

Date: May 27, 2007

SUNDAY: Pentecost

SERMON: Living Reminders

Text(s): Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17

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I'd guess that most of us here this morning use a calendar or agenda to help us remember where we're supposed to be or what we're supposed to do at any given time of any particular day. I thought that might be true primarily of those who are still working, but many of the retired folks that I've spoken with have said that if anything, their lives are busier now than when they were still actively working in their careers. And of course, our spouses or partners also have agendas with their schedules on them, and that means that we have to have a third calendar at home in which to blend and coordinate both persons' schedules. It gets really complicated sometimes, doesn't it? If it weren't for those agendas or calendars, we'd never show up where we're supposed to at any particular time. Doctors and dentists and hairdressers have learned that they have to call a day in advance to remind people of their appointments because so many of us just lose track of things like that and don't show up. So now we get reminders. Good thing, too, or I'd have missed my six-month dental appointment the other day if it hadn't been for that call. Somehow, it didn't make it from the card the dentist's office manager had given me onto my calendar.

But there are other sorts of reminders we need also, besides those that help our sometimes faulty short-term memories so that we can remember to do the daily things we need to do. We need reminders to help our long-term memories as well, both our personal memories and our collective memories.

Isn't that one of the reasons we celebrate Memorial Day every year—as a national exercise in remembering what it has cost our nation to remain free and to stand up for the freedom of others? I recall vividly the time a group of 70 international pastors and spouses stood at the

monument in the middle of the American Cemetery at Omaha Beach in Normandy one afternoon and paused to remember the high cost of defeating the evil Nazi regime, a cost visibly in evidence in row upon row of white crosses and Stars of David— more than 10,000 of them—that make that place a hallowed place of memory. As we remembered those who sacrificed themselves, we were recalling into our own lives, their courage, their love of freedom, even their willingness to die for it.

More and more, as we delve into the workings of the human mind, we're discovering that our ability to remember, and to derive meaning from those memories is essential to our humanity. To a very large extent, it seems, we are what we remember. Although every experience of our lives is etched into our brains, most of us can only access a fraction of those memories most of the time. And that's probably a good thing; we would simply be overwhelmed if all of that information was available to us all at once, all the time. Ask me which color shirt I wore two days ago, and I probably wouldn't be able to tell you. But ask me to remember some of the highlights of our wedding day, such as my middle brother's scheme, as my best man, to enliven our wedding ceremony by handing my pet iguana which he had in his tuxedo pocket, to the pastor when the pastor asked for the wedding ring, and I can tell you every detail. I *won't* tell you every detail, but I could. I will tell you that he "chickened out" at the last moment, and we got through the wedding ceremony without that particular disaster happening.

Perhaps no one in the modern world has stressed the link between memory and our very humanity so effectively and so consistently as Elie Wiesel. Wiesel was one of the Jewish inhabitants of the Hungarian village of Sighet, when all the Jews in that village were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz and Birkenau in 1944. Because he was young and strong enough to work, he survived the selection process and was not immediately sent to the ovens of Birkenau. When he returned to his hometown twenty years

later, what pained him the most was not that the people of Sighet had permitted the round-up of the Jews without resistance, but that they had erased their former Jewish neighbors from their memories. He writes: “*I was not angry with the people of Sighet for having driven out their neighbors of yesterday, or for having denied them. If I was angry at all it was for having forgotten them. So quickly, so completely. . . Jews had been driven not only out of town but out of time as well.*” In other words, what is forgotten cannot be healed. Only remembered wounds may be healed. Only remembered evil may be avoided the next time.

Sometimes, particularly in the case of painful traumas in our past, we may not so much deliberately, as unconsciously repress the memory of those traumas because we are just not emotionally capable of dealing with them. They’re too painful. We seem to store those memories in a deep, dark, walled off place in our minds, and we can go for years without any conscious memory of them. But those unconscious walls are not as impenetrable as we may think. As I’d guess most of us have learned, deeply buried and painful memories can be like landmines, and suddenly sabotage us in ways we’re not even aware of, and may never be aware of, without the help of a therapist or wise counselor. Memories of childhood abuse or of a painful loss can often lie buried for years before surfacing when something happens that forces them to the front of our consciousness.

One of Frederick Buechner’s latest books is *The Eyes of the Heart*. Buechner is an ordained Presbyterian minister, but his life’s work has really been as an acclaimed novelist, poet, and essayist. He’s now in his 70’s, and this latest book is a kind of memoir and rumination on aging. He’s looking through old family photos and letters and memorabilia in his study in his house in Vermont. As he does, he comes across some photos of his mother and father, and at once, some of his most painful childhood

memories are triggered. His father had, without explanation or apparent cause, committed suicide when Fred was a boy of ten. And this suicide had all sorts of destructive long-term effects on the relationships within his whole family, and on his own personal life. No one would ever talk about it; all he could get out of conversations with family members and friends was that his father was a very popular man who was liked by everyone. As he once again remembers this painful trauma from his childhood, his beloved and long-deceased grandmother visits him— not in a sort of spiritualist séance sense— but in memory. The photos and letters conjure up her presence, and she becomes very real to him. And in that encounter, he begins, at last to come to terms with his father’s suicide. In his imaginary conversation with his grandmother, he explores how his search for his father has in some ways shaped all that he has done and written and become his whole life. And finally, in this imaginary conversation with his grandmother, whom he loved more dearly than anyone else in his family, he begins to make his peace with that painful and, some ways, crippling memory. By remembering, in relationship to one he loved, and whom he knew loved him, that old encrusted wound of the soul began to be healed.

Today is the Sunday that we call Pentecost. On Pentecost we celebrate the presence of the risen Jesus through the Holy Spirit who has been given to the community of Jesus’ followers. But what does that mean?

Well, our lessons offer us some clues. In our Gospel lesson, we hear Jesus telling his disciples that when he is no longer with them in person to teach and guide them, they will not be left alone to fend for themselves. Rather, he tells them, they will be sustained and equipped by their remembrances of him. These memories or reminders of Jesus will come to them through the agency of the one that God will send them—a *paraclete*—to remain with them for ever. Now what is a paraclete? Various English translations

of the New Testament render this word as “comforter,” or “advocate” or “helper.”

Suppose you need to carry a table from one end of the room to the other. It’s too big for you to pick it up and move it yourself. So you call to your friend, “Hey, Jim, can you help me move this table?” Jim comes to your aid and picks up the other end of the table and together you carry it across the room. Jim is being a paraclete. He’s someone you can call on to help you carry the load. That’s what Jesus promised to his disciples. A paraclete would come to be with them for ever. Someone whom they could call on to help them carry the burdens of life and the work of bearing witness to Jesus—the work of being the church. Who is this paraclete? Here in John’s gospel Jesus refers to the paraclete as “the Spirit of Truth,” or “the Holy Spirit.”

St. Luke, in his narrative account of Pentecost in the Book of Acts, likewise affirms that it is the Holy Spirit who is given to the community of disciples following the ascension of Jesus to empower them to proclaim the gospel message to the whole world. He even uses visual symbolism to indicate the Spirit’s presence—fire and wind. It is the Spirit who actually creates and animates the Christian community, so that collectively, we become “the body of Christ.” The Holy Spirit is not confined to the Church, but the Church is only the Church to the extent it is animated by spirit of Jesus. Otherwise, it’s just another social institution, like the Rotary Club or the Chamber of Commerce.

But how does the Spirit animate the Church? Jesus says, “*The Holy Spirit, . . . will teach you everything and remind you of all that I said to you.*” The presence of the Holy Spirit is a reminder of Jesus. Now let me add that this isn’t the kind of mundane reminder that you give your spouse on the way out the door in the morning when you say, “Don’t forget to stop and get milk on your way home.” That too is a kind of reminder, but it doesn’t call back into your present existence the decisive word or event that

shapes your whole identity, informs your values, and governs your behavior.

The Holy Spirit is the living presence of Jesus re-called through memory into our present moment, so that in our corporate life together, we can actually manifest the life of Jesus to one another and to the world around us. This is, in fact, the central meanings of our sacraments of baptism and communion. When we are baptized, we identify with Christ in his death and resurrection. We remember, in a very real and personal way, the sins of human nature that sent Christ to the cross, and we identify ourselves with Christ in his victory over the powers death and sin. And in that way, we begin to experience the healing of our own past sins. We die, as it were, to the old life of necessity and the oppression of guilt, and rise to a new life of liberty and possibility in Christ.

In the Great Thanksgiving prayer in our communion liturgy where we recall God’s redemptive work in Christ, we are doing this deeper sort of remembering. The old name for that part of the prayer is the *anamnesis*. There’s no precise English equivalent. The nearest would be remembrance or reminder or memorial. But all these words suggest to us that the person or event remembered is past and absent. But the word *anamnesis* suggests just the opposite. It means in the act of remembering, the person or event being remembered becomes real and present. These sacramental memories are more like the memories Frederick Buechner had of his grandmother— memories that recalled her presence and love into his life in a real way, so that he had the courage and resources to find healing for some deep personal wounds.

When we administer the waters of baptism or gather the Lord’s Table, Christ becomes truly present among us, and all his saving power, all his power to love, all his power to transform is present as well. By these reminders of Jesus, we are given the possibility of acting differently, of living by a different value

system than the world does, practicing different ways of relating to others, of living in love, even as Christ has loved us.

Just as the Holy Spirit recalls the living presence of Jesus among the community of Jesus' disciples, so the disciples— that's us— are also called to be living reminders of Jesus to others.

“The one who believes in me will do the works that I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these because I am ascending to my Father,” says Jesus in John's story. And in Luke's story, the risen Jesus promises his disciples, *“You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses to the uttermost parts of the earth.”*

Living reminders of Jesus. That is who we are, and that is what we are empowered and equipped to be by the Holy Spirit. And when we model that kind of life— the Christ life— in our life together as a community, we send a powerful invitation to those around us who are lost and hurting and groping for meaning, and we offer to others the priceless gift of hope.