

"Lest We Forget"
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We are all aware that even though this is the first week-end of summer, it is also the weekend when we celebrate Memorial Day. The celebration of Memorial Day began after the Civil War as a spontaneous movement, born from a desire to remember and honor those who had fallen during the war. In the beginning it was called Decoration Day, as many decorated the graves of the fallen soldiers. In some places it was called Memorial Day, which became its official name in 1967. The need for Memorial Day reflects a common human tendency – as a nation we are prone to forget, and so we need reminders of significant events and the sacrifices that they have required from our citizens, sacrifices that can impact how we live.

As Christians we also need reminders of who God is and who we are. As I read today's text listen for Peter's encouragements to remember.

Text: 2 Peter 1:1-15

Peter is writing to believers in Christ, but he knows that they are prone to forget who they have become in Christ. He's not shy about reminding them and he says he intends to keep on doing it, even though they know these things already (he sounds just like I do when I remind my kids of something and their response is always I know, I know – they do know it, but that doesn't mean they always remember it). He's also concerned to make sure that they remember these things after his death. He's not leaving anything to chance. We too are women and men of faith, who have trusted in Christ and have experienced the transformation that the Holy Spirit brings in our lives, and we too need the same reminders. So I'd like to spend a few minutes considering why we forget, what it is we need to remember, and then reflecting on how we might remember.

Why do we forget?

We all know lots of jokes about how we forget things as we age, and as I get older I appreciate more of their humor. But I don't think the spiritual amnesia that Peter is describing has anything to do with age. Nor is it the result of a hard bump on the head. When I look at my life here are some of the reasons I forget:

Sometimes it's because of the myth of self-sufficiency – things are going well for me and I trust in myself and my own abilities. In our OT reading, Moses is telling the people that they will be tempted to forget their God, and to take credit themselves for the richness of the blessing of God in their lives. Our 21st C culture values self-sufficiency and independence, and I need to remember, as they did so long ago, that all that I am and have is a gift of God.

On the other hand, when things are not going well I tend to trust in my own abilities to fix it. I take matters into my own hands and charge ahead, confident that I am in control and can manage everything and everyone.

Sometimes I just get busy – my life can get so hectic and it's easy to get stuck in the weeds and lose my perspective on who I am and where I'm going. It's as though I'm on auto-pilot. I barely have time to get everything done, let alone to think about who I am.

Sometimes when we are in crisis or physical or emotional pain, it's hard to remember. I saw this first-hand during my internship as a chaplain at the Jefferson hospital. One night I received a call to visit a young woman. As I chatted with her I realized that she was overwhelmed with her situation and all she could think about was the long-term consequences of her unexpected illness. Her despair made it very difficult for her to remember anything.

You may be familiar with the bumper sticker – To err is human, but to really mess things up you need a computer. Any of you who have switched to working with Vista understand what I'm saying. I sometimes think we're a bit like a computer – whether in good times or bad, it is easy to resort to our default setting – self-sufficiency and autonomy. But we must remember that as Christians we have a new software with a new operating system. Our XP world is dead and we need to remember we're now working in Vista. Our life of sin and self sufficiency is over, and we now live in a new relationship of trust and dependence on God.

One thing I love about the Bible is that it is full of real people. They may not worry about XP or Vista but they too have the same challenges to remember that they live in a new operating system. This is why I think Peter's continual reminders come from his own experience. Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians a time when he had to give Peter a stern talking to.

Peter was in Antioch and was eating with the Gentiles. Now this was radical, for Jews did not mix with Gentiles, let alone eat with them. But sometime earlier Peter had had an amazing vision in which God had shown him that he is to preach the gospel to Gentiles and accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ. And that's why he was eating with the Gentiles in Antioch. But when some of the stricter Jewish Christians come to Antioch Peter separates himself from the Gentiles – he resorts to his default position – Jews and Gentiles don't mix. Paul takes it upon himself to remind Peter about the truth of the gospel, that in Christ God is calling people from every tribe and tongue and nation to a restored relationship with God. Even Peter, who has experienced such a dramatic override of his default position, still struggles to remember, and so he understands that we too will struggle with the tendency to resort to our old familiar ways.

What does Peter want us to remember?

Peter tells us that we sometimes forget that we have been cleansed from our past sins. Earlier in our chapter he explains what this means. Salvation is not just from something – an escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust or desire. Salvation is also to something – to becoming partakers in the divine nature. By this he does not mean that our personalities are somehow merged into God's being or essence, so that we in effect become gods ourselves. When we trust in Christ and the work of redemption that was

accomplished in his death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts and enables us to live a life that is pleasing to God.

As we say no to sin and yes to God, the Spirit who now lives in us, is working change in us and we begin to exhibit some of the qualities or characteristics of God – holiness, love, compassion, mercy, goodness, self-control. We begin the process of maturing spiritually, of behaving more like Jesus. We play a part in this process – Peter exhorts us to make every effort to continue in the life of faith we have begun, to live by the new operating code that has been written on our hearts.

And the result will be that we will live effective and fruitful lives. When we forget what God has done for us in Christ we become spiritual couch potatoes – ineffective and unfruitful. Christianity is not just being content with knowing we're going to heaven, although that is important, it is recognizing the freedom that we have in Christ and using that freedom to serve God and others.

So, the bad news is we are often forgetful. I never fail to identify with the hymn writer's words "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love".

But there is good news – we serve a God who does not forget, who is faithful to his covenant promises, who delights every time we remember and respond again to God's grace, seeking to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts and lives. How comforting it is to know that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning.

How can we remember who we are?

There are lots of things we can do that help us remember but I'd like to focus on one for a few minutes - what we call the liturgy, or the form of our worship service.

Our liturgy is a re-enactment of the gospel, a re-enactment that reminds us every week of what God has done for us and how we are invited to respond to his mercy and grace. Our call to worship reminds us that it is the Lord who takes the initiative and calls us back into a restored relationship with God, our Creator and King. The confession of sin reminds us that we come to God as sinners, in need of forgiveness and restoration, but that God promises to forgive, cleanse, and renew us. God meets us and ministers to us in the Word as it is read, preached, and sung, always teaching us and reminding us who we are as God's people. And we respond to God's grace in our lives in songs of praise, in prayer, in affirming our faith, in giving gifts to God, and in thanksgiving. Then God sends us back into the world to be Christ's ambassadors, ministers of reconciliation. Each week in our worship service we are rehearsing the gospel story, and as we do, we are building into our hearts and minds a pattern for remembering that can help us in our daily lives, whether we are self-sufficient, too busy, at ease, or in despair. The gospel story is not one that only happened 2000 plus years ago, it happens again every day, and we live not only because of that story but every time we remember the story.

Many of you may have seen Saving Private Ryan, a film about 8 men who, following the D-Day invasion of France are sent behind enemy lines to find and bring back Private James Ryan. Ryan's three brothers have died during the war and so for the sake of the parents, who have already sacrificed 3 sons, the government decides to bring Ryan home. The mission is dangerous and violent, and several of the men question why eight men should risk their lives for the sake of one. Most of them do die but Ryan is brought safely home. The film opens with Ryan as an elderly man walking amongst the crosses in Normandy. As he stands before the crosses of the men who gave their lives for him he remembers the events of the past, and in a flashback the rest of the film tells the story of his rescue. The flashback ends with the words of the dying Captain John Miller, the leader of the mission, whispered into Ryan's ear: "Earn this, earn it". The film comes back to the present, with Ryan kneeling before Miller's cross. He says: "Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I've tried to live my life as best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes I've earned what all of you have done for me".

James Ryan lived the rest of his life in the light of the sacrifice of Miller and the other men. He owed them his life, and the daily memory of their sacrifice shaped and informed how he lived that life. In a similar way, Peter wants you and me to know how important it is that we remember Christ's sacrifice for us, that because of his sacrifice we no longer live for ourselves but for God. It is in remembering this that we truly live as God created us to live.