“The Power in Remembrance”

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 24
8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, September 11, 2011
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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

“Looking back, I realize it was the beautiful day that killed us.” Those were the words of Richard Picciotto, a grizzled and grieving New York City fire battalion commander. His book, Last Man Down, tells the story of Picciotto’s four hours trapped in the rubble of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Picciotto believes that if it had been gray or foggy or overcast on September 11, there’s no way the terrorists could have flown those planes. But all up and down the East Coast of these United States it was the same: still winds, blue skies, not a cloud in sight; Boston, New York and Washington, D.C. – all enjoying an absolutely gorgeous, late-summer day.

How well we remember. The beauty of the day, the blue skies, the wispy clouds; how well we remember, the horror of the unthinkable, the gray ash everywhere, on the ground, in our minds, covering our psyches. 9/11 is etched in our memories and has shaped our lives ever since.

As we gather together on the tenth anniversary of that day, it is, I believe, incumbent upon us to remember: to think back, to recollect, to memorialize, and to pledge to one another that we will never forget. Someone wrote to the editor of the Baltimore Sun on the first anniversary; words I saved because I think the writer is wrong-headed about this. This is what he wrote:

It might be a good idea to honor the fallen of September 11 by avoiding soapboxes, talk shows and pulpits balanced on the graves of the dead. I was always told it was disrespectful to stand on anyone’s grave, and I refuse to do it or watch anyone else do it now.

That’s not what we are doing here. The community of faith has always gathered to remember the events that have shaped its life and the life of the world around us. But the important distinction between the way we gather to remember and the way the world does it needs to be noted. When we gather to remember, we believe, no, we know, that there is power in remembrance. We don’t just call to mind, remember, an event like September 11. No, our approach is different, for it is deeply and distinctly rooted in the Judeo-Christian understanding of remembrance. In the fullness of faith, remembrance for us, like it always did with our Jewish ancestors, remembrance always brings a past event into the present so that it can transform our future. The past informs our today, so that tomorrow we will be different. There is power in remembrance.

We begin worship each week with an invocation; we gather: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The Latin word invocare means to bring forth, to call forward into the present. Early Jews believed that to say a name was to invoke the presence of that person into the here and now. When we begin in the name of the triune God, we believe that such naming brings God’s presence to bear on our assembly.
We don’t just remember, we invoke, and that is more than simple memory of the past, for it has power to inform our today, and to transform our tomorrows.

When we gather each week, we hear the ancient stories of God and his saving work among his people. Such stories, in their retelling and remembering, capture us into the story line. We become, in their retelling, caught up in the saving history of God’s people. We are the ones God loves and cares about in the present, and such knowledge, such history, moves us in new ways into God’s future.

No, that writer to the *Sun* has it wrong. We in the community of faith do not gather around the graves of the dead, we gather in the name of the Living God. And we who gather and who name this God do not do so just to remember, because we know there is power in remembering, a power that changes us for tomorrow’s tasks of living.

This process of remembering begins with **identification**: a deep, personal identification with the events we are seeking to recall. Some of you know people who lost loved ones in the violence of September 11, 2001. But even if you don’t, we were connected to those who died, those who served, those who helped, those who grieved, because they are our brothers and sisters, and we know the pain of their loss, because we have known loss and suffering and pain and wounding ourselves. We know what it’s like when the heart is bleeding. Remembrance always begins with deep, personal identification. It begins with remembering the affliction of our sisters and brothers, and making their pain our own.

There is a powerful Biblical precedent for doing this. In the first lesson chosen for this day, the Israelites are given specific instructions on how they are to make offerings to God in the Promised Land. When future generations present a portion of their harvest to the priest, they are to remember and recite the story of how they were given their land.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor,” they say. They begin by identifying themselves with Jacob, the vulnerable, destitute, landless ancestor who had sought refuge from famine in the land of Egypt. Then they tell his story, remembering that “he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.”

We know that story so far. But this is where it gets interesting and instructive for us. The Israelites go on to say, “When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors.” Did you hear the shift in language and person? The people say, “When the Egyptians treated US harshly and afflicted US, by imposing hard labor on US.” The language shifts from the third person to the first person. The Israelites were not talking about Jacob anymore; they are talking about themselves. Even though none of these residents of the Promised Land experienced any of this affliction themselves, they remember it, and when they remember it, they make the pain of their ancestors their own.

The Israelites were being challenged to remember their affliction, just as we are doing here today. And when they do, they discover that they are not alone in their pain and suffering. That’s the first order of business in remembering – we identify, we feel, we know, we become one with the past.
Then, a second thing happens, and it is illustrated as well in that first lesson. Note what happens in the remembering: they felt the pain and made it their own and cried out to the Lord, and it is reported that “the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders.” Remembering is also about remembering who is there beside us, and recalling his faithfulness to his people.

New Jersey Synod Bishop Roy Riley has stated it well:

Remember this: all the days of our lives – the best days and the worst days – are lived in God’s precious presence, because God chooses to be present and promised to be with us to the end of time. A cross that was lifted up on a hill outside Jerusalem makes a cross that emerges from the ruins of the World Trade Center Towers mean something to us... This gospel holds us in common and bids us to hold one another in love and mercy – the common good born out of a most uncommon, unfathomable grace. Remember.

The people of God are never alone in their affliction. Not in ancient Israel. Not in the world today. When God’s people cry out to the Lord, we believe as we gather here today, that he hears, he cares, he loves, and he will provide the strength we need to go on. For the faith community to remember is to remember the faithfulness of God. God has spoken promises into human history, and God keeps his word. Part of our remembering here today is to put our trust not in things of this world, which are transitory at best, but to put our hope in a God who is as good as his word, a God who keeps his promises. If we want security in life, if we want that which endures, if we want that abundant life we all seek, if we want deliverance from the pains and hurts and terrors of this world, there is only one place to go – it is to place our trust in God’s word of promise.

There is a third and final piece to this remembrance business that we are about today. It is captured well in an Associated Press report, where it was noted that the summer of 2001 witnessed a baby-boomlet as a result of 9/11. Isn’t that interesting? People wanted to have children, it was reported, not in spite of 9/11, but because of it. Bearing children is seen as a gesture of hope. People want to build families, to make connections, to form close bonds like we haven’t seen for a while in this country. As one doctor reported after talking to countless couples, it is a “longing to experience the important things of life.”

That’s the third piece of remembrance we need to note. Remembrance causes us to lift up our eyes in gratitude, to stop taking life for granted, and to appreciate and live in this moment as the precious gift it is for us and those around us. Yes, there certainly remains sorrow over the events of the past we remember this day, but there is also hope for a better tomorrow, and life to be lived today, and others to touch and love and hold in this moment.

I like the poetic way Wayne Muller described what happens in the brokenness of life, and I’ll end with his words fresh on our ears and in our souls. He wrote in his book, How Then, Shall We Live?:

This is what I’ve learned: within the sorrow, there is grace. When we come close to those things that break us down, we touch those things that also
break us open. And in that breaking open, we uncover what life is really all about and the truth about our existence. . . . Even in the midst of the most horrible anguish, the most unimaginable loss and suffering, the light of God shines, the spirit remains, and we can be lead into a deeper and richer life.

In our remembering this day, I pray that is so.

AMEN.

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