

REMEMBERING

Today is Pentecost, one of the great days of the Christian heritage, second only to Easter in its truth, though not in its celebration. That gets us early into our subject: the impact of our remembering. Pentecost is better than its reputation. Its major fault is our poor remembering. Life is rife with such instances. Alexander the Great was phenomenal, and his impact on subsequent history is enormous. The impact of the Emperor Asoka is probably as great. His vision and statesmanship, if anything, were greater than Alexander's. His personal character was certainly far more impressive. Yet in our culture, one is hardly known and the other is invariably ranked among the ten or twelve greatest people in all history. What makes the difference is not their reality but our remembering.

Isn't that fascinating and, in a way, scary? The great heroes and role models of our heritage are not always the great ones among us, but simply the ones we remember. The same thing is true on a more personal scale. Our lives are shaped and formed not always by the best we have discovered or experienced, but by what we most remember. Great people have come in and out of our lives, but we no longer remember some of them. Incredible events have happened to us, but we have not thought about some of them for years. Meanwhile, at least in some cases, thoughts that do not inspire, people who do not care, tasks that have no high purpose, and goals that we do not even much admire are allowed to take up great portions of our time and life. They somehow have our attention. They are what we remember, so they become our reality. Reality for each one of us is simply that small portion of life that *we remember*.

Pentecost is the descent of the Holy Spirit. It is the experience that gave birth to the Christian church. We generally recognize phrases like that when we hear them said again. But mostly we do not remember. Astoundingly, we do not always remember our own personal pentecosts – the times we ourselves have clearly encountered the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ. Astonishingly, we are able to forget even our own entrance-times into the Christian church. Of course, when we cease to remember, then other things – other values, other goals – become the focus and reason for our living.

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It is also Communion Sunday, so let us begin today's Communion meditation with the simple reminder of the importance of remembering. Jesus' plea at the Last Supper was a plea for us to remember Him. The urgent plea to Timothy was that he "remember Jesus Christ." Both statements seem weird and strange to us at first. We think of those disciples around that last-meal table; we think of Timothy the super-dedicated youth; we read both pleas in the New Testament, which "feels" and projects a total religious flavor, as far as we are concerned. Why such injunctions to remember? Surely these folk couldn't forget if they tried! That's the only kind of thing New Testament folk ever thought about, right? They didn't have to eat. They didn't need to worry about their jobs. They didn't have friends with other interests or convictions. They didn't have family problems, sick relatives, or physical ailments of their own – and so on. Of course, we know better the moment we stop to think about it, but most of the time we do not stop to think about it. We forget that they also had to remember.

I wish to realize afresh, as I take Communion today, that the only thing which stands between Christianity and oblivion is the desire of its people to remember Jesus Christ. We remember the words. That's not the point; even the vulgar and the swearing manage that. We remember the high title: *Christos*, Anointed. Technical definitions are not the main point. At least we know the title is the highest: Son of God, Savior – our link with love and eternity. We remember, with some regularity, the big events – at least the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Such things are crucial, and they are also inseparably built into the Communion meal. But it is all cold and distant unless I also remember Jesus the person. I try to imagine that last meal with the disciples, and Jesus saying to these friends: "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" I do not get a picture of creedal perfection or theological exposition. I hear a friend saying to friends: "Remember me! We have been through a lot together. We have talked and walked and dreamed dreams. We have shared a vision of true Life, and we ended up living for it. That became the pact of our friendship, and finally it became not only the bond of our love but the very reason for our being alive. Now, all of it put together, I go to die for the thing we have done and been and become together. Keep this faith that has been forged between us. Do not turn away or let it go for nothing. Remember me!"

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Any person's death is important to you in direct ratio to how well you "know" that person. The thing I have to keep mentioning with some of you is that there are many ways to come to "know" a person. Whether a person is near or far, alive or dead, contemporary or at the other end of history, we come to "know" them by getting involved, risking our inner feelings, spending time and emotion feeling our way into their "place," their "shoes," their motives and goals.

The only reason the Bible is important to the Christian Faith is because it is our link to "knowing" some people of the past – especially Jesus. The only reason for Bible Study is that it helps our "remembering." If we do it together, sometimes that becomes shared remembering, which is even better. Nevertheless, the only thing that stands between Christianity and oblivion is the desire of its people to remember Jesus Christ. Where the church is, people know Jesus: they know and remember Jesus personally; they love and honor Jesus personally. These things are true to such a degree that it becomes their first priority in life to serve and obey Jesus Christ. Memory does not always come to that, but knowing and remembering Jesus always comes to that.

This is one of those special days for me. You may not know it, but I hate it when people leave. Even if they do not deserve to be here anymore and it makes our life a lot easier when they go, still I hate it when they leave. Somehow it seems like it should not have to be that way. On the other hand, I really love it when people come. Even though they are bound to bring their weaknesses along with their strengths, their hang-ups along with their gifts, and even their doubts along with their faith, still I love it when people come. It feels right and good, and one of God's favorite blessings is when God blesses us with each other.

So the second thing I want to bring to my Communion meditation this morning is the awareness that we are here to remember Jesus Christ together. I can do that alone if I have to, and sometimes we do have to. In fact, it seems some days that we have to be ready and willing to remember Jesus alone before we are granted the great boon of being able to remember Him with others. But it is a bleak thing to remember the Lord of Love and the Bringer of Abundant Life when we are alone in the awareness or feel there is no one to share with. So when we get the great chance to be a church together, it is a terrible waste and a spiritual "crime" if we squander that chance.

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Do you know when Ramadan begins and ends this year? You don't remember? Muhammad was a genius for finding ways to help his people remember Allah together. Not eating or drinking during daylight hours for the thirty days of Ramadan is a yearly special emphasis. His most ingenious discipline is the simple requirement to pray five times a day: Everybody together, five times a day. Whatever you are doing, you stop to remember obedience and submission to Allah. If you take that to heart, you do not ever get time to get very far off track.

Jesus had the same thing in mind, didn't He? Every time you break bread – that is, every time you eat or drink anything – “remember me.” We have unwittingly lost the impact by trying to save it for special “churchy” occasions. That is not enough – not nearly enough. Every time anything passes your lips, “remember me.” And when we eat, most often we try to eat *with* someone if we can – we eat together. Jesus knew that and counted on it. Then *especially* “remember me.” Whenever you eat bread or drink from a cup, “Do it in remembrance of me.” Whenever you no longer need to eat or drink, you will have no need to remember me. There is no Christendom without remembering.

One of the strange realities of the institutional church is that the organization is capable of absorbing our time and focus until we lose sight of Jesus – until we no longer remember, at least together. That is, we can get so mixed up with survival, disagreements, projects, or even the mission tasks we are trying to accomplish for the Lord that we have no time left over for the Lord Himself.

So I appeal to all our newer members, including the ones we welcome today, and also to all of us: remember Jesus Christ. We seek Him alone and we seek Him together, and everything else we do must come from that – it must be secondary to that.

The third thing I want to remember with Communion today is that sometimes our loyalty and love for Jesus can be in conflict with the nature and breadth of Jesus' own love.

I just made some strong statements about allegiance and loyalty and commitment to Jesus Christ. I do not take any of them back. I suspect I never will. I certainly hope I don't! Nevertheless, Jesus seems to be less jealous about His personal place than most of His

followers are. In full identity as the Eternal Spirit, Christ bridges all barriers and doubtless cares for all persons of all tongues, races, and religions. At least that is what Christians should know and believe. But as Jesus the individual man, He gets caught in our prejudices and limited by our languages and cultures and traditions. Meaning, for instance, it is not likely that many Arabs are going to be able to see a Western, white-man's Jesus as their own personal Savior.

So Jesus Himself says: *"But there are other sheep of mine, not belonging to this fold."* (John 10:16) And again: *"Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man [Jesus in human identity] will be forgiven; but for anyone who slanders the Holy Spirit [the Christ's true and eternal identity] there will be no forgiveness."* (Luke 12:10)

So our own church's bylaws remind us to be careful about the "other folds" quote: "We further respect and affirm the convictions of those who sincerely believe in other religious faiths and who conscientiously search for and/or experience some portion of God's truth. We will seek friendly dialogue ..." etc. And again, but straight to the point: "We do not seek members already active in other churches. We do not seek to convert those who are convinced and content in other religions."

While it is acceptable and even honorable among many Christian groups to go out head-hunting for anything that moves, we have laid upon ourselves a discipline of consideration. It has been a long time since we needed to hear this. I wondered for a while if we ever would again. Not many of us were talking about church or religion to anybody for any reason. But now some of you are getting excited and enthusiastic again about Jesus and the Christian Life and the spiritual journey. Wonderful, and keep sharing! But do not try to dig up what Christ has already planted.

I remember with some delight the first time I got a real chance to delve into some of the other great religions of our world. I was entranced by the scope of it all. I was surprised at some of the differences, since we all want things to be simple and to come out the same (so as not to confuse us further). Of course, there is much we have in common. One thing all great religions have in common is the curse of having many followers who do not take their precepts to heart. Every religion is cheapened by adherents who do not put much thought or effort into living by the faith they seem to claim. It is clear

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that every world religion would improve and inspire life beyond our measuring if only all the followers made sincere and serious efforts to follow the teachings of that religion.

By the same token, the sincere followers of any of the great religions are impressive and inspiring. The more we respect the dedication and devotion of the saints of any other religion, the more we need and want to take our own faith to heart. What is killing the vision of Islam or Buddhism is not Christianity, but mock Christianity. By the same token, it is not the faithful Hindu or the faithful Jew who hurts or destroys what Christ came to accomplish; rather, it is the Hindu who does not honor his own tradition and it is the Jew who makes light of his own religious faith. It is the insipid in every religion that holds back spiritual enlightenment and progress.

So there is more than one way, and we are not the only way. But we cannot have it both ways. Life is too broad and truth is too deep to go skipping over the surface and then blithely claim that we have homogenized it all and know it all. There may be more than one way, but life is so short and peace and love are so far that we must each track one way – all the way. Even that finds us at the end of our days here with so much left to know, to discover, and to grow into.

I recently received a letter from Lee Whiston, a dear friend in New England. He has been leading spiritual-life retreats all over the Eastern seaboard for the past twenty-five years. He is ninety years old now and still leading retreats. If you hear it right, the letter is better than a sermon. He writes: “God is so good to us in our old age. I am slowly learning that being is more important than doing; I am still learning that simple, direct, and unquestioning obedience to God is the heart of true religion; I am still learning that people are more lonely than I dream of and that Jesus Christ has answers for them and for me ... far beyond expectation.”

These things I want to remember as I take Communion this morning. And I hope you will come to remember them with me:

First and mostly, we remember Jesus Christ Himself, the personal man who is our friend and who loved us enough to die for us.

Second, we remember Jesus Christ together. That is the primary bond between us – the TRUTH we seek and the kind of LIFE we are after.

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Third, we remember that Christ's own love is broader than ours. Our loyalty to Him cannot be weakened; He is our Savior and Lord. But He is bigger than we know and has business with others that we do not understand. Part of trusting Him is trusting His love for others. And sometimes that means getting back to paying attention to our own loving and our own business.

So it is time to go to our remembering – time to rededicate ourselves. Lord Jesus, come. Be with us, we pray. Amen.