

What good are we doing?

November 12, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Yesterday, our Nation observed another Veterans' Day. The British Commonwealth of Nations call it Remembrance Day. When I was growing up it was called *Armistice Day*. The first Armistice Day was at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month, 1918 and was one of wild jubilation over the end of World War I, the war to end all wars, and in the delirium of that day, children and adults were expressing very vocally our age old hope for peace and our joy when even a temporary, incomplete peace seems to have been achieved.

In the 88 years that have passed since the first Armistice Day, each successive November 11th has been a day of increasing irony for many people, because that war was not the *War to end all Wars*. Not even changing the name from Armistice Day to Veterans' Day has altered that fact. Important as it is to honor our veterans, perhaps Armistice Day is still a useful concept. It still serves to remind us that the

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nations of the world have never really established themselves in a just and permanent peace, but rather they have been living in a succession of, more or less, unstable armistices when there is always the danger that something or someone will put a match to the fuse. It is still a time when we are called upon to remember those who were willing to sacrifice, *to put in everything they had, their whole living*, to paraphrase our Lord's words in the Gospel (Mark 12:38-44), *the sacrifice of the few for the many*.

We Christians are a *few* a *very few*, when one considers the population of the world today and the many religions that are held by those peoples. There are countless millions for whom Christianity is nothing, for whom the Cross in their midst is an abomination.

There are times when we as Christians wonder whether we, or our Church matter very much. It's not

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that we doubt the things we stand for, but there are so many who pass the Church by, neither caring, nor listening for the message of the Church. And we wonder, *What good are we doing? What earthly use is it that we take a stand for honesty when theft and deceit are all around us? What use is it that we value life when murder is an hourly occurrence? What difference does it make to our neighborhood that we are seen going off to Church, while others settle down with 7 1/2 pounds of Sunday paper and get ready for the NFL Today? Does it matter that we are worshipping and listening for a word from God while millions are not?* Oh, yes. It matters. The *few* always matter.

In the Book of Genesis (18:24) it seems that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are on the eve of destruction and nothing can avert it. But in the heart of Abraham burns a deep compassion, which dares him to take the risk of approaching God. So, with deference and awe,

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he asks, *Suppose there were fifty righteous in Sodom, would it be right to destroy them then?* God replies, “No, if there were fifty righteous, I will save the cities.” Abraham warms up to his theme: *Would you stretch a point, take five off the fifty, making forty-five, would you still spare the cities?* “Yes.” *Forty?* “Yes.” Abraham knows he’s beginning to push his luck, but he keeps on going. *Suppose thirty righteous are found there, would you still deliver Sodom?* Again the answer is “Yes.” *Twenty?* “Yes.” *And if there will only ten?* And he receives the astonishing answer, “For the sake of ten righteous, I will not destroy Sodom.” So, the few **do** matter; we **do** have a potent force in our own right despite the forces which militate against us.

The most valuable asset to any community is a small core of righteous people. The health of society depends upon those for whom God counts. Take them away, remove them completely and society eventually

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disintegrates. Wherever people's lives are enriched with goodness, love and loyalty they draw their power from God. There are those who say the opposite. They deny there is a God, yet still believe in service, compassion, goodness toward others. I suggest that they live on a borrowed faith. Trace back that belief in goodness and there *will be* a spiritual source, a godly Mother, a teacher, a friendship, an education. *Somewhere* at *some time* this person was shown God. Cut off that living faith and, in time, will come the collapse of *all* values.

It *does* matter what we believe. It *does* matter that we are here. Our communities need us. They depend upon us. Their future is bound up with the fact that there are righteous men and women in their midst. I don't think it is going to far to say that the future of the nation and the world depends upon men and women for whom God counts.

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Throughout our history as a Nation, it has been the *few* that made the difference. It was a *few* who drafted the Declaration of Independence and risked all for that Independence; it was a *few* who conceived and drafted and formulated our Constitution. It has always been a *few* in our Armed Forces who, for over 230 years have offered their lives as a sacrifice for their friends and their country. More than a few times, that sacrifice has been required. We hold all of them, the living and the dead, and those serving in harm's way throughout the world today in Remembrance, on Veterans' Day.

There is a postscript to this. God speaks to us as Abraham spoke to him; *Ten righteous are sufficient to save a large number, but tell me are you content with ten? Think what twenty could do! Let me not stretch your resources too much, but do you think you could make it thirty, or fifty, or more?* Then think of the effect on the community, the nation and the world. What a difference it would make!

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AMEN.