

RECOLLECTING (The Vow to Remember)

The forty days, excluding Sundays, between Ash Wednesday and Easter is called “Lent.” Lent is here again. It is symbolic of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness wrestling with Satan, being filled by the Holy Spirit, preparing for His ministry. Traditionally it is a time of special prayer and fasting. Some people look forward to Lent each year as a time to concentrate on some important aspect of the Christian Faith and get it clearer than ever before and, if possible, incorporated into their way of life.

For most of us, Lent is associated with the hard-core principles and concepts of Christianity. This is not the fluffy season or the easy side of the Faith. At least it doesn’t appear to be at first. We start with ashes and then begin to get serious. Lent draws us to consider our mortality, sin, discipline, and sacrifice. We come up against repentance, betrayal, pride, the place of the Cross, the necessity of surrender, the wonder of forgiveness and grace. For those who trust that all of it is still heading for resurrection, Lent is a marvelous time. The hard-core truths of Christianity are deep and solid – unafraid and full of power. The more we get into the tough and scary stuff with Jesus Christ, the more we realize that life is okay after all.

This Lent I am proposing that we take a look at some of the major, first-order disciplines of the spiritual life. That is, there are some common denominators between all religions – some issues that are addressed by every approach to spiritual growth and life across the board and worldwide. If it helps to keep it clear, you could think of them as “THE VOWS.” Not all religions and not all religious people take the same vow toward money and property, for instance, but every religion and every religious person ends up taking some vow about this matter.

So we are going to be talking about the vows of the spiritual life. Sometimes you may be surprised to realize that you have “taken vows” about these matters. But you have, and that will come clear as you think about the vows that others have taken and the vows that are recommended. You may be pleased with some of the vows you have taken. I hope so. You may also wish to change some of the vows as you take them out and look at them. We will have a very meaningful

and productive Lent together if we talk about our vows and then each return to our prayers to deal with our own.

Today the subject is “Recollecting”: The Vow to Remember. The great enemy of the spiritual life is sloth – spiritual sleepiness. Every religion, throughout the ages, has discovered that most of the mayhem in human life does not come from people’s inability to find an elusive truth. Most of the trouble comes because we cannot “remember” the truth we have already found and indeed believe and claim. How many times have you said to yourself: “I didn’t mean to do that.” “I know better than that!” “I cannot believe I made that same mistake again.” “I’ve been telling other people not to do that for thirty years, and here I do it.”

We know that love is better than hate; that anger does not very often get us the results we want; that resentments poison our lives; that getting too tired or too busy makes us miserable and ineffective; that some foods are not good for us, and too much of any of them is unhealthy. We know that prayer is necessary to keep us spiritually tuned and on track; that our friends are more important than things; that God is our only true security. We know these things, but we cannot seem to remember them. We might argue over details of application or approach, but we believe these things; we just cannot remember. Maybe I can make it through eight or nine hours tomorrow remembering that anger is not my friend. So I ride the highway being courteous to all motorists; being patient at mistakes; being grateful that I have the skill to avoid some of the more inept. And as I am returning home I feel really good, and it is clear to me that wasting time and energy giving private lectures and making signs that nobody hears or sees is really dumb and hurts nobody but me. Just then, a block from home, somebody nicks my fender from behind for no earthly reason other than sheer unadulterated stupidity and carelessness. Suddenly I cannot remember. “Hello Anger, my old friend.”

For as far back as history can remember, we humans have been trying to increase our awareness – trying to find some way to stay alert. The practice of any religion includes disciplines for recollecting our truth, our purpose, and how we want to live.

Start off with the familiar. The Scripture reading this morning reminded us of some of the stringent commandments of Judaism for recollecting the truth. Aside from the obvious earnestness of the

passage, it is also clear that if the Jewish adults are busy teaching these precepts to their children, then not only is the wisdom being passed on to the next generation, but the adults are learning while they teach: the adults are *remembering for themselves* as well as instructing the children. It is one of the most powerful precepts in all of Judaism.

For generations, Christians followed this example. How in the world and why in the world did we ever let that get away from us? Sunday School: essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon and a wonderful idea. However, if it ends up taking religious instruction out of the home, which apparently it has done, then despite all of its efforts and accomplishments, it will have been one of the church's most severe mistakes. Sunday School was formed to enhance – not replace – the religious instruction of the home. But I stray ...

What else does Judaism do to ensure recollection? The Sabbath Day itself is a monumental program for this very purpose. “*Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.*” It is to be a different day – a day of remembrance and reflection and recollection. Special feast days (high holy days) are set for the same function: to remember the key experiences and what the people have learned from them. And then there were the sacrifices – the great ritual and worship activity that centered around the temple in Jerusalem. I am simply pointing out that Judaism is full of illustrations of our point: every religion – every spiritual path – takes great pains to help its people to remember. The problem is to stay conscious on a daily (hourly) basis.

In Islam there is no temple or sacrifice. The Sabbath Day has little of the importance it carries in Judaism. There is far less emphasis on learning and teaching, since absolute and unquestioning obedience needs little classroom work or discussion. But Islam is adamant about remembering! Five times a day the call of the minaret goes out. Five times a day, the people prostrate themselves toward Mecca and take anew their oath of allegiance and obedience to Allah. That does not leave much time to forget between prayer calls. There is not much chance to go for days without remembering who you are and what your primary purpose is. Of course, humans are tricky; we can even turn vigil into mere habit, thus losing the benefit and going back to sleep. Nonetheless, Islam has other disciplines (Pilgrimage, Ramadan), but the call to prayer illustrates the rigorousness with which it deals with the Vow to Remember.

You need not worry; I don't plan to discuss each of the great religions this morning. I merely wanted to illustrate the point. You already see it, and your minds are calling up further illustrations faster than I can verbalize them. So far we have only two simple precepts in mind: First, the Vow to Remember is immensely important in every religion. Second, going to sleep spiritually is the bane of our existence. And that brings each of us to a third item: "What is my own Vow to Remember?" What is my own plan for recollecting the truth by which I want to live? What are the disciplines by which I stay awake and alert to God?

There are hundreds of individual approaches to this business of remembering. Numerous mystics have tried to devise ways to stay constantly aware of their devotion to God: putting rocks in their shoes; wearing sackcloth next to their skin; repeating the Rosary; saying the name of Jesus or some other brief mantra every waking moment of every day. Much of it sounds bizarre and even cruel to our minds. I suspect that if Brother Lawrence, St. John of the Cross, or Teresa of Avila examined some of our habits and customs – eating, and taking pills; the pressure we put on ourselves at work and school; filling up our schedules; commuting; watching TV and movies; playing games – they would claim that nothing in their day came close to the agony we inflict on ourselves daily. At least they consciously did it to get closer to God.

This always reminds me of Simeon Stylites (388-459 A.D.), a Syrian monk who lived for thirty-six years on a three-foot platform on top of a pillar that was eventually over fifty feet high. I remember him well because he made me so angry when I was young. When I was told that he often tried to make it through the forty days of Lent without eating or sleeping, it infuriated me. What an idiot! What an intolerable, insufferable waste of time and life! Why didn't he try to do something important – try to help somebody or do something?!

Over the years I have wondered at my reaction. Why such anger? Who am I to be offended, and so many years after the fact? Why did I not wonder what could have compelled a fellow human being to put forth such an incredible, strenuous effort, year after year? He wanted to heighten his awareness. He wanted to get closer to God. Nothing else mattered as much to him. So he wasted (?!) thirty-six years trying to commune with the Almighty. Who am I to be offended? Have I used my life so much better? Have I found someone more important to get

to know? Do I remember my truth and my purpose like old Simeon did his? Maybe I was only jealous of someone who loved God so much.

St. Bonaventura says, “The aim of prayer is union with God.” Augustine says, “Ask nothing from God except God Himself.” (Augustine also believed that it was all right to pray for anything it was all right to desire.) Augustine again: “Man prays to God that he himself may be constructed, not that God may be instructed.” Pseudo-Dionysius comments: “He who stands in a boat and seizes a rope flung to him from a rock, and pulls on it, does not draw the rock to himself, but himself to the rock.”

Anyway, I am no longer so sure that Simeon was stupid, or that I and my culture have all of our values and priorities so straight. I have trouble remembering the very things I care about most and the very truths I believe in most, even the things and people I most love – even God. And when I look at the lives of my prayerful friends from the past, it often seems to me that in comparison to them, I do very little about it. They took it so to heart, and their lives showed it.

That does not make me feel “down” or discouraged. It reminds me that God is the primary fascination and goal of all consciousness. It reminds me that there are ways to awaken and increase consciousness and stay aware. Many have discovered such ways, and the farther they walked them, the more eager and pleased they became. As long as I have life left, it is not too late to learn to remember. And what I most want to learn to remember is Jesus Christ.

There are, of course, Christian disciplines of remembrance. Ours are many and varied. Some we inherited from Judaism, like the Sabbath – turned into Sunday in honor of Jesus’ resurrection. For the most part, however, we have lost that discipline. We can no longer remember why we were supposed to set that one day apart. It’s tough when we cannot remember the things that were going to help us to remember.

Other disciplines are attached to special groups or traditions, like the canonical hours of prayer from the Benedictine Rule. Islam has five times for prayer each day, and they are for everybody; even monks sometimes have trouble keeping up with the eight prayer times of the Catholic tradition:

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Matins at 12 midnight (during the night; also called *Vigils*)

Lauds at 3 a.m. (Dawn Prayer)

Prime at 6 a.m. (First Hour, Early-Morning Prayer)

Terce at 9 a.m. (Third Hour, Mid-Morning Prayer)

Sext at 12 noon (Sixth Hour, Midday Prayer)

None at 3 p.m. (Ninth Hour, Mid-Afternoon Prayer)

Vespers at 6 p.m. (Evening Prayer, “at the lighting of the lamps”)

Compline at 9 p.m. (Night Prayer, before retiring)

“My goodness,” we sigh. “They hardly had time to do anything but pray!” Some of them thought of it the other way around. Working and cooking and the chores of business and survival were only trivial activities to take up the time between chances to pray.

Of all the rituals and traditions of Christendom, one is most basic and more basic than the others. It is also simpler and sufficient. Jesus instructed us: Every time you eat and every time you drink, think of me. When anything passes your lips, let it remind you of another kind of nurture: the love I have for you – the thing I have gone through for you. Each time you eat, each time you break bread: *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

Sometimes it is hard to remember even the things we are given to help us to remember. But somehow deep within us, we know that our spiritual amnesia only lasts until we truly care – until we truly want our lives to belong to God.

Anyway, it is Lent. One of the basic requirements of any religion or spiritual Way is the obligation to recollect our truth. Every religious person in some way takes a Vow to Remember. It is a good week for each of us to take our own Vows to Remember and look at them afresh. What do you do to keep awake, to keep fresh, to keep conscious toward your God?