

“REMEMBERING: I - THE SAINTS”

Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Revelation 7:9-17

Matthew 5:1-12

Today marks the beginning of a new sermon series - it's just three sermons long - because then, unbelievably, Advent begins! The sermon series is entitled “Remembering,” and as I said, it consists of three parts - today, remembering the saints, next week, remembering veterans, and the third week, remembering to give thanks.

So let us begin this journey of remembering. As I am wont to do, I'll begin with a story. It's the story of an older couple, who, like many of us, had trouble remembering common, everyday things. So they both decided that to help deal with that situation they would write things down.

One night, as they were watching TV, the wife asked the husband if he would like anything. “Yes, I would,” he replied. “I would love a large ice-cream sundae with chocolate ice cream, whipped cream and a cherry on top!” So the wife started for the kitchen and her husband shouted after her, “Hey, aren't you going to write it down?” “Don't be silly,” she hollered back, “I'm going to fix it right now. I won't forget.”

She was gone for a while, and when she finally returned she set down in front of him a large plate of bacon, eggs, hash browns and a glass of orange juice. He looked at the plate, then looked at her, and said, “I knew you should have written it down! You forgot the toast!” (On-line, Sermonillustrations.com, “Memory”)

Now, that's a funny story, but the older I get, the more I know how true it is. Sometimes, it's hard for us to remember. You know, I think Jesus knew that too. I think that's one of the reasons He spoke the way He did, and taught the way He did. I think that's why He spoke in parables, because we are much more likely to remember stories than we are to remember facts. And we are much more likely to remember stories that we have to figure out for ourselves, as many of the parables are, than stories that are told straight out to us. Once we've wrestled with their meaning and figured it out, we're much more likely to remember them.

And I also think that's why Jesus used a lot of symbolism. Why He, for instance, used the bread and wine of a meal as symbols for us to remember Him. “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup,” He said, “remember me.” It was

not long after His death, that the first recorded instance of Him being remembered in exactly that way occurred, when He sat down at a meal and broke bread with the men He had met on the road to Emmaus. It was in the breaking of the bread, that they remembered who He was.

Remembering is important. And remembering people is especially important. The wonderful writer Frederick Buechner said this about remembering:

“When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us . . . It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart.” (Frederick Buechner, *Whistling In the Dark*, “Remember”, p. 100)

Today, All Saints’ Sunday, is a wonderful gift that we in the church have been given. It’s a wonderful gift because we have the opportunity to remember some who have, in the words of Buechner, left a mark of who they were on who we are. We remember the members of our church who have died over the course of the past year in a special way, and we remember others in our lives as well.

It is a wonderful opportunity to remind ourselves of who they were, and that we wouldn’t be who we are if they hadn’t been among us. This year, we experienced a lot of sadness, because 15 members of our church died, along with countless others in our circle of family and friends. But lest we let the pain and grief weigh us down, on this All Saints’ Sunday, let us remember with joy all they meant to us and helped us to be.

When you look at their names in the bulletin, and in a few minutes see their pictures, I hope a flood of memories will wash over you. When I was previewing the powerpoint presentation the other day, it was very emotional. There were so many special people who left us this year.

When you see their pictures, you’ll remember the love they had for their families. You’ll see people who were married for decades (some for forty, fifty and even nearly sixty years) to the love of their life. I had a conversation with someone the other day who told me that he so admires the strong marriages he sees in this church. These pictures today are filled with people who were in those marriages.

And these pictures today will cause you to remember the love of parent and child. So many of them had families whom they loved, and who loved them. You’ll see pictures of multi-generational families, enjoying life together. How blessed the family members have been to have had that person in their life. How

missed they are . . .

And these pictures today will help you remember the tremendous service given by these dear people. Whether it was in the military, or the fire department, or the state police, or on a school bus, or in public office, or in a classroom, or on a retreat, or in the church kitchen - so many of them lived lives of quiet service, and made such a difference in the world.

Look closely at these pictures and you will see portraits of joy. You will see smiles on their faces, because they knew joy and happiness. It might have been because they were with someone they loved, or it might have been because they were in a place that made them happy, but they all knew joy, and weren't afraid to show it.

You know, this year, maybe for the first time since I've been the pastor here, I realized that many of the people on this year's list were people I had known almost my entire life. I remember them from when we first came to Elkton when I was in elementary school. And I remember them from my neighborhood, and from this place, this church. I remember so many of them - the Buckworths, the Litzenbergs, the McCools and McCalls, the Howes, the Renshaws. They were a part of my life then, and along the way, the others became a part of my life as well.

Frederick Buechner is right, each one of them has left a mark of who they were on all of us in some way. We are the better for having known them, for having had them in our lives. And while we mourn their deaths, for we miss them terribly, we are so very grateful that God gave them to us.

So today, we remember them with thanksgiving for the people they were, for how they lived, and how they loved. We thank God for their lives, and most especially, we thank God for their new lives in those rooms prepared just for them by Jesus Himself. They have run their course in faith and now rest from their labor. We entrust them to God's care and keeping for all the days to come.

On this day, this very special day, let us turn to the screen and remember these saints with gratitude in our hearts to Almighty God. Following that, we will remember all of the saints in our lives who have passed, as we sing the hymn and have the opportunity to bring flowers to the vases in the front of the sanctuary.

Dear friends, let us remember the saints . . .