

## "HOW WOULD YOU BE REMEMBERED?"

First United Church, Bloomington, IN

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Philippians 1:3-8

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For most people Memorial Day makes for a long holiday weekend that marks the beginning of the summer. For some it is a time to engage in acts of memorial. This may include visits to the cemetery to decorate the graves of loved ones. It may include a service of remembrance for those who have given their lives in this nation's wars. The original purpose of Memorial Day was to decorate the graves of veterans of the Civil War. Over time it became an occasion to honor the deceased veterans of other wars as well. For many who continue to observe the day, it has become a time to remember all loved ones who have died.

I remember when the decision was made regarding the design for the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C. It was a controversial decision, to build this low-profile, black stone wall, designed by a young Chinese-American woman, in tribute to those who fought and died in that war. In my mind, however, it was just what needed to be done. No looming statue or monument celebrating the glories of war. Rather, a simple wall, with the names of all those who had died. History has proven the wisdom of that decision. The wall became a wailing wall, a place to remember and to grieve and, for those whose lives were shattered by the war, to begin to put the pieces back together again. The wall became an instrument of redemption for the dead as well as the living, a means by which those who had died could be redeemed from oblivion. They would not be forgotten, and therefore, their deaths were not totally in vain.

Some years ago a local attorney, Morrie Erickson, presented a program to the Bloomington Rotary Club on "The Killing Fields of Cambodia." Some of the slides he showed pictured a museum, housed in a former high school that had been converted into a center for interrogation and torture by the Khmer Rouge, that he visited in Phnom Penh. The walls were covered with hundreds of pictures of some of the millions of persons who died during that reign of terror. This museum, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, the Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery, AL, and other such memorials to the dead, contribute in their own way to the redemption of the lives of persons otherwise unknown to us who have perished at great price.

Why is it important that we remember the dead? There is much that we can learn from the past, and from those who have gone before us. Often, we need to come to terms with our own past. The dead remind us of where we have come from, and what continues to be part of us. The dead also remind us that life is not to be taken for granted. The tombstones of many cemeteries tell the stories of children who died in infancy or of childhood disease, of men who remarried after a first or even second wife had died in childbirth, of women who took other husbands after theirs had died in battle. For every story of long life and prosperity, there are several of hardship and defeat.

We also need to remember the dead in order to appreciate what they have given us. We need to

remember them in order to recall their sacrifices, and the contributions they have made. We remember in order to recognize how much our lives have been given to us by others, and we remember in order to give thanks.

Whenever I conducted a funeral or a memorial service, it was especially with this in mind: We remember in order to give thanks – to express our gratitude. It seems the least we can do for those who have died. It is important for us to remember. It would seem ungrateful not to do so. But not to remember would also seem to be a denial of the very fabric of our existence. How could it be that anyone could be born among us, could live among us and could die among us, and it not matter to any of the rest of us? How could it make no difference to us? How could it be of no consequence that someone else has breathed the same air, and cherished the same hopes, and borne the same burdens, and shared the same joys? Is it not enough that someone else has lived among us for us to remember?

Yet ours is a culture that does not place all that much emphasis upon remembering. There are cultures where the ancestors are venerated in ways that would seem strange to us. There are cultures where the links to the past seem much more important than they do for us!

It is not just our link to the past that is in doubt, however, but also our link to the future. The author of Ecclesiastes, my favorite summertime philosopher, may have been expressing the malaise of his own time, but he was also way ahead of his time, when he lamented the apparent futility of all human endeavors. “Vanity of vanities,” he exclaimed. There is nothing for people to gain from all their toil. A generation comes, a generation goes, but there is nothing new under the sun. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. And then the clincher, so far as human fortunes are concerned: “The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them” [1:11].

In the biblical view, not to be remembered is a terrible thing. There is one thing that the psalmists and the prophets and other biblical writers clearly do not want remembered. They do not want God to remember their sin. They do not want God to remember their iniquities. But they want very much to be remembered. When the prophet Ezekiel declares to the neighboring Ammonites, “You shall be remembered no more,” it is a word of searing judgment and repudiation [21:32]. God’s people want very much for the divine promises and covenant to be remembered. One of the very worst things that could happen to them would be to be forgotten by their posterity and by their God. In Isaiah the prophet laments the situation in which a righteous person dies and no one lays it to heart [57:1]. In the biblical view, it is not the life of happiness that is to be cherished. Nor is it the life of pleasure. Nor is it the life of superior accomplishment. It is the life that is remembered. It is the life whose significance endures in the community of one’s posterity. It is the life whose meaning continues beyond the grave.

There is of course a terribly perverse side to the desire to be remembered. History knows too many people who cared for nothing more than making a name for themselves. Never mind any

good that they might accomplish for others. History remembers the powerful rulers and the great warriors, whether or not their cause was just. The names and deeds of the Pharaohs of Egypt will not soon be forgotten, nor their great monuments to themselves, while the names of the thousands upon thousands of laborers and slaves who built the great pyramids shall never be known. The desire that virtually all rulers have had to be remembered has generated great building projects and great armies and great armadas and great wars, imposing enormous burdens and sacrifices upon the common lot of humanity.

The goal of life is surely not to be remembered. There are all kinds of ways to make a difference in this world, and many of them cause more injury than improvement, more pain than pleasure, more suffering than benefit, more harm than good. Yet it may be that the way to identify a life that is worth living in in terms of a life that is worth remembering.

So I raise the question of this sermon. How would you be remembered? I have intentionally made the question ambiguous. How would you be remembered, if you were to die tomorrow? And how would you like to be remembered?

And article that appeared in THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY magazine years back prompts me to raise this question in this way. The article reported on a pastoral statement by the Roman Catholic bishops of Germany, expressing their concern regarding changing attitudes toward dying and death, burial and mourning. Growing numbers of people in Europe were choosing to be buried anonymously, without religious ritual or even a parting farewell from relatives. There had been an enormous increase in anonymous burials, where the ashes of the deceased are placed underground, unmarked, in large grass-covered groves. In some regions of Germany up to half the population claimed to prefer nameless burial to traditional funeral rites. In some Scandinavian cities such as Copenhagen, 90 percent of the citizens were said to prefer anonymous graves, In Italy, on the other hand, only 2 percent preferred them.

Just this past week the local newspaper ran an article from Reuters reporting on the growing number of bodies that are going unclaimed in Canada. Rising funeral costs were identified as a primary explanation [Bloomington Herald-Times, 5/20/2024]. Reading between the lines, however, I couldn't help but wonder if there hasn't also been a declining interest in remembering the deceased. Time was when people seemed more willing to pay for the "high cost of dying."

What might it mean to live a life that does not seem worth remembering? One cannot help but think that this is a reflection of an enormous shift in thinking about the meaning of life, and perhaps a sign of despair. It may also be a commentary on the absence of community and connection that marks the lonely existence of many citizens in these days. Karl Lehmann, head of the German bishops' conference, viewed the trend toward anonymous graves as "an expression of the lack of relationships among the living as well as a lack of solidarity between the living and the dead. 'People who never felt valued and loved during their lifetime have no interest in being remembered after death and no interest in possessing an individual memorial place'" [May 15, 1996, 541-542].

As Christians we proclaim what may now be a counter-cultural message. We proclaim that all life is precious before God. This means, on the one hand, that the value of your life, or my life, does not depend upon our capacity to make names for ourselves. It is not our importance to history that determines our importance to God. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus declares that not a single sparrow is forgotten in God's sight. Even the very hairs of our head are numbered, of much more value are we than many sparrows [Matt. 10:29-30; Luke 12:6-7]. Therefore, we surely will not be forgotten. And we need not be afraid that anything or anyone can take away from us the importance of our lives. This is the beginning of a Christian spirituality, that each and every one of us is of infinite worth, because we are precious in the sight of God.

Precisely for this reason, however, we see ourselves as part of a larger fabric of existence. It is not as isolated individuals that we attain our value in this life. Belonging to God, we also belong to one another. Of value to God, we are also of value to others. If our lives are worth remembering to God, they will also be worth remembering to others. In one of his essays, the philosopher Charles Harshorne pointed out that we tend to value others for their contributions to our own lives. But, he went on to observe, it is even more the case that we tend to value ourselves for our contributions to the lives of others. A life worth living is also a life worth remembering.

In his affectionate letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you." Such is how we are toward those for whom we care, and toward those whom we love. We remember them. We give thanks for them. It is the same regarding those who are no longer with us. We continue to conduct funerals and memorial services, and to observe special days of remembrance, in order to remember and give thanks.

We remember and give thanks in affirmation that the lives of individual human beings are important and gracious to us and to God. We would not have history consign anyone to oblivion.

We remember and give thanks in recognition of the ties that bind us to one another, such that we have no good apart from one another. When the bell tolls for another, it also tolls for you and me.

We remember and give thanks in confidence that God will not forget us and in hope that our lives, too, are even now occasions for thanksgiving, and will be worth remembering. AMEN.