

MEMORIES THAT ALLOW US TO MOVE ON

We are not duty-bound to celebrate secular holidays inside the church. The society around us mucks up the church's special days, and the church sometimes returns the favor, or simply ignores them. Christendom knows no national borders. But it is not neat and simple, is it? The world tends to categorize us as a Christian nation, which is a terrible insult to Christ. But whatever is said about the United States today, a lot of Christian vision and values are mixed into its roots. Those of us who are Christians find our patriotism and our faith all mixed up together – both emotionally and intellectually. We may or may not like Obama or Bush, but Lincoln and Washington are more in the category of saint than politician in the hearts and heritage of this nation.

So why do we have special times set aside for memories – whether Memorial Day, or *Do this in remembrance of me*? What happens to us as a nation or a church if all our memories are lost? Well, amnesia is no laughing matter in real life. Some historians claim that a nation thrives or dies according to how well it can pass its memories on to each succeeding generation. Every priest and minister knows that this is true of the church. And what is your opinion of how well we are doing that today?

On the other hand, many groups and forces are busy changing the memories – tweaking them, or even rewriting them to suit their own purposes. Don't you sometimes wish we had a "canon scripture" of our own history, so people could comment all they liked but we could still get back to how it was first perceived and understood? How many explanations and motives have you heard for why we dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima? Have you been talked into celebrating the brave Japanese flyers who had courage enough to fight against the evil, imperialist West at Pearl Harbor?

Memorial Day is not as easy to celebrate as it used to be. When I was a young pastor in New England, Memorial Day was about the Second World War. There was no doubt about it. You could mention the Civil War, the First World War or even the Revolutionary War on the side, but Memorial Day was about the Second World War. And of course, "Memorial" was more than a memory. It was an honoring of events and

deeds that in some way shaped our destiny, even saved and preserved us. There was still a clear memory of who was on which side – and which side was for liberty and justice, and which side was for dictators and totalitarian enslavement. Of course, we were disillusioned that some of our former allies had switched sides when we weren't looking. But there is always a Judas, no matter what the conflict, large or small.

Nevertheless, on Memorial Day we remembered those who died that we might live – and beyond that, all who had sacrificed to preserve our way of life. It was a clear, clean, and heartfelt celebration for most people. It lifted up liberty as a value worth such sacrifice. And while this part was not always as clear, it seemed to call all of us to build these memories and this way of life into our own present and future, that we might never lose what others had sacrificed so much to obtain.

Some of you know and feel and remember what I'm talking about. But increasingly the memories fade away. Increasingly we find ourselves speaking with people who do not identify with the Second World War any more personally than we ourselves identify with the Civil War or the Revolutionary War. If we are history buffs, we know it as history, and maybe a movie or two puts us into a bit of the feeling for a day or two. But reading about a marriage is not the same as being married.

So what are you holding in special memory tomorrow? Korea? Vietnam? The Gulf War? The policemen and firemen at the Twin Towers? Operation Iraqi Freedom? The soldiers in Afghanistan? Those who are yet to die fighting terrorism? Maybe all who fight corruption, injustice, domination, disease, poverty, coercion on any level, in any arena. It's hard to focus, isn't it? And if we cannot focus, the celebrations get vague and lose a lot of their power. The loudspeakers boom out in the baseball stadium: "Happy birthday to all you fine folk out there who are having birthdays this month!" There are only fifty thousand of us present, and I don't know about you, but I confess: I am not deeply moved.

Some memories truly bless us, guide our steps, light our way. Some memories debilitate, blight our path, leave us feeling guilty, discouraged and fearful, wondering if we even want to go on. If we honor the positive memories, we are filled with hope and courage and eagerness to move on. If we honor the negative memories, we soon come to the end of our strength and hope. It is not about reality; the memories we honor *become* our reality, for better or for worse.

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In our religion, we are taught to process bad memories. Face them honestly, feel the sorrow, repent, receive forgiveness, make amends insofar as possible – then lay aside the poison in them, forever. We are also taught to process the good memories. Face them just as honestly, feel the gratitude, receive the blessing, tune our lives to trust the caring and goodness of the Source from whence they came – then claim the energy and the purpose, and carry them into all our new days.

But many people do not have enough memory or grasp of our religion to even know that such things are possible, never mind how to do them. Nevertheless, if we want to survive the confusion of our time – find enough focus to know who we are and what we care about – we cannot be content with the generic and general truths and celebrations of our time. We must find our own place in some specific body of truth, and in some specific group that is committed to honor and live out this truth.

I am opposed to the sloppy, generic, mindless approaches that have so pervaded the churches of our time and culture. “We can all be good Christians whether we mean it or not; whether we do anything about it or not; whether we keep any of the disciplines or not; whether we commit ourselves to Jesus, His people, or His church – or not.” (I’m sure this is coming as a big surprise to all of you.) I am not opposed because I am “mean-spirited,” or because I don’t care, or because I just want to hang around here longer and longer to make all of you miserable. I am opposed because churches like that don’t do any real good for people, don’t bring them into true bonds of love for each other, don’t bring them into a deep and meaningful connection with Jesus and His Holy Spirit. Churches like that don’t change anybody’s life. They don’t *save* anybody – and I mean that literally, theologically, psychologically, medically, maritally, or any other way you can think of.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, and some of us want to honor those who sacrificed or even died that we might live. There are a lot of them. Rows and rows of white crosses, beyond counting. Rows and rows of fathers and mothers, servants, scientists, teachers, missionaries ... even the categories themselves are almost beyond counting. One way we can each keep it from being too general, and therefore too out of focus, is to each bring to mind some of our own special memories. Who are the people, and what are the events they were involved with, that light *your* life? You do not have to convince or persuade anybody

else. Long after the speeches are over, you can have a wondrous Memorial Day if you bring to mind the heroes and angels who have lifted your life and made it meaningful and purposeful and worth all the anguish and effort it takes to live it.

Still, if we want to get really focused and touch the memories that most allow and empower us to move on, we will need to get to some of the names at the top of the list. At the top of my list, of course, is Jesus. He was setting captives free long before we ever heard of democracy, or America. And He sets us free from terror, evil, and death far beyond anything democracy can touch. There is no doubt in my mind that it cost Him His life, the love of many people, and everything anyone in this world holds dear. He is at the top of some of your lists too. But He doesn't just get there automatically, does He? Thinking it ought to be so doesn't make it so. Saying it or writing it doesn't make it real. Only experience makes it real. We cannot remember what has never happened to us, nor can we be nourished by what we have only pretended. There is a difference between remembering when you first turned your will and your life over to Jesus Christ, and remembering when you had a theoretical conversation about what that might be like. There is a difference between remembering what happened to you because you did that, and *pretending* that you did that. Nobody else can tell for sure, from the outside looking in. But *you* can tell. And on the inside, there is no faking with spiritual truth. Pretend humility, like pretend love and pretend peace, is more burden than release. It all comes from pretend trust, which only makes us more fearful and lonely and depressed than ever.

Okay, you know where I'm going with this, but you don't know how I'm getting there. And you don't have to come if you don't want to. But it is the best Memorial Day in all the world – that is, it gives us memories which can carry us on into a true and wondrous future.

King Josiah came to the throne in Jerusalem when he was eight years old. It was about 640 B.C. and he reigned for thirty-one years, which means he died pretty young. He died trying to stop Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt from going north to Carchemish to join the remnants of the Assyrian Empire in a fight against the rising power of the Babylonian Empire. Mostly I am told that this was a stupid and needless sacrifice. Necho had promised Josiah that he would do no harm in Judah; he merely wanted passage through the land. All the

important cities were up in the hills, so who cared if Pharaoh's army marched along the sea and across the Valley of Jezreel?

I know that faithful people can do really stupid things. (Just don't ask me how I know that.) But I still want to know why a man as faithful as Josiah would leave Jerusalem, gather his armies at Megiddo, and try to stop the Egyptian army. It crosses my mind that Josiah had seen it clearly, even if he died for it: he wanted alliance with Babylon; he knew that Babylon was the future. After Josiah's death, Judah switched allegiance away from Babylon, and opposing Babylon cost them everything – land, temple, the death of most of their population, and the rest of them carried as slaves into Babylon. In any case, Josiah was the last faithful King the Jews ever had, and many say their greatest King next only to David. (Hezekiah would have been a close third.)

Young as he was, Josiah was clear that he wanted to be faithful to Yahweh. At this point in Jewish history, that was unusual. Early on, he began to suppress the pagan shrines and cast down the idols of foreign gods, and to call his people to return to their God. He reversed the growing chaos and led the nation into a great religious reform. Along with many other projects, Josiah was determined to restore the temple, which had been severely neglected. During some of the final restoration, the priest Hilkiah discovered a scroll of the Law which had long lain in some back corner of the temple and which, in fact, had never been seen before. Some even suspect that it had just been written, but we won't debate that here. In any case, this lost scroll was our Book of Deuteronomy, the clearest and most powerful presentation of the Covenant in written form.

Deuteronomy was read to the twenty-six-year-old King, and Josiah quickly realized that despite his reforms, there were many faithful requirements still sorely neglected. So the religious revival leapt to new dimensions, and it became known as the "Deuteronomic Reform." You heard but a tiny portion of it read this morning. Until Josiah's untimely death at age thirty-nine, the whole nation was increasingly alive with new purpose and clarity and devotion.

It all came from "remembering." Remembering where they came from, what it was all about, who their God really was – and therefore who *they* really were – and what was expected of them. But much as I may admire, honor, and respect King Josiah, it is a long way from Second Chronicles, chapter thirty-four, to Acts, chapter two. Is Pentecost still fresh in *your* mind?

“Then the king sent and gathered together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. And the king went up to the house of the LORD, with all the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites, all the people both great and small; and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which had been found in the house of the LORD. And the king stood in his place and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant that were written in this book.” (II Chronicles 34:29-31)

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...” [Peter said:] “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.’” (Acts 2:1-4, 17-18)

Do you detect the difference between following the precepts written in a book, even the Book of Deuteronomy, and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit – who speaks afresh and from within, to you personally, and to the actual and precise situation as it unfolds for you day by day? A code of Law or a body of teaching, no matter how inspired and profound, is still cold, objective, and unmoving. So here is a whole nation devoting itself to this Deuteronomic code. If the whole world would keep such a code, it would transform everything. We can have nothing but respect and admiration for Josiah and his reform. But it dies when he dies. It will be renewed many times, and that is good. But it is still cold, objective, and inescapably rigid.

The Holy Spirit is neither cold nor objective, nor is it ever rigid. The Holy Spirit always wants to deal with what is actually happening to you in the here and now – all the players known, and all the shifting, emerging flow of real life known and taken into consideration. A living relationship with the Risen Christ is many levels above a written code, no matter how well it is written. And when the king dies, the

latest revival fizzles out, or the world goes into upheaval all around you, the Holy Spirit is just as present with you – just as eager to guide and comfort and inspire as ever.

It is taking our world a long time to make this shift. That is, it is hard to believe that God really sent Jesus to establish such a powerful and personal connection; hard to believe that God really cares this much; hard to believe that if we honor this crucified and Risen ONE enough to seek Him in the inner quiet of sincere and trusting prayers, He will come to us and communicate with us. When you read a book, you know when to turn the page. When you wait in the silence for the Spirit to find some way to form in your mind and heart the thoughts and images that you need – well, who knows if we will get enough noise and interference out of our minds that day to hear anything at all beyond our own thoughts and desires? Besides, we are busy; we have places to go, things to do, people to see. We have no time to waste on prayer. And God knows, we never waste time doing things our own way ...

I wonder what we suppose Jesus was doing for forty days in the wilderness, or the many times He spent all night in prayer. Reading Deuteronomy? Writing corporate prayers for public worship? Did He spend such time praying out loud? Ordering God around? Telling God what to do and how to do it, like most of our prayers do? It is a very different WAY that Jesus showed us – a very different WAY that Jesus walked, and invited us into.

The disciplines of listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit are not less arduous than the disciplines of obeying Deuteronomy. Far from it. But they are very different. A good deal of Christendom today has merely shifted from trying to obey the precepts of the Old Testament to some version of trying to obey similar precepts of the New Testament. And a good deal of liberal Christianity has shifted from trying to obey the precepts of the Old Testament to a vague and general idea of loving your neighbor and solving the problems of the world – which leaves humans entirely in charge of it all, and has virtually nothing to do with obedience to God, either by precept or because of a personal love-bond and prayer life. After all Jesus did and taught and went through for us, don't you think that is truly and profoundly sad?

What is our vision for our own future, here in this church? Do we need some new purpose, some new direction? People who do not listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit need an earthly institution

or organization to tell them what to be excited about and what to do next. Are you hoping somebody will find a new scroll in the temple, start a new Deuteronomic Reform? Do you know the difference between a program and a vision? More importantly, do we know the difference between obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, and making it up ourselves? I don't know anybody who seeks the will and guidance of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis who is sitting around wondering what to do next. Quite the opposite.

Suppose somebody decided our church was really important and gave us a billion dollars. Perhaps then we could begin to buy up the plots of land on our block, develop parking, extend our facilities for youth, and have many other exciting programs. Would that make us faithful? Would we all become humble and start tithing, praying, and getting ourselves into the relationships, jobs, and purposes God really wants for us? Would we not be at least as likely to get haughty and full of ourselves, and maybe decide we were smart enough to design the ways and methods for saving everybody who comes to us?

Our vision is to *remember* that only the Holy Spirit can bring us true vision, individually or collectively. Our vision is to *remember* that each of us must continue to pray and follow the specific guidance of the Holy Spirit for our own lives – and then trust the Spirit to organize our efforts toward their true purpose. This is very hard for Americans, is it not? We have all been taught since kindergarten (or before) that good, responsible people take their destiny into their own hands. Yet here, at this church, we keep saying: Get it out of your hands, and put it into the hands of the Holy Spirit. And really mean it. Don't just do something – stand there. Meaning, stand in the presence of the Holy Spirit ... wait upon the Lord ... do nothing, without permission from Jesus.

Of course, God has purpose and destiny for groups and churches as much as for individuals. Does that mean that each time we get an inkling of the Spirit's direction, we take the methods and implementation back into our own hands? That is Satan's best chance to stop even the most faithful churches. What it *really* means is that sooner or later we must learn to pray as a group – as a congregation, as a church. I am not talking about saying prayers aloud at each other – voicing words in public. I am talking about *really praying*. We have never even *approached* this dimension of the prayer life here.

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Why do I keep going to Vespers on Monday afternoon? Usually four to six people show up. It is very pleasant. It is also irrelevant (except occasionally for one of us individually). But I keep going because it represents our future: Gathering in silence. Speaking little; saying what comes to us from the silence. Praying some more. It is in the embryonic stage, far from where we need to go. But it is a hint, a possibility, a tiny flicker of what lies ahead.

Generations ago, faithful Christians moved the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. Why not from Sunday to Monday? Maybe one day, large numbers of us will gather each Monday afternoon to wait upon the Holy Spirit together, as if we were one mind, one body ... seeking the will of the Spirit for our faith community ... already promising to obey, if only we can hear and understand.

Good memories lead us on into the future.