

Date: May 30, 2004

SUNDAY: Pentecost

SERMON: Thanks for the Memories

Text(s): John 14:8-17, 25-27; Acts 2:1-11

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Many of you probably saw the movie “The Pianist” last year. It’s the Roman Polanski film that tells the story of Wladyslaw Szpilman, the brilliant concert pianist who was forced to live in the notorious Warsaw ghetto where the Nazis forced all the Jews in Warsaw to live. Szpilman’s story is fascinating because he was one of the very few Warsaw Jews to survive the war. I visited the remains of that ghetto in 1997, when our International Pastors and Spouses Conference was held in Warsaw. Apart from some monuments and a mound of grass-covered rubble over the site of the famous command bunker at Mila 18, there’s not much visible evidence remaining of the 800-acre area where more than 800,000 Polish Jews resided from 1940 until August of 1943, when all the remaining inhabitants were sent to the concentration camp at Treblinka and exterminated and the ghetto itself razed to the ground.

Our guide during that tour was Rabbi Yael Reisner, who worked for the Lauder foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping the surviving descendants of those who died in the Holocaust find some traces of their family history. He told us that the story of the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto was even a worse horror than the story of those who perished at Auschwitz and Birkenau, if that is possible. Three and a half million Jews in Poland perished at Auschwitz and Birkenau, and nearly all of their names and photos were recorded with grisly efficiency. But in Warsaw, the Nazis were in such haste to kill as many as possible of the Warsaw ghetto Jews before the Russians took the city, that for the more than half a million exterminated at Treblinka, they kept no records or photos or lists of names. The Nazis not only destroyed the people themselves; they obliterated any memory of them as well.

The rabbi told us that he had spoken just that week with a man in his seventies whose parents had smuggled him as a baby out of the ghetto just before it fell, and had given him to a compassionate Catholic family to raise. He was given a false baptismal certificate to conceal his Jewish origins. As a result, he was the sole survivor of his whole family and when he grew up, he emigrated to Israel. He married and raised a family in Israel and now he had come with his middle-aged son back to Warsaw. The son was not sure that his father’s stories of having been born to Jewish parents was correct; after all there was no evidence that they had ever existed. The Lauder foundation was able to help them trace their family origins through a page of an old pre-war Warsaw phonebook. When he saw his real father and mother’s name listed in the phone directory, the older man got very emotional and turned to his son and said, “You see, I’m not from Mars; our family had a phone number. We existed.”

Later, as we stood on the steps of the monument to the ghetto uprising, listening to Rabbi Reisner talk, two men walked up the steps to look at the monument. The rabbi paused and turned and greeted them in Hebrew, and then turned back to us and said, “That’s the man who’s not from Mars, and his son.”

Why am I telling this poignant story on Pentecost Sunday, a Sunday when we are celebrating the birth of the church through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Why remember one of the most tragic and horrible events in all of recorded human history and certainly of the 20th century?

Well, it might be appropriate to remember it because we’re also celebrating our national Memorial Day when we pause to remember the courage and sacrifice of so many who gave their lives to preserve our freedoms. But even if it weren’t Memorial Day, it would still be appropriate to tell this story because, in many respects, it goes to the heart of the meaning of Pentecost, and the meaning of the church.

The church is a community of memory. It is a community that extends across time and whose vocation it is to remember Jesus, and to help others recover those memories through worship and prayer and story and action. The vocation given to us at our baptisms is to be, as Henri Nouwen put it, “living reminders” of Jesus Christ. Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the last century’s great spirits and spiritual guides, says, “Much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word, ‘Remember.’”¹

This is precisely the point that John, in our gospel lesson today, is making. There we hear Jesus speaking with his disciples before his crucifixion, and telling them that he is going away. He will not be with them in the flesh any longer. But they will not be abandoned or orphaned, as it were, without a memory of their true identity. God will send them the Holy Spirit, to recall to their collective memory, all that Jesus taught them and all that Jesus did, so that they will be empowered to do the works of God that Jesus did, and even greater works. *The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.*

We cannot live without memory, and particularly, we cannot live in peace without memory. Perhaps that’s why we fear a disease such as Alzheimer’s so much. To a great extent, we are what we remember. Just as those who lost all trace of their families in the Holocaust can never really achieve any kind of closure, any kind of identity because they have no past that can be remembered, so neither can the human race survive without a memory of a God who created us in love, who willed the human family into being, who has shown us the way to live so that we can know the purpose of our lives and know the peace that the world cannot give, the creation blessing of *shalom* which we can only know when we remember who we are and where we came from.

Today, as in all times, the world is suffering from spiritual amnesia, from loss of memory of our identity as the beloved children of a loving God.

We don’t have to look further than the pages of our newspapers or the corners of our own consciences for the evidence of that spiritual amnesia. We rightly declare a national holiday to honor the memory of those who laid down their lives in the service of our country, but we, who are that country, can all too easily allow our feelings of patriotism to conceal the fact that it is frequently we who create the conditions that make those sacrifices inevitable.

I was moved, as I’m sure many of you were, by the article in *Time* this week where survivors of the D-Day landings were interviewed and where they shared their memories. It’s the 60th anniversary of the Normandy landings, and perhaps because of that, and also because of the opening of the World War II memorial in Washington D.C., it seems that more attention is being given to Memorial Day this year than on some other years. Some of those who participated in one of the most decisive of battles in human history, said that they were aware that they were participating in something that was overwhelming in its import for the future of the world, aware that they were entering a battle against a monstrous evil that could be a turning point in history. Little wonder that it should be so important to remember such a momentous battle. And we’re not the only ones who remember. We were buying some farm-made cider and Calvados at a farm in Normandy one time, and when the farmer’s wife discovered we were Americans, she immediately began to tell us stories about her memories of the invasion. She was a little girl at the time they happened, but she remembered them vividly. “Where would we be now if it hadn’t been for the Americans?” she said.

One of the issues we’re all struggling with now, I think, is wondering whether 60 years

down the road, we or our children will be able to look back and remember the war in Iraq as a cause that had such moral clarity and noble purpose that it was worth the sacrifices that it is costing us.

That's why the story of Pentecost is so important for us; it just it may represent the only hope we have of retaining our collective moral memory and getting ourselves out of this lethal spiral of consumption, competition, and war. The world needs reminders of the Spirit of life, not the Spirit of death. In the global village that our world has become, we need reminders of how to live together in life-affirming rather than life-destroying ways. Our El Salvador mission team gave us such a powerful reminder a few weeks ago, a reminder of just what is possible when we are willing to take some risks of reaching out in love, even to people far away who live in a very different world than we do.

Pentecost reminds us that we, the people of God, are the location where the life-giving Spirit of God is to be found, the Spirit who brings to our remembrance all that Jesus has taught and commanded us. By gathering weekly to worship a God who is not merely an idol of our own making, but a living God, and by re-telling the story of that God's redemptive love for the world, we remind ourselves that we are not self-made people. We are dependent and beloved creatures. And the life we live together in community becomes a reminder to the world around us that there is hope for the world, that there is the possibility for human beings to live in love rather than in the oppression of ethnic hatreds and economic rivalries. By practicing forgiveness of one another's faults, we remind the world that there is an alternative to the ever-escalating spiral of retaliation and revenge. By committing ourselves to be good stewards of our possessions, we remind those who are trapped in the clutches of greed and materialism, that it is possible to use things without being possessed by them. By showing hospitality to the stranger, by

opening our arms to the outsider, we remind the world that barriers of race or ethnicity or culture or gender or sexual identity are barriers that have been broken down by the cross of Christ. By standing up for the rights of the poor, the disenfranchised, and by volunteering to serve others, we remind the world of Jesus, who said, "I did not come to be served, but to serve."

That is the vocation of the baptized and Spirit-filled: to be the world's memory, to be living reminders of Jesus. We are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. And as we go out into our neighborhoods and workplaces and schools we become living reminders to others that the end toward which all creation is moving is not destruction and death, but re-creation and life.

1. *Man is Not Alone*, (New York: Farrar, Staus & Giroux, 1951), p. 161.

