

"Remembering!"

Matthew 5:17-20
May 30, 2010

II Corinthians 5:16-21
St. James UCC

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Memorial Day means different things to different people. To many it is a much welcomed holiday, a long weekend. It may be a time to party, or to gather with family or friends. It may be a day to relax, or to plant gardens, a day to go to parades, or to visit the cemetery to plant flowers and to remember loved ones who have died.

Memorial Day began of course after the Civil War, as a time to honor the dead - of both sides. In time it came to include commemorating the lives lost in all wars - and for many a time to remember that war is not some glorious adventure, but that it is painful, destructive, and involves very real losses for all involved.

It is a time of looking back to remember and to learn from the past, so that we can do better today and tomorrow. Certainly that was true after the Civil War when the observance of Memorial Day started. The nation had been devastated by this war, hundreds of thousands of young men died, and countless more would live for the rest of their lives with bodies that were permanently damaged by the war. Never again did they want to go through an experience like that - an experience which not only devastated individuals and families, but which had torn the nation apart. They sought to honor the dead who had given so freely and nobly, but to honor them so that their loss might not be in vain, so that we might learn from what had happened and not make the same mistakes again.

Our text from II Corinthians brings us a similar message. In this passage we find Paul reminding us that in Christ we are new beings. Through His sacrifice on the cross Jesus has freed us from the bonds of sin. On the one hand we are no longer bound by the past - namely bound by the mistakes of the past. We don't have to keep repeating them. Our past sinfulness does not enslave us. It does not commit us. It does not mean that we can't start living differently today. For as Paul says, "When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come."

In Jesus Christ God has given us the opportunity to live differently, to live more faithfully and fully, to really be that person of God that we have long said that we want to be. We have the opportunity to really do that beginning today, for in Jesus Christ God has reached out to us and has made us friends instead of enemies. The barrier is forever breached, for God has taken the initiative to reach out and touch us, claiming us as God's own people, and we will never be the same again.

That message of freedom and reconciliation is then put with our text from Matthew. The temptation always is to hear God's message of reconciliation and to think, "Oh, I can do whatever I want and I will be forgiven". Instead of a message of love and reconciliation,

we often hear a license to sin. In this text Jesus clarifies the message for those who have misinterpreted it in that way.

Jesus has not come to throw out the Law, to abandon the Law, or to have us live as though we have no responsibility to each other or to God. Instead, Jesus has come to fulfill the Law. We too are called to fulfill God's Law - not blindly, as the Pharisees so often did. They sought to fulfill the Law by rote - not understanding or even caring what the real meaning of the Law was - what the intent of the Law was. They subverted the Law by making following the Law the goal instead of it becoming the way of guiding people to live faithfully. They sought to carefully follow each of the Law's provisions as if the end goal was just following the Law instead of faithfulness to God.

In this passage Jesus reminds us that in committing ourselves to be faithful, in being friends of God, we do accept some obligation, some responsibility. We do commit ourselves to trying to live faithfully. There is a spirit and intentionality behind the law of faithfulness to God, so that over the centuries, followers of Christ in every generation have felt that call to learn, to remember, to follow God's Law, God's teaching.

Memorial Day is a holiday which calls us to remember our past, to honor the sacrifice of those who have gone before us, to remember loved ones who have died, and most of all to learn from the example of those we remember. For when we remember the individuals, but that remembering teaches us nothing, then we are in a very real sense dishonoring them by our failure to learn from their sacrifice. We truly honor those who have given their lives when we not only remember them, but when our remembering also teaches us something, when we learn from them how we can live better, how we can live more faithfully today.

That's true not just of Memorial Day, but of our efforts to live as faithful Christians. As Paul reminds us, God is the great reconciler, who has reached out and forgiven us. In forgiving us, God has not forgotten the sins of the past - nor should we. When we cut ourselves off from the past, when we fail to learn from the past, then we deny the future. We deny the future a chance to be different, to be better. God has opened up the future for us by helping us to learn from the mistakes of the past.

There's a wonderful story about two brothers who were once convicted of stealing sheep and, in accordance with the brutal punishment of that day, were branded on the forehead with the letters S T, which stood for "sheep thief". One of the brothers, unable to bear the stigma, tried to run away to hide himself in a foreign land. But people would keep asking him about the letters on his brow and what they meant. Every time they asked, it was like scraping the scab off of a wound. He kept trying to hide, but it didn't work. Thus he wandered from land to land, and at last, full of bitterness, he died and was buried in a forgotten grave. He never faced up to or learned anything from the mistakes of his past.

But the other brother, who repented of his misdeed, did not leave his home. He said to himself: "I can't run away from the fact that I stole sheep, so here I will remain until I win back the respect of my neighbors and myself."

As the years passed by, he established a reputation for respectability and integrity. One day a stranger in town saw the old man with the letters S T branded on his forehead and asked a native what they signified. After thinking for a little while the villager said: "It

all happened a great while ago, and I have forgotten the particulars, but I think the letters are an abbreviation for Saint."

Jesus Christ came and died for us to make us into that new creation that Paul talks about. We are meant to live and to be different because of Jesus Christ. If all that we do is to pay Him an occasional honor without ever really absorbing or learning from His example, then we have missed the whole point.

In Jesus Christ God has called us to learn, to grow, to be different, to be more faithful... to follow the great commandments that Jesus named for us - To love the Lord our God not just when it is convenient or popular, but with all our heart and mind and soul, and to love our neighbors not just when they are nice to us or it is convenient, but to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

God has called us to a new standard of faithfulness, a standard which demands a total commitment of ourselves, a standard which calls us to look back not only at the example of Jesus, but at our own example - both the good and the bad of what we have done. God calls us to learn from the past so that we might live more faithfully today. For we are called to learn and to grow and to be God's people in this generation.

Amen.