

The First Baptist church, Midland
September 4, 2011
Hebrews 12:1,2; 13:7,8

Remember Jesus... Remember Jesus
A communion Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

"A few years ago, rumors spread that a certain Catholic woman was having visions of Jesus. The archbishop decided to check her out.

"Is it true, m'am, that you have visions of Jesus?" asked the cleric.

"Yes," the woman replied, "it's true."

"Well, the next time you have a vision, I want you to ask Jesus to tell you the sins that I confessed in my last confession. Please call me if anything happens."

Ten days later the woman notified her spiritual leader of a recent apparition... Within the hour the archbishop arrived. "What did Jesus say?" he asked.

She took his hand and gazed deep into his eyes. "Bishop," she said, "these are his exact words: I CAN'T REMEMBER." (Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up and Burnt Out.* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1990), 116-17.)

We smile at this story, don't we, but what a truth it conveys. The very God whom we love, worship and serve forgives *and forgets* our sin. Indeed, that's why we worship the Lord. His grace is supreme and because of it, we are forever secure. Yet isn't it ironic... it is precisely because of our Lord's nature to forgive and forget that we are on a journey to remember.

Do you recall the words of the prophet, Micah? "**O my people, remember... remember what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord (6:5).**" Yes, ours is a journey leading to recollection.

For example, we remember God's intervention in the life of Noah to destroy then save the world... we remember God's covenant call to Abraham reaffirmed through Isaac and Jacob... we remember God's message to Moses at the burning bush which led to the freeing of the Hebrew slaves and the Ten Commandments... we remember God's investment of a Kingship upon David and the establishment of Israel... we remember God's call to Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and all the other prophets in the face of wanton spiritual rebellion... We remember God's intervention into human experience through the birth, the ministry, the crucifixion, the resurrection of Jesus Christ... and we remember the events of Pentecost. These are all treasured stories which help deliver us to an intimate personal relationship with God. They lead us into His presence and that is why remembering our stories is so important.

I believe this is exactly what the author of Hebrews means in chapters 12 and 13 when writing: "**Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...**" Who are

the witnesses? Simply stated, the witnesses are the people who have gone before, many of whom are enlisted by name in chapter 11. They are the patriarchs, the judges, the kings, and the prophets in the Old Testament and the people like James and John, Matthew and Nathaniel, Peter and Andrew in the New Testament. And I believe this cloud also includes all those faithful folks who have journeyed within the community of faith ever since.

For example, do you remember Maggie Cunningham? She was one of the original, founding members of this very church back in 1869. And what a story she has.

Maggie was a leader not only within the Baptist church, but also within the entire Midland community. Born in Toronto, Canada, she was orphaned at the age of 7 and eventually made her way to Midland in 1861. Eight years later she was one of four charter members in this fellowship.

In 1875, Maggie started a restaurant business but it burned to the ground in 1876. Not to be defeated, she rebuilt it within a few months and became a legend in the community because she often provided meals to destitute travelers and others free of charge.

Because of her own experience as an orphan, Maggie Cunningham adopted several orphaned children and raised them as “the family that she never had.” She provided for them generously including, in a couple cases, a post-high education.

It is also said that Miss Cunningham started Midland’s first shelter for battered women and children using her restaurant as a refuge. She also used her own resources to help those in need of shelter, food or clothing. And if this wasn’t enough, it was this woman’s driving energy and faith that helped build the new Baptist church at the corner of Larkin and McDonald Sts. For years she held bake sales at her restaurant every Saturday with all proceeds going to the church.

Maggie Cunningham’s obituary states that “her funeral was held from the Baptist church, of which she was an exemplary member... All Main Street businesses closed during her funeral as a respectful tribute to the woman who gave so much of herself to others.”

What a remarkable lady. She is definitely in that cloud of witnesses, don’t you think? And I can’t help but wonder... who will the list include in our generation? Who will make it possible for us to **“run with perseverance the race that is set before us”** and who will help us look **“to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”**? When we have the answer to these questions, we’ll be looking at those who will be joining the great cloud of witnesses.

For this is how we grow the church and enhance the faith. We tell and re-tell our stories and constantly interpret their meaning for the new generation of believers. We help folks understand that the power with which Jesus healed the demoniac is the same power with which our God is healing people today... the blessing he placed upon the poor widow who gave everything she had to her Lord, is the same blessing our God gives those today who genuinely and sacrificially give themselves away. The tears he shed when overlooking the corrupt city of Jerusalem on the day he entered for the final time, are the same tears God sheds today over the

brokenness throughout our society and our world. The forgiveness he gave to Zacchaeus who had cheated even his own people, is the same forgiveness God gives to those who are caught in sin today. And let there be no doubt... the commission he gave to his disciples to go into all the world baptizing and teaching is the same commission God places before us today.

So on this communion Sunday, bask in the warmth of your spiritual heritage. Remember the stories which fill our lives with meaning. Give thanks to God for the generations who have lifted our history... for the cloud of witnesses bringing us to this place in time. And in this holy moment, give thanks for the table which stands before us and speaks of our precious story.

Remember through this cup and this bread your Savior who died for you on a hill called Calvary. Remember the people who gathered about the foot of that cross gambling for his clothes and taunting him with vinegar on a sponge. Remember the soldier who pierced his side with a spear. Remember his mother who was in the crowd of impassioned observers who was commended to the care of the beloved disciple, John. Remember Peter whose allegiance was tested not once but three times and who came up short on each occasion only to grow into the most eloquent evangelist in all of history. And please... please remember that all of these people are part of our family.

To bring this all together, I'll close with a simple story. It is told about Nels Ferre, a well know theologian and author who left his home in Sweden at the age of 13 to come to America. The departure was an unforgettable experience.

The family had come together to pray for Nels and each of the eight children participated. Finally, when all had finished their prayers they walked to the train station. And as they stood waiting for the train that would carry this 13-year-old away to a new country, Nels said he could see his mother forming words, but not saying anything at all... at least not anything aloud that he could understand. But he knew what she was doing. She was praying and her words were not for his ears, but for God's.

Finally the conductor blew his whistle and the train began to pull out of the station. Nels said his mother ran along the platform beside the train yelling to him through the window... her last connection with her son. "Nels, Nels," she shouted through her tears. "Remember Jesus... Remember Jesus."

Need we say another word? *Remember Jesus...*

Amen and AMEN!