

## 5.26.2024 Trinity Sunday (John 3:1-15)

At 1:30 a.m. on June 17th, 2017, sailors on the USS Fitzgerald were jolted awake, some were even thrown to floor, when the Navy destroyer collided with a cargo ship off the coast of Japan. According to the Navy's account, the collision ripped a gaping hole into their living quarters, which were two levels below deck, and the sailors were immediately engulfed in a rush of cold seawater. The report tells the story about torrents of water rushing in picking up mattresses, tables, and chairs. Anything that wasn't bolted down was chaotically swirling around the room in the dark of night. Less than one minute after the collision, the water was waist deep, and just seconds later it reached the ceiling. The report describes how the sailors helped one another, and one rescuer is mentioned by name: Fire Controlman 1st Class Gary Rehm Jr.

Gary Rehm, following in his grandfather's footsteps, joined the Navy right out of high school. On the night of the collision he was thirty seven years old, a 19-year veteran of the Navy. His family and friends say that Rehm called the other sailors on the ship his "kids," and when the ship was docked stateside near his Virginia home, he often invited those who were far from home to join his family for holidays.

There are various accounts of what happened in the chaos that night. Some report that Gary Rehm saved at least 20 sailors, his kids who ended up trapped after the collision, and while the exact number of those he saved varies, one fact is certain: When he went back down to save more, he died with six others.

Jesus said, "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13). Gary Rehm demonstrated such love for his friends, his kids, and this Memorial Day weekend is a time to remember him and all who have died in the service of our country. Memorial Day originated at the end of the Civil War, at a time when the thoughts of American hearts were preoccupied with how to remember, how to memorialize the 625,000 soldiers who died in the war between the states. Memorial Day was born from the solemn desire to honor our dead, but in our current culture we place such great value on comfort and leisure, that Memorial Day is all too often

simply described as the unofficial start of summer. This weekend will be filled with department store sales, half-marathons, picnics, baseball, and the Indy 500. This weekend will be filled with freedom, but what we find in Gary Rehm's ultimate sacrifice is what every true American knows: Freedom is not free.

Day in and day out, our culture settles for comfort and leisure, but on Memorial Day, as we contemplate the heroes who paid for our freedom with their lives, we realize that every man, woman, and child was created for, and is called to, so much more than the vanity of what society would have us believe is the good life. We seek to honor, and have such great admiration for our heroic dead, because they exemplify what it truly means to be human. Humanity is summed up in this phrase, spoken by the perfect Human, "*This is my body which is given for you*" (Luke 22:19). There is a sense in which those words are the call placed on every human heart, and while we cannot begin to fathom the great distinction and immeasurable difference between our Lord's infinite sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and any finite sacrifice we can offer, still, His words exhort us, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, and as disciples of Jesus Christ, to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow His example of sacrificial love (Mark 8:34).

Our heroes turned their back on the vanity of comfort and leisure, and freely chose to embrace the blood, sweat, and tears of sacrificial death. By laying down their lives for their friends, by giving their bodies for us, they demonstrated the greatest love. As G. K. Chesterton said, "The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him," and love is really what we celebrate on Trinity Sunday.

It is the doctrine of the Trinity that distinguishes Christians from every other world religion. While other religions speak of God's love for humanity, it is through our understanding of one God in three distinct Persons that Christians make the powerful declaration that God doesn't simply love people, "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8). The very essence of God is love, and His love finds its origin in the eternal, perfect, and personal union that exists between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, for we know that love cannot exist without an object to love. As C. S. Lewis said, "Love is something that

one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love.”

Today, in many churches, pastors will use analogies in an attempt to explain the holy mystery of the Trinity, but these efforts are as futile as using an analogy to explain why Gary Rehm would give his life for those sailors that he called his kids. There is no neat, logical explanation for the inexpressible mysteries of our faith, and words will never accurately describe the indescribable depth of sacrificial love. The most profound truths in this world, and the world to come, cannot be comprehended through the use of human reason. This is a fact that our Lord expressed in His conversation with Nicodemus.

In the Gospel passage we read this morning, Nicodemus approached Jesus in a genuine search for the truth. However, as we listen to their conversation, we discover that Nicodemus had a problem. He was trying to use human reason to understand the mysteries of God. When Jesus said to him, “*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3), Nicodemus replied reasonably, “*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*” (John 3:4). As our Lord continued to explain the necessity of spiritual regeneration, New-Birth by the power of the Holy Spirit, Nicodemus continued to struggle as he held onto that which seemed reasonable, and finally asked Jesus, “*How can these things be?*” (John 3:9).

“*How can these things be?*” It’s a reasonable question, from an earthly perspective, but our Lord wasn’t speaking to Nicodemus about earthly things. He spoke to him about the things of heaven, and during the course of their conversation, He sought to point Nicodemus’ thoughts in an upward direction, even revealing the truth to this man that he was speaking with God. Jesus revealed that truth to Nicodemus when He said, “*No man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven*” (John 3:13).

Because our Lord took on “*the form of a servant*” (Philippians 2:7), because He took on human flesh when He came to earth from heaven, those who walked and talked with Him, like Nicodemus, often thought, as St. Augustine

points out, “that Christ was no more than what they saw Him to be” (St. Augustine, *The Trinity*), but in His own words our Lord tells us that “He was here, and was also in heaven.” He “was here in His flesh,” and “in heaven by His divinity.” He was, in fact, “everywhere by His divinity” (St. Augustine, Tractate 12:8). The Son of man, who was, and is, everywhere by His divinity, would through His humanity, be lifted up on the Cross at Calvary, “*That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life*” (John 3:15).

On this Trinity Sunday, we are confronted with a flood of holy mysteries: The eternal truth that God is love. The Holy Trinity. The revelation that our Lord “descended from heaven in such a way as yet to be in heaven” (St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on John 3). God truly dwells in “*light inaccessible*” (1 Timothy 6:16), and as we contemplate these holy mysteries, and seek to honor those who have died in service to our country, we draw this conclusion: “*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13). This is the sacrificial love that our heroic dead have demonstrated by giving their human life for us. This is the sacrificial love that God has manifested to His people, but we must remember, as our Lord gave His life, He suffered in excruciating ways that we cannot, because He is God. As Cardinal Henry Newman stated: The Son of God “did not die of bodily exhaustion, or of bodily pain; at His will His tormented Heart broke, and He commended His Spirit to the Father.” (Cardinal Newman, *Mental Sufferings of our Lord in His Passion*).

All that happened on the USS Fitzgerald began because of a tragic accident, but what our Lord endured, He willed. His Passion and Death did not come upon Him by accident, or suddenly, like a ship in the night. Nothing surprises God. He possessed full knowledge of everything that would come to pass: the rejection, the betrayal, the mocking, the scourging, the crown of thorns, every step that led to the Cross, His crucifixion. He saw it all. Even before the creation of the world God knew that the Creator would die for the creature, and still He chose to create, because God *is* love, and you are His beloved.