

“THERE WAS SOMETHING WE WERE TO REMEMBER”

based on Matthew 28:16-20

preached on Memorial Sunday, May 30, 2010

On this weekend I am reminded of two messages that many have forgotten. The first is that this is the Memorial Day weekend. All sorts of people are on the road with this first unofficial weekend of summer. Some have stretched the three days into a four day weekend as they get to the shore or the mountains for the first time since, well, for a lot of them, the first time since last weekend. We don't wait for summer to get away anymore. We see a holiday weekend, think 3 or 4 days, pack up and take off. The purpose for the holiday escapes us. That is the first thing much of our society has forgotten.

Memorial Day. It is a time to remember those who sacrificed everything to preserve the nation and the principles of liberty on which the country was founded. The Apostle Paul wrote that there is no greater gift one can give than to lay down one's life for their friends. I have heard many stories on how and where this Memorial Day tradition began. But the reason it began was because people stood in such awe and gratitude of that gift of sacrifice, laying down their lives, that they honored not only their own soldiers' graves, but the graves of their adversaries as well.

Memorial Day speaks about the principles on which our country is based. And it is important to remember those principles because often in our society we choose what is simple over what is right. We are moved more by our desires, what we want, rather than what is prudent or principled. And those principles were stated so well by Thomas Jefferson – *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”* We believe that we have the freedom, the liberty to choose the life that we will live. We believe that we have a divine right, given by the very hand of the Creator, to speak, to assemble, and to worship as our heart dictates. And over the centuries, when those rights have been threatened, internally or externally, committed men and women began to speak and act and fight that liberty might still be ours. We need to remember to honor those who have offered their life for our benefit.

Memorial Day fits well with the Christian faith. Jesus laid down his life for us even before we were friends. He did that so we could learn to live life abundantly. He did it so we could be liberated from sin. On this weekend it is fitting to remember and honor those who have died, those who gave their life to maintain the principles of liberty. And yet the attendance in many churches will be lacking this day because we do not honor the sacrifices of others as much as we celebrate our chance to boat, fish, swim, or just get away. Some people get really upset when they see a flag being burned. They think that dishonors the ones who gave their lives for their country. But in truth, many died so we would have the freedom to even burn a flag. It is a stupid thing to do and I would hate to see anyone do it. But people died so they could do it, not to prevent them from doing it. What does dishonor their memory, though, is to ignore the sacrifice. And it breaks my heart to see so many turn away.

There is one other thing that I believe we have forgotten. That was this instruction from Jesus, the last thing Jesus told us to do, *AGo, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the*

“THERE WAS SOMETHING WE WERE TO REMEMBER” based on Matthew 28:16-20
preached on Memorial Sunday, May 30, 2010

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Go and make disciples. In the past forty years, the mainline churches in America have not done a very good job of making disciples for Jesus. What we have done is fill the rolls. We have found ways to put people on our membership rolls but we haven't done a good job of making disciples. Some people are members and disciples. Let me try to explain the difference. When I was growing up we did not have Confirmation Classes. Most of you did not go through Confirmation. We went through Catechism. Do you remember that? The purpose of Catechism is to teach the principles of the Christian faith. The focus was on what we needed to learn to be a faithful Christian.

Now we have Confirmation. Did you ever ask what is being confirmed in confirmation? Do you know? The purpose of confirmation is to confirm, or reaffirm the vows of baptism. The focus of the confirmation curriculum used in many places, not here but in many places, is to help an individual discover who they are in Jesus Christ and what that means for their life. Understand the implications of that. In Catechism we are taught about what the faith has been and what we are to do, how we are to act if we are to be faithful followers. In Confirmation we seek to discover who we are. One places the focus on the traditional faith, and the other places the focus on ourselves. In Confirmation we teach our children how to be members, not how to be disciples. And yet, we are called to make disciples.

What is a disciple? A disciple is one who has been taught. The disciples of Jesus were the ones who spent time with him, who were able to observe him day by day. They listened to the words he said and saw the way he handled the variety of people who would show up. Some were challenged while others were treated with the utmost respect and grace. The disciples learned how to imitate Jesus in their daily walk in life and faith. Christian disciples continue to look to Jesus day by day. They see him through the windows of the gospel texts. They learn about him through the writings of Paul. They begin to understand when they begin to reach out in mercy and when they begin to boldly speak out and challenge the ways in which the world has moved away from God. Disciples still learn how to imitate Jesus in their daily walk in life and faith.

We are called to make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are to baptize. I think that means two things. First it means to celebrate that formal ceremony where a public declaration is made to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to support the Church which is the body of Christ. It is an outward sign of an inward, spiritual grace that is poured out from heaven. Whether it is done with infants or adults, whether it is in a stream, lake, or sanctuary, whether it is poured or sprinkled, none of that matters, for what we do is just the symbol. It is God who does the work of baptism. It is the Lord who welcomes us into His family. And the truth is that God wants everyone in His family. That grace has already been poured out, and is continually poured out on all the world. It is there for anyone and everyone to receive. We are here to recognize and celebrate that fact.

“THERE WAS SOMETHING WE WERE TO REMEMBER” based on Matthew 28:16-20
preached on Memorial Sunday, May 30, 2010

But I want you to think about baptism in another way. In its original context it meant immersion. That does not mean you have to be immersed in water to be baptized. No! That's just water, a symbol of something more important. What we need to be immersed in is the Spirit of God. Does a fish know that it is in water? I don't think so but biology was never a strong suit for me. I think that the water around a fish is so constant that it only knows when it is out of water, not when it is immersed in water. In the same way we don't realize that we are immersed in gases all the time. It is only when those gases become irregular that we recognize it. In the same way, if we are to be disciples of Jesus, we need to live in the Spirit of God. We should never have to talk about entering God's Spirit. It is to be so natural to us, that it is second nature, NO! Not second nature, first nature for us. We should be so attuned to walking with God that we only realize it, when we are away from it.

We are called to make disciples, to baptize them into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are called to enter the Spirit of God everyday, and to remain there every minute. Jesus told us to be of an attitude of prayer. To me that means that we are to be communicating with God the Father and God the Son, that we are to be obediently walking in God the Spirit all the time. When that becomes the focus of our lives, when that becomes the focus of our faith, then we will be imitating Jesus, the Christ. Then we will be the disciples we are called to be.

Until we get to that point, we still have some work to do. The first thing Jesus said was “Go!” The last thing he said was, “*I will be with you.*” We are not at the end of our spiritual journey. All of us need to continue to mature in grace and faith. But we cannot journey by just sitting here. We have to go with Jesus into the world to make a difference in the world. We are called to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. We need to transform this world into God's kingdom even as we are being transformed into God's servants. When we reach out in the name of Jesus Christ, as we are doing with the Clothing Bank and the work camp to Red Bird; when we reach out with Helping Hands and Habitat for Humanity, and all the other ways we reach out; when we extend ourselves, when we do what is right simply because it is right, we will grow in faith. And all along the way we are told to invite others into the journey. Come and see and I will be with you.

That sounds scary to some people but it's really not. It is not difficult if we are actively involved in living out the gospel in our words and deeds. Sometime I am amazed at all the interest that develops when we do something that just comes naturally, that is, sharing the love of God in a practical way. People in the community know that in times of trouble the place to turn is St. Paul United Methodist Church. We see it at the Clothing Bank and at Angel Food. We see it when someone calls to say, “I'm in trouble and I need help.” People turn to us. There are other places where they could go, but they come here because they know that we make a difference in the community. They know that we can make a difference in their life, not because of who we are, but because of whose we are. Because the light of Christ shines on us, in us, and through us. And that's important because there are thousands of people living around us, who have a giant hole in their heart, in their spirit, in their life. They are living in darkness. They don't know that light; they are hopeless and helpless. And yet they know no other way to live.

“THERE WAS SOMETHING WE WERE TO REMEMBER” based on Matthew 28:16-20
preached on Memorial Sunday, May 30, 2010

We know the Way. We know the Way, and the Truth, the Life, and his name is Jesus. We can share the light of grace that flows from the very heart of God. Now I want you to think a minute. How many times have you seen someone who is hurting, and you stopped to help? How often have you been hurting and someone reached out to you? A mother, a father, a friend, a stranger? It happens all the time. And here's the thing. There are people in need and we are able to help, and as the disciples of Jesus, the natural inclination is to help, to reach out in grace. We must help and we will help.

A few years back I wanted to show the love and grace of God in a practical way. And since the price of gas was then approaching \$2.00 a gallon, oh wow, I thought that we could buy down the price of gas. We would pay \$.25 per gallon for the first 10 gallons that anyone bought. But I couldn't find a local gas station that would work with me. I guess they didn't trust the church. And yet shortly after that disappointment, a radio station in Miami did the same thing to a larger extent, and it was national news. A short time later in a place called Turkey Valley, it was done by a church and it became a news item around the state. Or consider this. You know that every year on the day before school starts we have blessed the backpacks and the kids carrying them to prepare them for the coming year. I have done that for a number of years. Well a couple of years ago The Patriot News in Harrisburg did an article on it, and it was nice. But then some local TV stations picked it up as a filler and they began talking about it. By the next afternoon, I'm listening to some afternoon talk show when ABC Radio Network news came on, and they began talking about a church in Dauphin County that was blessing kids and backpacks. Then local television stations from Providence, Rhode Island, to Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona, talked about what my little church was doing to prepare their kids for the school year. Can you grasp the significance of that? The news that someone is determined to live out their faith, the news that someone is taking these teachings, taking the evangelism of Jesus seriously, that someone is seriously trying to share the love and grace of God is such an unusual thing that they want to tell the world. And the world wants to hear it. And the world wants to see it. It can be easy to show the world the love of God. It can be easy to invite the world to come and see, to come to see Jesus in us and in the world around us.

When the first disciples came to Jesus he simply said, "Come and see." Now as we become the new disciples we need to look to others, to encourage others to come and see who we worship. Come and see the One to whom we dedicate our lives. Come and see the One who loves us, the One who gave himself up for us that we might live in liberty and peace, that we might invite others to live in liberty and peace.

There are two things we need to remember this weekend. First we need to remember those who gave the ultimate sacrifice for the principles of liberty on which this nation was founded. And second, and more important, we need to remember the One, who gave himself up that we might live, that we might have peace, that we might be His disciples, that we might go to make disciples in all the world, immersing this world into God the Father, Son and Spirit. Go forth in the liberty you have. Go forth in the power and peace that has been given to you. Go forth boldly. For Jesus will go with us in life, in faith wherever we may go to reach out to others, wherever we go to build His kingdom. In your life may you discover how true that. In your life may it be so. Amen.