

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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MAY 27, 2007

MEMORIAL DAY



2 Timothy 2:1-13

"Remember"

Today we celebrate both Memorial Day weekend and the feast of Pentecost. It's a day to recognize that we are required to remember, and that we are promised the Holy Spirit to help us do that.

Memorial Day in the USA has its roots in the Civil War, when Southern women began to put flowers on the graves of fallen soldiers. In 1868 it was first proclaimed as a day that deserved national attention, and flowers were placed at Arlington National Cemetery on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers alike. In 1873, New York became the first state to adopt Memorial Day as an official observance; other states followed, but it was not until 1971 that Congress made it a national holiday.

Since WWI, there has been some confusion in this country between Memorial Day and Veterans' Day - November 11th, the day the "Armistice" was signed that ended "The Great War." In America, Memorial Day is now supposed to remember those who *died* in all wars, Veterans' Day those who *served* in the military. But the two overlap, and symbols of November 11 like selling poppies to raise money for needy veterans, have spread to Memorial Day.

1) *What We Remember*

What should we remember? That tens - no, hundreds - of thousands of soldiers, sailors and airmen have died in defense of country, ideals, freedom, families. That there have been times in our history, and that of all nations, when to go to war seemed entirely justifiable, much better than not doing so, and necessary to defend against aggression. That men and women have volunteered to fight for causes they believed were worth risking their lives for, and many died.

The Civil War took the lives of 600,000 - two thirds of them from disease - and another 400,000 were injured. A similar number of American casualties occurred in WWII; in WWI one third of that, after the US entered that war in 1917. But since 1914, in the trench warfare in the mud of Belgium, millions had died. In one day in 1916, the British army lost 19,000 dead and 55,000 wounded, on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. By the time it was over, 1/2 million British soldiers were dead. My grandfather was there; an infantryman, a sergeant who weeks later led 6 men out of the Somme battlefield, all that were left out of the 800 men of The Hampshire Regiment. In all, 9 million soldiers died in "The Great War;" and every family in Europe was changed - my

grandfather had a serious limp the rest of his life; my other grandfather died of his injuries after he returned to England - and every nation was changed, as an era of European optimism and four empires ended as surely as a life of Southern gentility was swept away by the American Civil War - *Gone With The Wind*, indeed.

How can anyone not remember such things? How can people go through life willingly ignorant of history, of what it cost to preserve the culture that we now take for granted? How can we live as though war is something we pay a few professional soldiers to fight for us "over there," while the rest of us carry on shopping? Do we value so little what it really took in the past to defend liberty, and nationhood, and security, and the cultural values we cherish? History matters, but you wouldn't think so today.

2) *History Matters*

In case you think this is just about "the politics of war," let me remind you that Christian faith is also bound up with remembering historical events that shape our lives today. When the Holy Spirit came on Jesus' followers at Pentecost, he did what Jesus had said he would do: he caused the people to *remember* Jesus: what he had said, what he had done.

In this, the Spirit was doing what he had always done for God's people. Most of the OT can be summed up in the command, "*Remember* that the LORD your God delivered you from slavery in Egypt by his mighty hand." God called his people to remember their deliverance, and he sent them his Spirit, and his Word, and gave them symbolic actions to help them remember. The Feast of Passover was created so that every year in the early Spring, Israel would remember how they left Egypt on the

night the angel of death "passed over" them while destroying the first-born of all Egypt.

Fifty days later, they were to celebrate "The Feast of Weeks," the first-fruits harvest of the wheat crop; they would remember that God is good, and had brought them into "a land flowing with milk and honey," and they would celebrate and feast with gratitude. In time, thankfulness for the gift of God's Word - his Law - at Sinai, was added to the Feast. In the 1st C. AD, it was on this day, Pentecost - the feast fifty days after Passover - that the gathered followers of Jesus received the outpouring of the Spirit of truth and power, their "firstfruits" of the life they would now live as Christians.

And when the Apostle Paul wrote letters to them, he would often say "remember" what Jesus has done for you. To Timothy, he says "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David" - a rhythmic sentence that sounds like part of a short "creed" that Christians were already memorizing. Why should Timothy remember? Because he was going through troubled times, because he had to learn to endure, because Jesus was his example and his strength.

Jesus himself had said the same: "eat this bread and drink this wine to remember me, and the way I died for you." If we do not remember, we will never understand how we got to be where we are, we will never grasp how we are to live now, we will never find the example or the strength to follow the path we are called to tread in the future.

3) *How To Remember*

But *how* to remember? We all struggle with that - there are too many things we are asked to memorize, and we get overloaded, and over the years find it harder and harder to remember even important things.

There are aids to memory: *symbols*, for example. When we eat the “memorial meal” that we call the Lord’s Supper, we are immediately reminded of what Jesus did to procure our rescue, our redemption, our salvation. The Passover *seder* has always done the same as a means of Jews’ remembering that the LORD delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. Symbols help memory.

There is also *story*. One of the features of how we are made as humans is that we need stories of our lives. We cannot live for long with life being “just one thing after another.” We need to make sense of it, believe that it all adds up to something, has a direction and a meaning and a goal. So we create narratives of our lives. It’s a powerful mental and emotional activity, and at times we benefit greatly from doing it consciously. Some of you in the Beth Moore Bible Study series know how valuable it was for you to write an account of the different phases of your life, and to trace how the Spirit of God had been working in you.

When we write the stories of our lives, we learn important things about who we are, and how and where God is leading us. And what is true of individuals and families is true of communities and nations. We need our history to tell us who we are and where we are going. So I’m thrilled we now have a Historical Committee that is trying to reconstruct the “story” of this church.

We need to find new ways to retell the story of our nation and our culture that will be memorable, and will give us a stronger sense of how God has worked, is working, and therefore can be trusted to work in the future. We especially need the story when times are hard, confusing, anxiety-provoking. In this country we have lived since September 11, 2001 with fear, and all

that does to a people and a culture. We are told we are “a nation at war,” but we feel strangely disconnected from that, and it’s often hard to believe – unless you have a son or daughter serving in the military. Families like that need our support and our prayers, because they are carrying the burden of our nation’s anxieties and future on very few shoulders.

There is one more aid to memory that I find especially helpful. It is related to “writing your story” – it is the use of *symbolic and poetic language*. It comes as no surprise to me that Biblical commands to remember God’s mighty acts and purposes are often couched in symbolic language. That is true of much prophecy, of Jesus’ parables, of the apocalyptic passages in Daniel and Zechariah and Revelation.

But you can find it even in small ways: when in Deuteronomy, God’s people are told to remember the Exodus, the LORD says “sacrifice the Passover in the evening, as the sun goes down, on the anniversary of your departure from Egypt.” Times of day, times of year, anniversaries, sunset... these are the symbolic attachments that make words memorable.

Paul tells Timothy to “remember Jesus Christ” as he endures suffering, fear, anxiety; but he wraps that command in a poem that he calls “a trustworthy saying”: “If we died with him, we shall also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we deny him, he will also deny us. But if we are faithless, he will remain faithful...” Timothy can memorize that; it will strengthen him when he faces opposition and persecution and failure in his pastoral calling.

So I leave you with a few examples of memorable and poetic language that for decades have served to help people know who they are, what story they are part of,

how God is at work in their lives and their countries.

Abraham Lincoln, the most theologically alert of all American Presidents, told the mourners gathered on the Civil War battlefield at Gettysburg that *"we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to their unfinished work... we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom..."*

Lincoln's Second Inaugural speech, two years later in 1865, sounded the same theme: *"Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue... so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."*

Canadian army physician John McCrae, in the huge cemeteries of WWI:

*"In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place...
We are the Dead..."*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow*

In Flanders fields."

We cannot forget. We must remember, and we must then do what we in our time are called to do.

Let us pray...