

## HONORING THE PAST

Deuteronomy 32: 1-7

Hebrews 12: 1-3

Six years ago this June, Phyllis and I, along with our eight grandchildren, sat around the old oak dining room table in our Montreat cottage. We had just finished our evening meal. As is our tradition, we had given their parents a “night out” and given ourselves precious time alone with our grands - eight spanning nine years in their birthing order. Not a bad count for our three sons who had blessed our lives with five beautiful little girls, and then three handsome boys!

Immediately following dessert, they were ready to bolt for more rock hopping in the stream in front of the cottage. “Hold on a minute!” They froze in their seats, all eyes turned in expectation. “We are going to play a new game. I am going to tell you something about yourself that you do not know.” And so we started. We told Caralee, the oldest, about her “rabbit hopping” as she followed me up the aisle for the showing following her sister Brittany’s baptism. We told about Courtney, at three and one half months, playing the “live Jesus” in the Christmas pageant, and how the worried Joseph had to produce a bottle of formula just as the wise men came forward to present their gifts to the Christ Child.

By this time, Robbie, the youngest at four, was on the edge of his seat: “Do me next, Ganpa, do me next!” And so, I told the story of his baptism, which I was privileged to celebrate as a in an Episcopal Church, because I had retired from this church. It was an epiphany moment, when Willie, then six, with eyes bright, exclaimed, “Ganpa, you were a preacher?!”

My story, their story. My journey, their journey. Only Caralee, the oldest, had any memory of me as “the man in the pulpit,” or was it “Jack in the pulpit” as Phyllis says?

Somehow, these experiences remind me about the importance of remembering, of honoring the past, of the importance of having a story to tell, and the value of sharing it.

On this designated Presbyterian Heritage Sunday, we have gathered here especially to remember and to honor our rich Scottish heritage:

- how the bold and brave, and sometimes brash, John Knox led a grass-roots movement some 450 years ago in Scotland to establish the Protestant (Presbyterian) Church;
- how he and five other clergymen spent four days composing the *Scots Confession*, which predates the *Westminster Confession of Faith* by some 84 years.
- how he boldly confronted Mary, Queen of Scotland, so that she is reported to have said, “I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the armies in Europe.”

We are here to remember and to honor the early focus on liberty which empowered our ancestors to come to this new land, to settle this colony of Virginia. They came with a thirst for freedom, but also a hunger for education which we have inherited as a Presbyterian priority. They set the stage for establishing the 64 colleges and universities and the nine secondary schools still related to our church. They are the ones who shaped our church’s polity—sessions, presbyteries, synods, and General Assembly—which we still practice today. Yes, it is a rich heritage that we honor, that we remember today, and for which we are profoundly grateful.

Now, it needs to be acknowledged that to honor the past is not a very popular thing to do in our culture today. We are often urged to focus on the *now*, to concentrate on the present, to ignore the past. Others urge us to fix our eyes on the future on what is yet to be. To be sure, God calls us to live in the present, and toward the future, but God also calls us to live from the past. Perhaps this is what is often missing in our culture today, in our lives, and even in our churches.

I sometimes wonder whether our failure to honor the past is not part of our problem today. I wonder about the degree to which the moral decline we face in our time—the loss of personal identity, the sense of rootlessness and disorientation—may not find its common genesis in our failure to honor and creatively appreciate our past, our failure to tell and retell our story.

Robert Bellah (and his colleagues) in their book, *Habits of the Heart*, calls our attention to the cancerous individualism that is destroying our sense of community in America. He calls the church to recapture its role of being a "community of memory" that is constantly reminding us of those values, those attitudes, and those "habits of the heart" that hold us together as communities and prompt us to care about something beyond ourselves and our immediate surroundings. Isn't that one of the functions of preaching: to remind us of what we need to remember and are so prone to forget? A community of memory—that's not a bad definition of the church.

Perhaps that's our greatest need today, that's why we have events such as this: to honor the past, to remember that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, without whom we would not be here today.

So think with me for a moment why remembering, why honoring the past is so important, and how this remembering may become a means of grace.

## I. THE PAST GIVES US IDENTITY

In the first place, remembering gives us an identity. From the very earliest stages of human history, men and women have found their identity in recalling the past and knowing they were part of an on-going story. That's how they achieved roots, stability and a sense of who they were—their identity.

Primitive people knew this and experienced it. Story-telling around the open fires was central to the formation of their identity and culture. They knew what we do not know, that without a story to tell, you cannot have a nation, or a culture, or a civilization, or even a personal identity. Without a story of your own life, you don't have a life of your own.

It has been said, "You cannot hear the music unless you have heard the previous notes." Playing one note is only a sound that becomes music when combined with previous notes.

Moses knew the importance of remembering the past. Just before entering the Promised Land, he pleaded with the Israelites to always remember how the Lord "brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." He pleaded with them to recall who they were as a people of God:

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father and he will show you, and your elders and they will tell you.”

In a time of discouragement as captives in Babylon, Isaiah called on the people to "look to the rock from which you were hewn, and the quarry from which you were dug." The Jewish people have always found their identity by remembering the past, by telling their stories—some painful, some glorious—over and over again.

And so it also is for all of us as individuals. Perhaps the best way for you to find out who you are, or to share with another who you are, is by telling your story and by remembering your past. You can know a lot about a person by learning the facts: height, weight, gender, age. But you cannot know who that person really is until you have heard his or her story. Psychologists have long known that the discovery of one's identity comes to a person when he or she is allowed to share their story. “Tell me about yourself,” they begin. Our story locates us; it defines us, it gives us our identity.

Just think with me what happens when we forget, when we no longer have a story to tell, when we live only in the present. Some years ago David Steele, a Presbyterian minister, wrote in the *Presbyterian Outlook* a poignant and moving article entitled, "*Why I Am No Longer Enamored of the 'Now.'*" He had become convinced that that which was wrong with his rather pedestrian life was his inability to live in the now, in the moment. He drank deeply of this new philosophy of his day and tried his best to block out all thoughts of the past, but he failed.

He writes:

*I failed...but where I failed, my mother, bless her, has succeeded. She lives in a perpetual "now." She has Alzheimer's disease. And what this means for my mother is that her past has completely disappeared. It is all gone...every speck of it. She has no childhood reminiscences; no intimation that the picture of my father on her wall is more than a stranger. She recalls nothing about being a wife, or of mothering or of grandmothering. All events, whether they happened 30 years ago or in the last five minutes, are wiped clean. After 80 years of living, she brings to each moment a blank page of memories. Without a history to remember, Mother comes formless into each moment. She simply is.*

Yes, remembering the past is a means of grace. It gives us an identity, and gives meaning and value to the present. “You cannot hear the music unless you have heard the previous notes.”

And, of course, the same is true for communities, for a nation and for us as a church. Carl Sandburg once said: "We know that when a nation goes down and never comes back, when a society or civilization perishes, one condition may always be found. They forgot where they came from. They lost sight of what brought them along." When I listen to all the rhetoric in this presidential election year, I wonder if this may be happening to our country today—we've lost sight of what has brought us along.

The past defines us as individuals, but it also defines us as communities. For example, as Americans, we are defined to some extent by telling our story of what happened in 1776. As Christians, we find our identity by telling and retelling over and over again the story of the life,

death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “Do this in remembrance of me!” As Protestants, we are further defined by remembering what Martin Luther did at the castle of Wittenburg. As Presbyterians, we are defined by remembering Calvin in Geneva and (as we do today) Knox in Scotland, and our 300+ year history in America.

And this individual congregation is defined by recalling our own history. John Holt Rice, a brilliant scholar/theologian, who almost single-handedly birthed Union Seminary; William Armstrong, who lead this and the National Church into Ecumenical-International mission, and lost his life at sea following this call of God; William Plumer, perhaps the greatest preacher of his day, who sent out one-third of his congregation to found the mission church out in the suburbs (among the rich home owners) known today as Second Presbyterian; Thomas Moore, who pastored the beautiful church facing the capitol, who was noted for his work in the war prisons during the Great Conflict, and who almost lost his position following the war when he prayed for Lincoln, who, by the way, was attending a Presbyterian Church. There was Kerr, the hymn writer, and McFaden, the educator, who founded the Westminster School for Girls and was instrumental in founding ATS, and Lapsley Carson, the builder of churches, who was a social liberal in his younger days in Richmond, joining cause with men like E. T. Thompson calling the church into a social witness and leading First into the ghettos, serving the needy and the children.

We, as a church, are defined by the great works of those who have gone before us. They were not saints—they made mistakes—but their efforts to be faithful to God’s call defines us to this day.

Honoring the past, sharing our stories, as we did with our grandchildren, as we are doing in this bicentennial year, gives us our roots, our identity. We are who we were! We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before.

## II. THE PAST INFORMS US FOR LIVING TODAY

In the second place, remembering our past informs us for the living of today. It gives us our sense of values, how we deal with the issues that confront us in today’s world.

What determines your actions—your reactions—in the midst of life? What/who sets your moral/ethical standards? When crises occur, when you hear the physician say, “there is no cure, I am sorry,” from where comes your guidance and your strength? Let me suggest that, at least for me, it comes from the past—from others who have touched my life: my parents, my grandparents, my teachers, my professors, great Saints of the Church, Luther, Calvin, Knox; and particularly my wife and children.

A living example of the influence of others on who I am today is capsulated in my choice of college. The year, 1952: I, a senior, soon to be a graduate of Rock Hill High, on my first and only visit, at that time, to Davidson College. At the end of the visitation interview with the then Dean of students, later to be President, Dr. Sam Spencer, he asked, “Well, Jack, will you be coming to Davidson?” I replied, “Well, sir, I don’t know if I am equipped to handle the academics,” “I’m from Rock Hill. I don’t know.” Dr. Spencer chuckled and responded, “I know

you can do well here, if you desire to come. You see, I too, am from Rock Hill.” That was a pivotal moment in my journey through life. Sam and Ava Spencer, now in their mid nineties, remain dear friends.

When I pause for a moment and remember all the individual people who have touched my life, who have helped shape me, taught me, encouraged me—parents, teachers, friends, ministers, authors, poets, artists, even strangers, particularly children from over the world, so many who didn't even know that they were making a difference to me—my "cup runneth over" with gratitude. And so it is, I trust, with each of you and for our church.

Perhaps you, too, can identify, as I can, with that entry in Albert Schweitzer's diary, near the end of his journey: "One thing that stirs me when I look back over my [life] is the fact that so many people gave me something or were something to me without knowing it...they entered my life and became powers within me. Much that I should not otherwise have felt so clearly or done so effectively was felt or done ...because I...stood under the sway of these people. Hence, I always think that we all live...by what others have given us in the significant moments of our lives.”

As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, we are surrounded (empowered) by so great a cloud of witnesses from the past: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Jesus, Paul, Calvin, Knox. We are empowered through memory of these; we are informed by our heritage for the living of these days.

### III. THE PAST GIVES US HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

And finally, remembering and honoring our past can give us hope for the future. No one knows what the future will bring, either for us as individuals or for us as a church. In some ways, the future is always scary, and it's easy to become discouraged and lose hope. The challenges are enormous, and we always seem so small, so inadequate. The things that could happen to us are frightening. Perhaps when we start feeling this way, we should remember that story of our text, of the Israelites just before they entered the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

Moses had sent out a reconnaissance party to check it out, to see what it was like, to see whether they could occupy the land. When the twelve scouts came back, ten of them gave a very discouraging report: “Yes, the land is flowing with milk and honey," they said, "but the people seem like giants, before whom we are little grasshoppers. So we had better not go."

Do you ever feel that way? Do you feel that there are some giants out there in the future, before whom you seem as a little grasshopper? Some of us feel that way when we are leaving for college, some when we are facing the dismal job market, some when we are facing retirement.

But listen to the report of two scouts, Caleb and Joshua: “Yes, there are some frightening giants out there, but we can conquer the land, for the Lord is with us." Two little grasshoppers, but unafraid to face the giants out there, for "the Lord is with us." How did they know that? Where did they get that courage? They remembered their past.

When they looked back and remembered all the trials and tribulations they had undergone during those 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, and recalled that somehow the Lord had seen them through it all, they had hope for the future, for they knew that the same Lord who had been with them in the past would walk with them into the future.

And so it is with us. Yes, there are indeed some "gigantic" challenges and some frightening realities out there in our future, before which we seem so small and powerless. But take heart by remembering your past, and recalling again how the Lord has been with you through all those difficult days and blessed you beyond your wildest dreams. And trust with all your heart that the same God who has been with you in the past will walk with you in the future.

Remember Jesus' promise: "...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Remember Paul's affirmation: In prison, near death, he writes, "Nothing, in life or death, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Remember, and you will have hope for the future!

Yes, honor your past, remember your heritage, "A means of God's grace," for it tells us who we are, it empowers us for the living of these days, and it gives us hope for the future.

Remember, my friends, honor the past, God's gift to you, and give thanks!

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