

4 November 2018

The Sin of Forgetfulness

Deuteronomy 4:5-9

We read Deuteronomy chapter 4, verses 5-9:

⁵See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. ⁶You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' ⁷For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? ⁸And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? ⁹But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

I have a hobby. I read sociological studies of religion in America. Yes, I am a sad, pathetic man. But I have a whole shelf of books on that subject in my office, books that chart the changes in American Christianity over time and project directions the church might take in the future. I read blogs and journal articles on the topic, and I go to conferences with names like “Emerging Church” and “The Future of the Church.” I believe that we are on the cusp of a new Reformation, as dramatic as the one Martin Luther kicked off just over 500 years ago.

But that doesn't mean that everything that's said about the coming church is worth hearing. A few years ago I drove across the country to a conference called “The Future of the Church,” sponsored by a small Christian publishing company in Colorado. What I heard there, mostly, was that the church of the future will buy all its programming materials from a small Christian publishing company in Colorado. Who knew?

No, it wasn't all bad. There were some good ideas there, too, but I left that conference frustrated with the self-satisfied attitude of the conference, an attitude of nobody-else-is-as-clever-and-farsighted-as-we-are. Speaker after speaker reeled off grim statistics about the numerical decline of the church, suggesting that the traditional church was on its last legs and could only be saved by adopting whatever new approach that speaker was promoting. Every idea was presented as *the* way to save the old, decrepit, dying church, and it bothered me more and more as the week went on. The bias for much of the conference was that whatever was old was bad and had to be replaced at once with something new and shiny, available for a limited time only in the book store. Yes, the church has challenges today. But not everything is broken.

Let us not commit the sin of forgetfulness. In Deuteronomy 4, as Moses stood before the People of Israel, looking out over the Promised Land, he gave them this promise: “You're about to go to a new place, and it will be very different, but God will bring you through safely.” Then he gave them this warning: “And once you're there, once the new life has begun, *take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let*

them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

You see, when we put aside the past, we also put aside the memory of God's love that has led us to this point. Yes, we need to read the signs of the times to the best of our ability. Yes, we need to adapt to our context when that context changes. But we must never forget that we are here today because God, our help in ages past, brought us here.

Today is a day for remembering. As we celebrate new ministries like the IM Church, and rejoice in new members and new staff and new brickwork – we know that the only reason we are here at all, able to begin anything new, is because of those who have gone before us. This year, for instance, we remember people like Char Kaehler, who once started a block party in her neighborhood and extended that hospitality to running Coffee Fellowship here at Lake Street. We remember Grace Dodge, who filled that pew – right there – every Sunday. We remember Dale Wollum, who became adopted father to children across his neighborhood and across racial and ethnic boundaries that no one else would cross. We remember Erma Peterson, the single woman who out-managed the men at City Hall in a time when most women were part of the typing pool. We remember Greg Gruman, who filled our classes with his questions and our sanctuary with his rich bass voice. We remember Karen Frank, who led churches across Wisconsin with wit and humor – a pastor's wife who declined to conform to the stereotype. We remember John Bergeron and Donna Bachman and Donna Juedes. And we invite you to remember those whose lives have shaped you and whose absence has left a hollow within. These helped us come this far. Let us not commit the sin of forgetfulness.

Today, All Saints Day, we remember that God has always been with us – both through the work of this church and through the lives of those who ministered here. Yes, an unknown world awaits us, and yes, the times, they are a-changing. We must not hunker down behind our walls and screw our eyes shut and hide from the future. But if there is anything more dangerous than refusing to look toward the future, it is refusing to acknowledge the past.

And so we read these names today, remembering who they were to us, remembering how God worked through them to make us who we are. As I read these names, I invite family members to come forward and light a candle as a visible remembrance, and I invite all whose lives have been touched by that person to stand in testimony to that life.

Let us not commit the sin of forgetfulness.

John Bergeron, husband of Phyllis Bergeron

Donna Bachman, sister of Blanche Bischoll

Mabel Holmes, mother of Beverly Fedie.

Charlotte Kaehler, mother of Becky Lasure and Kari Kaehler

Grace Dodge, mother of Jack Dodge and Diane Brunelle

Erma Peterson

Dale Wollum, husband of RoseMary Wollum and father of Julie Holzinger

Greg Gruman
Karen Frank, wife of Don Frank
Donna Juedes, mother of Pegi Fleming

We invited those of you who got here early to light a votive candle before taking their seats – a remembrance for anyone whom you mourn today. Others may not have had time, and so we want to provide a few minutes now for anyone who would like to do so while Edna and Jennifer play. It doesn't have to be someone you lost this year; grief doesn't follow a schedule. We pause now, for a time of private remembrance.

Let us pray:

We bless your holy name, O God,
for all your servants who, having finished their course, now rest from their labors.
Give us grace to follow the example
of their steadfastness and faithfulness, to your honor and glory;
through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Remember that conference on “The Future of the Church” I mentioned? Well, one session at the conference was called “The Future of Worship.” The first hour and a half of that session was spent in an extended worship experience, designed to introduce us to hip, creative ways to worship – a service that was supposed to appeal to all the senses. Without describing the whole thing, let me give you one example. Seated at tables, we were given three little condiment cups with different substances in them and asked to taste each substance. Then we were told to choose one and to meditate prayerfully on how that taste reminded us of Jesus. My first taste I recognized at once: Sriracha hot sauce. Maybe you know that taste. It's very hip, but it led to a problem. You see, once you've tasted really hot sauce, that's pretty much all you taste for a while. No idea what the second substance was. The third might have been caramel ice cream topping. So then I meditated. Here's what I meditated on. Don't mix Sriracha and caramel topping. It will not make you think of Jesus.

And why would we go through all this painfully contrived silliness anyway? We already have a way to taste and see that the Lord is good. We already have a way to remember Jesus with our senses of taste and smell. We in the Church have been doing it for two thousand years, ever since Jesus Christ himself began the practice as a time of remembrance. While we gather at this table, take this bread, drink this cup, we remember that Christ became one of us, ate with us, drank with us, lived with us, died for us, and by rising from the dead lifted our souls from sin and death. As we join around this table, we do not look to a flashy new future; we look to a gracious, enduring past. We remember that God has brought us this far, through deserts and dangers. We remember that God has fed us when we were hungry, refreshed us when we were parched, and taught us through the lives and examples of those whom we remember today.

And today we pledge ourselves: we will not forget.