



Memorial Day: They did the right thing – pastor Jerry

His name was Lewis Klingensmith, but I knew him as “Lew.” He died November 7, 2003 – 58 years after he should’ve died charging a machine gun nest during the Battle of the Bulge in 1945. He won a purple heart but lost his sight and part of his skull.

I met Lew at Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Seminole, Florida. We grew close in a weekly men’s Bible study. There was just four of us – Lew, “Dom” Stala – a retired Air Force sergeant, Terry Biglow – a retired Evangelical United Brethren pastor, and me – a young engineer at AT&T Paradyne – former Air Force and soon to be United Methodist pastor.

Since Lew was blind his wife, Vi, drove him to the study and waited in the car as we poured over the Bible and they poured their life stories into me. It’s a sacred trust. They’re all gone now and I’m left to remember. Usually, that happens around Memorial Day.

Each fought for freedom – in World War II, in the Korean, Vietnam, and Cold Wars, and in the on-going war for the souls of men and women. There are moments that seem so ordinary at the time, but later we realize just how extraordinary they were.

One night at that study Dom said, “Guys, I’m dying. What do you suppose happens?” Our conversation grew quiet and measured – Lew who’d looked death straight in the eye and lost his sight; Terry whose close encounter with death as a motorcycle cop in Ohio led him to a life of ministry; and me – wanting to be all grown up as a 30-year-old kid in a man’s sandbox.

Lew shared how he’d lost his sight in a fire fight that had him and his buddies pinned down. He charged the machine gun – not, he said, because he was a hero but because his friends were going to die. Although important to him, he said he didn’t do it for his country or his family back home. He did it for the guys who had become his family over there – “It needed done.”

It needed done. I think of 2 Corinthians 5:7-8, *“We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”* For me that crunches down to this: death is leaving this life for eternal life with Christ but right now we LIVE by faith not by sight, or opinion. A blind man, dying man, and a pastor taught me that.

Before I left for seminary, I did Dom’s funeral and felt his absence more intensely than the Presence of Christ. I’ve done many services at Bushnell National cemetery and always swing by Dom’s grave. I remember, laugh, cry, and before I leave I stand at attention and salute. One of my memories is always of that night, those men, and a conversation that changed my life.

It is Memorial Day weekend. The names and faces of men and women who’ve died in defense of this nation fade from memory but they’ve left a legacy called freedom. I try not to grow impatient with the impatience now surrounding COVID-19. We are one nation under God. Instead of wrangling let’s do the right thing – the thing that needs to be done.