

May 24, 2020

Remembering

Shepherd's Grace Church

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1: 1-14)

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your

own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

6 `I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17: 1-11)

So, this is Ascension Sunday...probably one of the least observed of the Christian holidays. The Catholic tradition puts slightly more emphasis on it, but most Christian denominations pass right by it in anticipation of the coming Sunday of Pentecost, the giving of the Holy Spirit. It is important, as we worship this morning, however that we remember Jesus' words, "Now I must leave you and it is better for you that I do for unless I leave, you cannot receive the Spirit who will be your guide. (John 15, my paraphrase)

Without this dramatic exit from the stage, the entrance of the Holy Spirit would not be possible. Still, as Jesus ascends to take his rightful place at the right hand of the father, He does not leave us or abandon us. Instead, he resides with us in the temple we have created for Him in our hearts. For this reason, we remember, we celebrate, we believe!

This is also Memorial Day Weekend. We celebrate it this year, still somewhat isolated from one another. The rules are being lifted to some degree so that we may come together a little more and over the next few weeks and months, perhaps even more than that. Thankfully, though we can come together a little this weekend to remember and to celebrate and to bear witness to those brave people, both men and women who have gone before us.

It occurs to me that if there is a holiday we can celebrate in separation from one another and still enjoy and embrace the full meaning and purpose of the holiday, Memorial Day is that holiday. What I mean is that perhaps this year we can celebrate the original meaning of the holiday even if we have to restrict some more of the lighthearted activities.

Memorial Day was originally called Decoration Day until 1968. Its purpose was for families to decorate the graves of those who had died protecting and serving the rights and freedoms of our country as they understood them. The holiday might have begun in Charleston S.C. where more than 200 Union soldiers died and were buried during the Civil War. There, a group of African American townspeople organized to decorate the graves of these unknown heroes so their acts of bravery might not be forgotten. (Time Magazine)

There were many other cities in both the North and South who claimed the honor of being first with Decoration Day, but all had a similar purpose; to recognize the fallen soldiers from the Civil War. After the end of World War II, the holiday took further shape and was officially recognized in 1968. Traditionally, the holiday marks the beginning of summer with acts of serious reflection and a time for fun and looking forward.

This year, as we find ourselves engaged in a struggle once again, perhaps it is important to remind ourselves that a large part of the celebration we come to on this day is a celebration of remembrance! While we cannot be together perhaps with all our family, we can still remember. This morning, as we stand or sit apart, I invite you to look around at the surroundings in which you find yourself. While you are doing some of that, let me show you around some of mine.

Over in the far corner of the bar area, there is a shiff-a-robe that I have repurposed to house glassware and a small refrigerator. The furniture piece was built by my grandfather, George Dickson and came into my father's possession. It has been estimated that it was built sometime around 1920 and was re-stained by me when I moved it downstairs. Every time I use it, I think of my grandpa and remember some of the stories of my own experiences with him. I can remember him helping my dad wallpaper several of the rooms in the home I grew up in. I can remember him, after he turned 90 standing on scaffolding three stories up at our house to finish painting the outside of the house.

Grandpa was a man of many talents and it is fun to remember them. This weekend, however, I remember him as a soldier in the Spanish American War. Sometime this weekend, Rochelle and I will go out to decorate his grave along with that of his brother John. The two are close to each other and remind me of a tradition of service that has long been a part of our family.

Next to the shiff-a-robe is a buffet that I converted into a bar. The buffet belonged to my grandmother and grandfather on my mom's side. Nanny and Grandad kept this table in their kitchen in Oklahoma City for as long as I can remember and when I open a drawer or cabinet in it, I remember the times I used to play hide and seek with Grandad, or the trouble I used to get into with Nana.

We will not be able to decorate their graves this weekend because they are resting in Oklahoma City. We will be thinking about them as we make our way through the memories here a little closer to our home. I will be thinking of their service and dedication to others and the values and qualities they instilled in their family.

Of course, sitting inside the shiff-a-robe and is a horseshoe wine rack Broderick made for us. As I look at it, I remember the future that is still ahead of him and the many ways our family still has to touch the lives of others...ways which we do not yet know nor can we anticipate.

Above the bar are cabinets our son-in-law helped finish and later gave to us. Craig proudly served his country and today we remember the service not only of the dead but also the living.

As we head back to the fireplace, I realize I have not mentioned it in the past several weeks even though it has been the centerpiece for much of the worship we have shared together. Today, I remember that this fireplace was hand built by the people who first had this house built. The original owner and his family hauled in the rock and laid it in place themselves.

When we were considering buying a home in this area, this fireplace was one of the key reasons we chose this one. I like the idea that there is a uniqueness to this place...a way that it is set apart and a way that it creates a place to make memories. Certainly, in the last few weeks we as a congregation have made some memories here in this place and together. I will forever remember those memories and cherish them forever.

Still, even as I return to the fireplace there are a few other memories I want to share with you. Near the fireplace is another buffet which belonged once to Rochelle's grandmother and grandfather. The table and chairs that go with it are the dining room furniture we use upstairs. The piece of furniture reminds me of Margaret and Clifford and the love they have for family and the beautiful family they made together and eventually welcomed me into.

There standing next to the fire place, in a location in which it does not normally reside is the cane that was carved by my Grandpa Dickson while he was at Fort Benning in Georgia preparing for his time in the army. We usually keep this cane upstairs by the front door for two reasons. First, we do not want Kenton to accidentally think it is firewood and burn it, and second, because I remember it standing at the entrance of my Grandfather's home every time I came over there. At the entrance to the house is "Just where it belongs."

Finally, this morning, I want to call your attention to the mantle of our fireplace. First, notice that we have finally removed our Easter decorations. I will bet you thought we were going to leave them up until the 4th of July! In our defense, I remind you that in the Church calendar, we are still in the Easter season until next week. We did not leave them up just because we were too lazy to take them down even though that was a small part of the reason.

Our mantle this morning and for every morning of the summertime will reflect reminders that during the summer we celebrate the freedoms we cherish so deeply in our household. As I look at it this morning on Memorial Day weekend, I am reminded that all 7 of my Dad's brothers served in the military and that all of them returned. I am reminded of the service of my grandfather's and of the sacrifice of my grandmothers. I am intrigued by the possibilities that exist for my children to serve in some way and am eager to see in exactly what way that might be.

In the few decorations that rest on our mantle this morning there are a multitude of memories and one that stands above the rest. It is the one that does not ordinarily belong in our household. It normally rests with my mom in her apartment. I borrowed it for this morning so I could illustrate to you the memories that are all around us if we choose to notice them.

Of course, the memento of which I speak is the flag that decorated my father's final resting place. This flag serves as a reminder today of the service not only he, but so many men and women have made to the ideals of freedom and liberty that formed and continue to define this great nation. The flag you see here on this mantle reminds me of the words of Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg. "These men gave the last full measure of devotion."

Remembering is such a powerful tool in our lives. Often times we walk right by our memories without giving them a thought, but today invites a double dose of remembering. Not only is Memorial Day a holiday specifically set aside

for remembering but so is Ascension Sunday. Look carefully at the passages we have before us today.

Remember, Luke writes. Well, He does not exactly say remember but he says, surely you read my first book. You have read his first book, right? Remember what I said in my first book Theophilus! I told you all about Jesus and the things he did and the teachings he gave. Remember how he was born? Remember how he was baptized? Remember how he testified? Remember how he suffered? Remember how he died? Remember?

Today, as Jesus leaves this world and assumes his rightful position at the right hand of God, we are called to remember the things he taught us and to take them to heart.

You see, remembering is more than just an idle past-time. Remembering is a call to action. It is a call to encouragement. It is a call to learning. When Luke writes of all the things Jesus did, it is a call to remember all Jesus did for us. It is a call to remember the work He did to save us from our sin and shortcomings and make us worthwhile to stand once again in the presence of God!

When He tells us to remember the instructions He gave through the Holy Spirit to His apostles, Luke is inviting us to learn that his agency extends beyond the words Jesus spoke when he was alive. Luke is inviting us to recognize that the Holy Spirit will remind us, not only of what Jesus said, but of what Jesus meant in those things He said. (John 15)

Luke is also reminding us of the growing process the Apostles and disciples went through during their relationship with Jesus. For those who are students of Mark's gospel, you know that the disciples were painted there as largely clueless. They were unable to understand Jesus' message of the coming kingdom. They wanted rescue from the events of this world, and they wanted it now! They simply could not comprehend a world beyond the one they could see, feel, touch.

The Apostles and Disciples Jesus chose were clueless, but they are clueless no more. Remember the passage as Luke shares it. Theophilus, one who is loved by God and is loved by God according to the Greek translation, recalls not the ineptitude of the disciples, but the growth of the disciples. Luke reminds him, reminds us that these disciples now pay attention to Jesus' instructions.

They do not question his death. They watched and witnessed and ran away but they came back. They are convinced by the proofs that are offered, His revelation of Himself to Peter, His greeting of the men on the road to Emmaus, and many others that He is alive! They have matured to the point where they can accept a concept of life beyond the one they had previously considered.

They listen carefully as he talks to them about the Kingdom of God and they obey his command to remain in Jerusalem even though they have no evidence of the coming gift of the Holy Spirit! These are no longer the addle minded Apostles whom Jesus first chose; they are now the forward-thinking ambassadors of the church whom Jesus will send out as witnesses to the world!

Even when they ask the question about whether He will restore the Kingdom of Israel, when Jesus corrects them, they do not press the point. The information they asked for is not for them to know. They asked, they wondered, they were told, and they move on. Their maturity in this situation is what they are inviting us to remember today.

In fact, as we remember this morning, we are also reminded to grow up, to become more mature, more thinking Christians. It has often been said that those who do not know history are destined to repeat it. When the disciples ask the question, is this the time, they are giving Jesus an opportunity to teach.

His very last lesson is that there are some things that are not for us to know. It is not for us to know when He will return. It is not for us to know how God has divided days or periods of time. It is not for us to know the way in which God will reveal God's plan. Jesus' last lesson for us is to know that God is worthy of our trust.

Remembering all that we have seen and learned, we should be able to comprehend that lesson. The proofs that Jesus was raised from the dead are convincing. They were convincing to the disciples who were with Him in the day and they should be convincing to us even today. Over the years, we have tried to manipulate history. We have tried to conceive an outcome that works to our greatest advantage and work toward that pre-conceived outcome.

In no case has that worked to our advantage. The United States fought a civil war with some dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal and all are endowed by their creator with inalienable rights, the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Those who worked diligently for this

belief all in their power to bring about this reality. The result: slavery was abolished but racism and discrimination became even more insidious.

In World War II, we fought to end tyranny from an evil we believed was oppressive. Some manipulated the process of that war and carried that manipulation to our own shores. Here in our own nation Senator McCarthy persecuted people for exercising one of the fundamental rights of our society, free speech. The war we fought brought bigotry and hatred to the people of our own country.

Today, we struggle with an enemy that cannot be seen or heard. Some give voice to that enemy and argue that we should stay inside and isolate from one another to combat the enemy. Others argue that we should ignore the risk and continue with life as we have known it. Both should loudly and are deeply interested in the safety and welfare of all whom they care about. The result is that we have created a national argument and have divided the country around this topic as much as McCarthy did and as much as slavery did.

What have we learned? Hopefully, we have learned that we cannot manipulate history or people in such a way as to try to achieve our own agenda. Jesus response in the face of the question from his disciples was to remind them that there is a greater source of control in our world. History is not for us to know. It is for us to learn from and today we must acknowledge that we have not done a great job of learning.

God is in control. That is the lesson we are to learn. It is His kingdom we pray for and His alone! He has the authority and the power. Jesus reminds us of this and then makes a promise that leaves us responsible for learning the lesson. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are given great power. We are given great power.

We are not mere bystanders in the history that is occurring around us. Our grandfathers and grandmothers did not stand idly by and watch as the world attempted to take from them those things which God had given. They did not accede to the threats to their liberties and freedoms. They stood up and they became witness to the mighty works of God in their nation. They recognized that the nation we live in was not and is not perfect, but they believed that what ever was second best was a distant second.

Today we remember them for their bravery but also for their willingness to trust in something greater than themselves. They did not say, "I am going to abolish slavery," but instead we are going to abolish slavery! They did not say

"I am going to put an end to the genocide and tyranny that exists in another part of the world." Instead they said, let us join together to put an end to this tyranny because a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Today we remember these heroes of ours because of what they did together, and we are challenged to do the same thing!

After Jesus gave the disciples the power to witness to His mighty acts through His trust in God, he was raised up and taken out of sight. When the angels who appeared to the disciples explained what was happening, the disciples did not scatter as they had done before. Instead, they learned from their mistakes and they stayed together. In the future they would argue about the mission they were involved in. Should they include all people? What about the women?

Their argument, however brought them closer together. It reminded them of the commandment Jesus gave them, of their purpose...to Love one another.

Today, we are called to that same struggle. Do we witness to the whole world, even to the ends of the earth? Or are some excluded? We can argue and we can discuss, but we must not divide! We must stand together! WE must remember the lessons Jesus taught. We are One in Him!

Our forefathers learned this lesson. As Donnie Huffman writes, "He was there in Philadelphia in 1776. He was there at Valley Forge when the general put the British in a fix. He was there at Flanders Field at the war to end all wars. He was there on that Sunday Morning on that Sunkist Hawaiian Shore!"

The disciples saw him disappear, but they know that he never leaves them or abandons them. They learned that He overcame even death for them and that He is always with them, standing at their side. Today, we remember that He is with us also. He is in the memories of our fathers and mothers whom we remember today!

This Jesus, the one whom we saw go away, is the same Jesus who broke into time for us, so that we might live together! This Jesus broke out of time to remind us that this world is only temporary. His kingdom is not of this world, but His prayer is for all of us. It is a prayer that we remember that we celebrate, that we believe! Amen!