found their way into the upper room to dance over the heads of the disciples gathered there. It is a rare coincidence that these two such very different holidays overlap as they do this year. But perhaps, this overlap is another “God wink,” one of those times when God knows just what we need and just when we need it. What do I mean by that? Let me explain.

First, just what is Memorial Day? Well, put succinctly, Memorial Day is a federal holiday observed on the last Monday in May. Originally called “Decoration Day,” it originated in 1868 to honor all those soldiers on both sides who had died in the Civil War. After World War I the name was changed to Memorial Day with the intention being that all those who died in battle while serving in the Armed Forces of the United States would be honored. It became a federal holiday in 1971. Memorial Day observances include visiting cemeteries where flags and other items are placed on the graves of veterans, as well as parades and special ceremonies.¹ Memorial Day also marks the unofficial start to summer, although that’s going to be tough this year with the weather forecast being what it is.

Now, what about Pentecost? According to tradition, Pentecost is the birthday of the church because it marks the event when the disciples (now the apostles, after Jesus’ death) receive the Holy Spirit thus empowering them to carry on Jesus’ work on earth. There are actually several stories describing this moment when they receive the Holy Spirit. In one Jesus simply “breathes” on them, but the one in

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Memorial-Day>

the first chapter of Acts is the best known due to its vivid description of blowing winds and dancing flames. Plus, all the people who witnessed it were suddenly able to understand what Peter and the Apostles were preaching and teaching, each in their own language. In other words, God's power was evident and available to everyone who was present in that moment. Our Scripture text for this morning, Acts 2:41-47 then goes on to describe just how these early gatherings of the followers of Jesus – the first churches – organized themselves and spent their time.

So, how is it that we might understand this odd overlap between this national holiday to commemorate and honor our military war dead and this church celebration of the Holy Spirit coming into the midst of Jesus' followers? Well, some would undoubtedly remind us that the abolitionist movement which preceded the Civil War, originated in the churches of the North. Those same churches, along with churches in the South I'm sure, also organized women's groups to make bandages to send to the battlefield hospitals. Towns on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line that became battlefields turned to their churches to provide for the wounded and dead from battlefields and bombed out town buildings as well. In other words, where there was need, the churches, north and south, did what they could to fill the gaps in society the war was creating. Just like those early gatherings described in Acts 2: "they would sell their goods and possessions and distribute the proceeds to all as they had need."

This is just what churches do, what they have always done. We answer Jesus' call to care for the least of these in our midst. The church also reminds us through preaching and teaching and mission outreach efforts that those who are "the least of these" do not choose that place in society for themselves. The slaves freed in the Civil War did not ask to be enslaved and fought for their freedom beginning on the shores of Africa before they even got here. How sad and unbelievable that their descendants are fighting for their basic human

rights still. Let's not forget that the battlefield soldiers of every war – the men and women actually on the front lines of battles as they rage – seldom ask to be placed in harm's way but they heed the call when their bravery and courage is needed. As a result, too many have made the ultimate sacrifice. And where are the churches in those moments when war is raging? Praying for their parishioners, friends and family members who are in the midst of it. Caring for those who fought the battle when they return home, often wounded in visible and invisible ways. The churches are present in the now of war through the chaplains present on those same battlefields praying with all who are homesick, all who are frightened and ashamed of their fear, all who are looking for God in a situation where God's presence feels absent. The churches are there, along with synagogues and mosques, Buddhist meditation centers and every religion on the face of this earth – praying that the battle fought is not too bad, that the wounded survive; praying for families left behind; praying that no innocent lives are lost even though they always are; and always, *always* praying for wise leadership with the courage to wage peace instead of war.

Church and nation. Faith and war. God and those who thirst after power at any cost. These are the forces confronting each other head on this weekend. They are confronting each other because they must. War is inevitable, too many believe, especially when riches and power are at stake. The church believes and teaches that peace is what should be inevitable, and seldom is. Yet, the church can never turn its back on the people, who are always God's beloved. Therein lies the challenge for the church. And to find the answers for that challenge we return to the basics of what the church has always been:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their goods and possessions and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day they spent much time together ... They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts praising God and having the good will of all the people.”

In other words, these followers of Jesus showed how much they loved God by loving others without counting the cost, without worrying whether or not someone “deserved” the help. They lived Jesus’ message to love the other as much as they love themselves and, in that moment, the church was born. Now, two millennia later, here we are at the United Congregational Church of Westerly, United Church of Christ remembering loved ones – family, friends, neighbors – lost in war at the same time we celebrate that we are here in our church, making a difference in the ways we are able.

Now for just a few moments, I would like to invite any of you who would like, to share a story about a time when you witnessed the church being the church in a moment of need or loss.

[Military funeral at Newman for first Gulf War veteran – Marine Captain Benjamin W. Sammis, 29. Operation Iraqi Freedom. Died April 4, 2003]

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Thank you for your stories. Surely our beloved nation is in the midst of very difficult days when leadership is not what we would hope it would be. A war started by that leadership rages and we all are paying the price as inflation rises and ugly truths about that same leadership are ignored or hidden from sight. Clearly, dear ones, we are in need of the Holy Spirit ourselves, guiding us forward through these dark times into the light with God’s hope illuminating our way forward. I can think of no better closing words than these, the somber, beautiful words of verse 2 of our National Hymn: *Your love divine has led us in the past, in this free land by you our lot is cast; be now our ruler, guardian, guide and stay, your Word our law, your paths our chosen way.*” Amen.