

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

WE ARE WHAT WE REMEMBER

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THE RIVERSIDE
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WE ARE WHAT WE REMEMBER

It was a show of wisdom on the part of the Congress of the United States to incorporate a day for remembering into the national calendar. The fact that Memorial Day has degenerated into a holiday that provides merchants and sportsmen with yet another occasion to turn a dollar does not argue against the need to remember.

We live in an era of exaggerated speech. Extravagant claims bombard our senses daily. "You are what you eat," they say. "You are what you wear." "You are what you drive." "You are what you feel." All of these overstate to make a point. But it is a claim of an altogether different order to say that we are what we remember!

* * *

In a power conscious age it is vital that we not overlook the power of memory. While there is much about brain cells that we do not know, we do know that the human brain has virtually limitless ability to store and retrieve past experience.

Memory experts criticize us for under-using this intriguing capability. Men like Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas can memorize whole pages of telephone numbers in a matter of minutes. They can meet two hundred people at a dinner party and call each by name thereafter.

Our tonsils may function well or ill without our willing, but the faculty of memory, we are told, is different. It is not just there. It is capable of responding to training and attention. Most of the time when we fail to remember someone's name it is because we never seriously intended to do so. We are what we remember. Could I know what you remember, and what you have forgotten, I would know you rather well.

* * *

Think of this truth as it relates to mental health and our general well-being. It is axiomatic in psychology that most neuroses and emotional disturbances are connected with the memory. We have a costly way of remembering what we ought to forget and of forgetting what we ought to remember! For instance, we have an inclination to remember and rehearse our injuries. We have to work on this, I believe, because life has a way of erasing negative memories.

If someone were to ask me in casual conversation, did you have a happy childhood, I would say, yes. I would bring to mind all kinds of associations and people and experiences that could only be described as positive. But if I really began to work on that question, dug down deep and probed, I could find much in that childhood that could be described as negative: Being chased by a hostile gang in Morningside Park, trembling in my bed on a Saturday night as bottles and furniture were tossed into an echoing courtyard to protest the noise of an all-night party, getting lost in the woods around Bear Mountain Park. Such negatives are there and retrievable if one sets out to do so.

Many people suffer by keeping alive some wrong committed against them. They keep these memories going by "artificial respiration." They build up a thirst for revenge and live to slake that thirst. But Francis Bacon had it right years ago when he said, "A man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well." 1 How much better it is to remember those who did us good than those who did us in!

But this is not the worst. We frequently remember, dwell on, become obsessive about, some wrong that we have done, which by constant thought and magnification can even become the unforgivable, unpardonable sin. The unpardonable sin -- what fantasies have been spun around that concept!

A wise counsellor was visiting with a woman who was utterly convinced that she had committed the unpar-

donable sin. The counsellor drew up an empty chair and said to the woman, "Let's imagine Jesus in this chair. Tell me now that you hear him saying, 'I won't forgive you.'" We tend to remember what we ought to forget.

The reverse of that mistake is that we forget what we ought to remember: Our beginnings, those who helped us get our start, love that met us, human and divine, when we least expected or deserved it. There is no finer therapy for a misused memory than the 103 Psalm; "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." We are what we remember.

* * *

Think of this truth as it relates to Christian experience. It would be hard to overstate the role that memory plays in Biblical religion. The word "zachar," the verb "to remember," is an exceedingly dominant verb in the Old Testament. It was so critical for Israel not to forget! Notice from the first lesson of the day; "And when the Lord your God brings you into the land...with great and goodly cities which you did not build, and houses...which you did not fill, and cisterns which you did not hew, and vineyards and olives which you did not plant, and when you eat and are full, take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." (Deut. 6:10-12)

The word, the teaching, the Torah was to be bound to the forehead, and to the arms, posted on the doors and taught to the children generation following generation. When the Hebrews found themselves in Babylon and began to contemplate the possibility of fusing with the Babylonian culture the Second Isaiah raised up and said, "Harken to me, you who pursue deliverance, you who seek the Lord; look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you." (Isa. 51:1-2)

It has been rightly noted that "The life of Israel is a life of exodus, moving out from the point of revelation, rather than a life of residence, staying close to the point of revelation." 2 That's true, yes! But those points of revelation that were known to Israel were zealously guarded by personal and liturgical acts of memory.

Christians too are held to the faith by memory. When Paul advised those young Christians not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (Heb. 10:25) he wasn't simply putting an arrow in the quiver of ministers who might use it thereafter as a text with which to enlist fidelity on Sundays. He was reminding those young Christians that they lived in a world that operated with an awareness of a different history. By gathering together on the Lord's day they would become mindful again of the piece of history by which they had been redeemed - the recollection of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Remember it! Remember it! "This do in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

There is no such thing as objective history. To have objective history we would need to know everything that anyone ever did who ever lived. When an historian gives his treatment of the 16th Century, for example, it is subjective from the start because he must choose a few events and people and ignore the many. History is a teeming mass of conflicting, sometimes cooperating, lives. Out of all the births the world has ever known there is one birth that is of paramount significance. Out of all the lives that have ever lived there is one life that is critical. And out of all the deaths that men and women have died there is one death that ought never to be forgotten. "This do in remembrance of me."

Whether you are conscious of it or not, the most significant thing happening here today is the fact that by word, by sign, by prayer, by hymns, by thought, we are remembering the history from which redemption comes. "In the fullness of time God sent forth his son born of woman." (Gal. 4:4) "God so loved the world that he gave." (John 3:16) "He suffered under

Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried; the third day he arose again from the dead." The church is the only institution on the face of the earth that is charged with the responsibility to keep alive the memory of that saving deed.

We hear a lot these days about I'm O.K.-You're O.K. How do I know that I'm O.K.? There is only one answer to that! "Because I'm loved." And how do I know that I am loved? "Herein is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us." (I John 4:10) Even in the church we are what we remember.

* * *

Think of this truth as it relates to America now! Many attempts are being made these days to induce a bicentennial fever. I say induce because given present circumstances national rejoicing can hardly be expected to erupt of its own accord. But I ask you as I have asked myself (because I am one of those reluctant celebrants), can it be that we are hesitant to celebrate a milestone in our history because, like the neurotic, we have forgotten the good and remembered only the bad?

Revisionist history goes too far when it judges personalities from the past by light they did not have. Last December I set out on the day before Christmas to find a Christmas tree. I discovered that the further uptown one went the cheaper and better the trees became. I uncovered that wisdom in Riverdale. A helpful neighbor there advised me to go still further for even better buys. Needing some refreshment before heading for Westchester County, I slipped into a diner for coffee. A fellow next to me at the counter was intent upon sharing his views on the world. I was prepared to listen. 'Long about the second cup of coffee he said, "You know, my great-grandfather left some impressive mementos that indicate that he was a hero in the Revolutionary War. He must have been one of the great ones to hail from New England. But now," he said, drifting into a stern tonality, "Now I look

at it differently. Once I was proud of him, now I am ashamed." I suggest that this is at once both arrogant and unfair.

Two things, as Americans, we do well to remember. One is those who died to secure the liberties we enjoy. I confess that the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars are not two of my favorite organizations. They are so predictably and unfailingly hawkish in their outlook. And the President when he addresses them in national convention always seems to rattle the sword and speak in a "Rule Britannia" vein. Yet... yet...yet... those institutions and the individuals that they represent remind us of an indebtedness that we should never, never forget.

Richard Neuhaus, who will be speaking from this pulpit later on in the summer, is quite right when he says, "All of history is one endless massacre stretching back to the dawn of mankind. Wherever we are in history, we stand on a mountain of corpses -- and, however terrible the thought, we are the beneficiaries of all this carnage." 3

National defense is as vital as a local police department, and a thoroughgoing pacifist would have to stand for the elimination of both! Perhaps an annual visit to a Veterans Administration Hospital should be a requirement for citizenship in this country. We should not invoke an abhorrence of war to justify indifference to those who paid the price supreme.

The other thing that bears remembering is the quality of the American Constitution. This Republic is the noblest political experiment in history. That we have failed to live out fully the text and promise of the Constitution does not in the least detract from its inherent worth! In my judgment, the political system that is enshrined in the Constitution is now being negated by the economic system with which it is associated. It is most important, especially for those of us who regard ourselves as critics of the nation, to locate the misery correctly. The fault is

not with the political system that is explicated in the Constitution. It is rather with the unjust economic spread that exists in this country that makes a mockery of political freedom. James Madison years ago saw what was coming when he said, "The most common and durable source of faction has been the various and unequal distribution of property." 4

This is the age of the underdog. Our consciousness has been raised to new levels with regard to the American Indian, the American black, the slave traffic and all that came thereafter. Our consciousness has been raised with regard to multitudes of deprived Puerto Ricans in the City of New York and, most recently, with regard to our shabby attitude towards refugees from Vietnam. But this is not the whole story, and we know it.

I had lunch awhile ago with Martin Marty. We were discussing one particular voice in America that is persistently sounding the death knell. Dr. Marty, gifted with swift turns of phrase, said of that despairing prophet, "He has a complete grasp of a half truth."

My friends, without making any claims for chosenness, or any appeal to a manifest destiny, it can be safely said of America that never in the history of the race has so much freedom been available to so many. Millions around the world wish that they were here. We must be doing something right.

We are what we remember. This is true of us as individuals. It is true of us as a church. It is true of us as a nation. Tell me what you remember and I'll tell you who you are.

CLOSING PRAYER

*Eternal God, we rejoice in all who
have faithfully lived and triumphantly
died.*

*Help us to remember them
aright.*

*Teach us the proper uses of
the past that we may the
better serve Thee in the
present.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Bacon, Francis, Essays and New Atlantis, "Of Revenge," p. 18, Walter J. Black, New York, 1942
2. Irish, Jerry A., "Moltmann's Theology of Contradiction," THEOLOGY TODAY, p. 27, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, April, 1975
3. Berger, Peter L., and Neuhaus, Richard J., Movement and Revolution, pp. 56-7, A Doubleday Anchor Book, Garden City, New York, 1970
4. Madison, James, quoted by Paul S. Minear in I Pledge Allegiance, p. 46, The Geneva Press, Philadelphia, 1975

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