

## A Season of Remembrance – Brian Hartley

Ruth 1:1-18; Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

“If you can’t remember back to the time before you were born,” suggests Fred Craddock, “you are doomed to live your life as an orphan.” And perhaps no season in the life of the church attempts to address this problem more directly than does the time in which we happen to currently find ourselves. On Thursday, we celebrated All Saints’ Day, the one day in the church’s calendar dedicated to remembering all of those who have gone before. And, just a week from today, we will find ourselves smack dab in the middle of what our European cousins call, “Remembrance Day,” first devised as a way of honoring the war dead after World War I. Lest we forget, strewn across our various technological devices and TV screens on that day will be the all-pervasive symbol of the Great War—the blood-red poppy.

Yet, being good Americans, tend not to dwell on the past and so across most of the evangelical church in this country, I would guess that a good deal of the preaching today will be centered on whatever the future may hold after we perform our civic duty at the polls this week. But, I would like to remind you that our understanding of the future is predicated on how and whether we choose to remember the past. After all, each of the presidential candidates has worked carefully to convince you of what is coming based on his past and his track record of success. Each, also, has labored diligently to craft a narrative to explain who he is and the values he holds dear based upon a particular rendering of his past. And, while we are never entirely captive to our past, it does provide a window into our character and serves as a means of shaping both our present and future. So, this morning, I would like to suggest that it is as we engage in the activity of remembrance that we come to understand better both ourselves and our God.

All of today’s texts take place during times of difficulty—a time between times, a moment of what Victor Turner calls “liminality.” For Jesus, it is a time after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and before his arrest and subsequent crucifixion. It is a time we celebrate during Holy Week—a time when the days between Passion Sunday and Good Friday seem like time out of time. Today’s gospel lesson serves literally as something of a hinge narrative between these episodes. Throughout much of Mark’s gospel, conflict with the religious authorities has been the abiding motif. And, such is the case with today’s story. Except for one crucial factor—it is the last time that the religious authorities will dare to question him. This is curious because for the last chapter they have heightened their irreverent attitude—questioning him about his teaching authority, about paying taxes, and about the resurrection. But after this passage of scripture, Jesus will denounce the scribes, embarrass them with the story of the widow’s mite, and in that famous 13<sup>th</sup> chapter speak of the very destruction of their center of power, Jerusalem. After this, nothing will remain except for them to arrest him, march him through

trumped-up charges, and hang him on a cross. So it is that this story serves as something of a transition between this intense period of teaching and questioning and the final denouement in which the plot to kill Jesus is hatched.

And the passage to which Jesus refers in today's gospel lesson has its original setting during a similar time of transition—a time our opening verse suggests when the people of Israel were about to cross over and to occupy the land. Prior to this, they had spent the past forty years wandering in the wilderness, being shaped into the people God needed. And, after this time they would find themselves contending for the land. Perhaps, then, the most curious thing about this passage is that while it is stuck in this liminal place where the people of Israel have one foot in the wilderness and one foot in the Promised Land, the scripture is something of an over-ripe passage bursting with action verbs. They are like the rocks I used to trip over as a boy when I would try walking in the woods—they would almost seem to rise up and pull me down to the ground. Do you see them in the text?

Hear...observe...keep...recite...talk...bind...fix...write. Everywhere you turn there is an activity being spoken of. This, then, is no call to passivity, but suggests that the very act of remembrance requires us to do something, to take action in order to not forget.

Now, I must confess, I have a habit of forgetting—particularly of forgetting what my wife asked me or reminded me of just a few moments ago. For being a relatively smart guy, I have a terrible time remembering what she just said. After almost 35 years together, she has learned this. That's why she sometimes asks me to repeat it to her or I have to write it down. And I still do this the old-fashioned way. I have both my written Day-Timer and my hardbound "Church Book and Desk Diary." And then I have countless notes I make to myself and lists. In fact, I am that guy you run into at IGA who is fastidiously marking things off his grocery list. My problem is that I can't ever remember which aisle certain items are to be found. The employees at IGA all know this and either run when they see me or break into a grin and say, "How can I help you today, Mr. Hartley?" My idea of bliss is not only finding everything on my list, but finding them without any help from supermarket personnel. The day this happens, I will know that I have achieved my purpose in life and can die and go to heaven.

But, you know, writing things down is not such a bad idea, after all. We are told by numerous studies that the very act of writing something down can help us to remember it. This is why I am quite often baffled at why so few students take notes these days. Anthropologists of memory tell us that at least two different things are happening when we write things down. First of all, before we write we are putting thought into ordering and assessing what we actually place on paper. And that very process helps these things to remain at the forefront of our minds. But, second, brain research suggests that writing also serves as a kind of "mini-rehearsal," helping us to visualize the doing inherent in what the note itself suggests. And, furthermore, this increases the chances that something will remain with us longer—perhaps even throughout our lives. Thus, we can speak, literally, of "inscribing it on our heart."

I have witnessed this often when making the rounds in a nursing home. Residents may appear as if they are not cognizant of what is going on around them—even on the verge of a kind of comatose existence. But, then, when I sit next to the bedside and begin to read from a familiar passage of scripture, such as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, or to sing an old hymn, such as “Amazing Grace,” suddenly they will begin to speak or sing alongside me. Those words and music memorized so long ago have taken up permanent residence in their minds and, despite their lack of mental acuity, continue to do their work.

During my childhood, I learned a valuable lesson about this inscriptive power quite literally the hard way. I was in second grade and in love with Beverly Elliott. She had beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes and would hang back just a bit when the other girls would chase us around the playground. Unbeknownst to me, I was suffering from the onset of early childhood near-sightedness and had a proclivity to run into trees and bicycle racks and an occasional cement retaining wall. Most of the other girls would laugh uproariously, but Beverly once offered me her lace handkerchief with which to staunch the bleeding after I had had a close encounter with a chain link fence. And for this, I thought, she deserved a proper thank you note.

So, I wrote her one. With my father’s prized fountain pen. In the quiet of my parents’ bedroom. On top of their new bedroom dresser, composed of very soft wood. Right about where my mother placed her do-dads. Not thinking about the fact that I should probably have a heavy thick blotter underneath. And so, the little love note that I sent to Beverly became permanently inscribed both in my mind and in the middle of my parents’ most-valued piece of furniture. To this day, I have never forgotten the horror of my mother being able to glance down and see her son’s primitive hen-scratchings, written from the depths of my heart, staring up at her every time she went to powder her face. You see, I took somewhat too literally our Lord’s command to “write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:1-9).

But it is the passage from Ruth from whence we have extracted perhaps our most memorable lines this morning. This passage, too, is set clearly in a time in between. It is a time in-between life and death, on the road between Moab and Israel, at the intersection between social expectations and extravagant, over-the-top love and faithfulness. And the irony is that we typically rip this passage out of its context and plop it down between two pimply-faced kids on their wedding day. But that is to remove the shock of this passage. For this is not the story of some love-besotted virginal girl offering herself to some masculine knight in shining armor. This is the story of a broken-hearted poor young widow choosing to leave behind all that was familiar to her to follow (drum-roll, please) her mother-in-law, her dead husband’s first love. That’s right, you heard me the first time, this story of faithfulness is about two women joined together only by the memories of the man who was now missing from the equation. And, as we all know, the choice made right here at this intersection in Moab—a land associated in the Hebrew mind with the sin of Lot and his incestuous acts with his daughters—was to make possible, according to the very first chapter of our New Testament, the narrative of one Jesus of Nazareth.

Fred Craddock claims that we live out of our memories, but that our memories leak. That is why we have to write things down and retell the story over and over. My grandfather was the one who taught me this truth. In fact, if I am quiet enough and close my eyes, I can hear him straining even now as he tries to describe the mini-ball whizzing through the air to blast away his grandfather's chin in a battle fought in the bogs of Louisiana during the Civil War. With his big rough carpenter's hands and that classic Ozark drawl, he could conjure up a world of the past for me that seemed, at times, more real than the one that existed right outside the door. His stories and those of his generation have served to nourish me and to give me a sense of identity in another place and another time, even as the 21<sup>st</sup> century world in which I operate seems light-years away from that 19<sup>th</sup>-century narrative.

These are liminal times through which we are passing. The warmth of summer is now far behind us and the snows of winter lie yet ahead. The leaves have passed through the prism of autumnal color and have slowly drifted their way to the ground—littering our lawns with deep piles of muddy brown detritus. The earth is packing up its bags and drawing in upon itself for the starkness of the dark and cold that lie yet ahead. And we find ourselves living in that shadowland of already-but-not-yet that marks the turn from one season to another. In a few short weeks, we will gather around the table to celebrate Thanksgiving and then turn over a new leaf as we start the new church year. We will haul out the purple vestments and the Advent candles. We will decorate the church for the coming of our Lord. And, we will all lean in with expectation towards Christmas.

But, not today. Not just yet. Today is for pausing and remembering. Today is for learning to embrace the liminal and the present. Today is for learning to recite and retell and rehearse. Today we choose to listen to the voices of the past—to Naomi and Ruth, to Jesus and the scribes, to the commandment of God to the people preparing to enter into the Promised Land. And, today, we enter that place-in-between, that place marked out with Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me."

And, like Jesus in today's epistolary lesson, we realize that we have entered into the "Holy Place," the place marked out with the words, "Agnus Dei," the lamb of God. It is a place made clean we are told, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood. This is the place where others have gone before us—the place filled with all of those bedecked in the bright red robes of the martyrs. It is a place made sacred through story and not easily reached through anything other than the holy imagination. It is the place of remembrance—a place from which we have come; a place in which we can stand; and a place where we pause to remember—lest we ever forget both who and whose we are. Amen.