

“If Memory Serves...”

Pastor Ron Dunn

May 29, 2016

It is, of course, a saying that we hear people use from time to time. “If memory serves,” they will say, and then complete the sentence by recalling what it is that their memory has to contribute to the conversation.

This morning, on this Memorial Day week-end, I would like to use this expression as a way of underscoring my premise that our memories do indeed, serve us in ways that provide meaning and significance to the living of life. Our memories serve to remind us of the importance of our past, the significance of the present and the possibilities of our future. When you stop to think about it, the gift of our memory is an indispensable tool in giving shape to our identity and direction as human beings.

We can see the significance of the power of memory in our lesson from the Book of Joshua. It was after the death of Moses that the mantle of leadership was passed to Joshua. It was his responsibility to lead the people of Israel across the Jordan River and into the long awaited Promised Land, the land of Canaan. It was the last leg of a forty year journey for the People of Israel. This was the moment that they, as a people, had dreamed about for so long that there were likely some who couldn’t grasp that it was actually taking place. “It was too good to be true!” some of them must have thought.

But it was true and Joshua wanted to make sure that the reality and significance of this monumental moment was not lost upon his people. Some of you may remember some of the more sensational details of this story. When the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant, stepped into the Jordan, this ancient tale informs us that the waters of the Jordan “stood still, rising up in a single heap” while the people then crossed over on dry ground.

If this occurrence sounds vaguely familiar, it should. For this was, essentially, the same “crossing over” experience that the people had when they began their wilderness journey by fleeing the Egyptian army across the “dried up” Red Sea. Now, with their journey at an end, they were again “crossing over” into the Promised Land on the dry ground of the Jordan River bottom. Rather than spend our time speculating about how this could be or what caused the river to be stopped up, I choose, instead, simply to take it at face value and not miss the deeper literary truth that the people understood that it was God who led them out of slavery and it was this same God who led them into a new land flowing with milk and honey.

Our lesson tells us that Joshua, under God’s direction, wanted to underscore this truth by creating a monument that would remind the people for generations to come of how God had acted on their behalf. After the crossing was completed, Joshua instructed one representative from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to take a stone from the river bottom where the priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, had stood. They were then to place these stone together, building a monument on the dry land. Then, in the time to come,

when their children would ask them, “What do these stones mean to you?” they would be able to tell them about how God had cut off the waters of the Jordan so that the people could cross. Our passage then concludes with this summary statement: **“So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.”**

Joshua understood that, in the years to come, it would be very easy to become so absorbed with the challenges of the present moment that the past and the lessons it had to offer, could be easily forgotten. This stone monument, assembled on the banks of the Jordan, would serve to remind their children and their children’s children that God had delivered them into this new land.

If memory serves, it will remind us of the importance of our past and the ways in which it has given shape and direction not only to our present, but also to our future. It was true of Israel in its’ very early days as a nation and it remains true for us in our own life as a nation today. Our ability to remember what has been is absolutely essential to giving shape to the prospect of what will be.

It was in the aftermath of the bloody destruction of the Civil War that there were several events that chose to recognize and remember those from both the north and the south who had lost their lives.

As the movement to formally remember these lives gained momentum, it was officially recognized as Decoration Day. In 1882, the name was changed to Memorial Day and in time, was recognized as the one day each year when our nation would pause to remember those who had lost their lives in military service to our country. As the decades passed, this remembrance was expanded to include not just those who died in the Civil War, but those had perished in the wars that would sadly, follow—all the way up until our present moment of time.

So it is on this Memorial Day that we pause to remember the men and women who have given the ultimate gift of their lives for the sake of our nation and the values and principles which are foundational to who we are as a people. This, of course, in no way is intended to glorify war and the destructive forces that it has unleashed. War has been and remains the ultimate symbol of the brokenness of humanity, the great blight upon the creation that God has called “good.” But it is to recognize the importance of remembering those who have lost their lives in the hope of making this world a better and indeed, a safer place.

To forget the courage and the conviction that these lives embodied would be to lose a significant part of our soul as a nation. It would be to cut ourselves off from the awareness of the magnitude of their sacrifice and the difference that this sacrifice has made in each of our lives. And so we remember, this morning, the legacy of those who have laid down their lives for the land and the people that they have loved. If memory serves, their witness will always be a part of our identity as a people—challenging us to live with similar selflessness and courage.

If memory serves, we will, likewise, remember our past as a people of faith. We will remember the witness of those who have gone on before us—the “great cloud of witnesses” that the writer of Hebrews references in our second lesson of the morning.

These are the ones, the writer reminds us, who, “through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, and won strength out of weakness.” Some were “mocked and flogged,” some “chained and imprisoned,” some were stoned to death, sawn in two or killed by the sword.” In other words, these are the ones who were willing to be “tormented and persecuted” for their faith and even willing to give up their lives by being “killed by the sword.”

The writer offers this moving and impressive litany in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews in order to invite his readers to remember the powerful witness of these lives that have poured the foundation upon which they now build. It is the writer’s way of reminding his readers to remember their past and to find strength and courage in the “cloud of witnesses” that now surrounds them as they “run with perseverance the race that is before them.”

It is, you see, in remembering their past that they find the key that unlocks the door to their future.

In the film, “The Lion King,” you will remember that Simba, the cub son of the great, Mufasa, flees to the wilderness after allowing the evil rival of his father, Scar, to convince him that he is responsible for Mufasa’s death. It is, of course, Scar who has orchestrated the entire plot, but Simba doesn’t know that and believes that he is the one responsible. While he is away, the once beautiful Pride Lands have become desolate under the control of Scar and his wicked Hyena friends.

In the scene we are about to see, Simba is confronted by his father’s wise mandrill friend, Rafiki, who tells him that his father is alive. In order to prove it, he invites Simba to follow him to the brook. Let’s watch...

This, of course, is the turning point in the story as Simba is able to remember his past and the legacy that his father has left him. As a result, he leaves his self-imposed exile and returns to reclaim his role as the rightful king, bringing new life and hope to his pride.

It’s a simple story with a timeless message: In our choice to remember our past and who we are, we will find the path that leads to the future and who we will yet be.

In a time in which change is constant and there is a never ending stream of trends, fads and the “next big thing,” if we are not careful, we can easily lose our footing and be swept away by the “current of the current.” **That is why it is so important to remember—to take the time to remember who we are...to remember why we are...and to remember where we are going.**

Let me be clear that change is not the enemy or the adversary. Change is a natural and needed occurrence of life. Change is necessary for our development and our growth. But change needs to be guided and shaped by the power of our past—the memory of those who

have gone before us, the cloud of witnesses that now surround us. In remembering those lives and the ways in which they were lived, we find an invaluable resource for informing and inspiring the way that we will live into our future.

So it is that I invite you, this morning, to remember who you are by remembering the lives of those men and women who have laid down their lives on your behalf and mine...

I invite you to remember who you are by remembering the lives of “the cloud of witnesses” who likewise, laid down their lives for the sake of their faith and their conviction that God’s love is stronger than the forces of war and the power of even death itself.

In the midst of your Memorial Day festivities, take some time this afternoon or tomorrow to be still and to remember. Take some time to read about or think about the magnitude of the courage, the conviction and the commitment has been rendered for the sake of the greater good of all. And, if you will, allow yourself to think about the ways that this legacy of self-less service might shape and direct your own life and the way you will choose to live.

- **In what ways might you choose to serve others?**
- **In what ways might you choose to set aside your own needs or desires in favor of addressing the need of the common good?**
- **In what ways might the power of your own memory inform and inspire the path that you take into the future?**

If memory serves, we will remember that in this time of unrelenting change, our past must inform our present and inspire our future.

We will remember that we are not alone, but are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who, even now, cheer us on in the race that is before us.

We will remember, in the words of the writer of Hebrews, to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, as we run with perseverance this race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

Amen!