

5-24-09 sermon – Re-Membering (Memorial Day Sunday) (Acts 1:15-26)

Pastor Jim Beckwith, Annville Church of the Brethren, Annville, PA

This past Thursday was Ascension Day – the day set for remembering how the Risen Lord Jesus, after first appearing to his disciples to prove he had been raised from the dead, ascended to be seated at the right hand of the Father. Our Scripture this morning picks up shortly after that Ascension – as the disciples wait in Jerusalem for the gift Jesus promised – the gift of the Holy Spirit which we celebrate on Pentecost (next Sunday). In that time between the Ascension and Pentecost, the disciples stayed in their upstairs room in Jerusalem, praying constantly.

Then Peter said, let us choose a replacement for Judas Iscariot, who killed himself after betraying Jesus. Peter quotes Psalm 109, which says that those who have falsely accused the chief leader (King David in the Psalm; Jesus in this case) should be removed from roles of leadership and replaced. Peter applies this to Judas – let him be replaced. Of course, Judas wasn't the only one who betrayed Jesus. They had all run away. Indeed, Peter had denied three times that he so much as knew Jesus. But he and the others in that upstairs room had all repented, had all turned back from their guilt and shame, seeking to be forgiven, to become part once again of the fellowship of Jesus' followers, whereas Judas was evidently unable to ask for forgiveness, and had therefore died – spiritually and physically.

Some people destroy themselves like that rather than allowing the Lord to redeem them. Some of *us* have a lot to pray about ourselves – to ask the Lord to redeem us, to reclaim us, to fit us back into the work force of his kingdom. After all such times of falling away, we are called to re-member the Body of Christ – to put people back into right relationship with the Lord and with each other, so that the Spirit of God might stir among us and continue the work of Jesus through us.

In Acts chapter 1 the task is re-member the leadership of the church – to fill the vacant spot caused by Judas' abdication and death. And Peter gives the criteria for choosing his replacement (vss. 21-22): it must be someone who has been following Jesus the whole time from Jesus' baptism, through all of his time of ministry ("the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us"), on through the crucifixion and resurrection and ascension of Jesus ("to the time when Jesus was taken up from us"). To be one of The Twelve Apostles required full knowledge of all of Jesus' ministry and teaching.

Upon occasion I have wished I could point this out to some church groups which seem to think that the only important part of the Gospel is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now obviously, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and the power by which God raised Jesus from the dead, conquering the powers of sin and death, is the amazing Good News that launches the church. But the teachings of Jesus about turning the other cheek and loving our neighbors, forgiving and healing broken people – these are incredibly important as well. So important, Peter is saying, that someone who had just started following Jesus in time to watch the crucifixion and resurrection should not be considered for prime leadership in the early church. No, the replacement for Judas must be someone who has experienced the full ministry of Jesus from baptism to ascension.

And it turns out there are two such persons: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. The apostles then ask the Lord to make the choice between these two capable candidates as they cast lots – and the casting of lots chose Matthias.

Have *you* experienced the casting of lots? While I was living in Virginia, I was invited to attend a worship service of the Old Order (Horse and Buggy) Mennonites in our community. They were choosing a new Bishop. I felt like I had stepped back in time in my own tradition – because I believe their casting of lots was similar to how Brethren a long time ago would have chosen a presiding elder. Three of their ministers had been set forward as good candidates, meeting the criteria for becoming a bishop. I'm not sure what the criteria were, but the congregation was assured by the current Bishop that any of the candidates could serve well. Nearly a dozen other bishops of Old Order Mennonites had come from out of state to be present for this special ceremony. It was an awesome day. I was very curious how it would all work out, because I was aware that people in the congregation had their own preferences. One of the three candidates was the nephew of some people in my Brethren congregation, and I knew that his extended family believed he should be the one. After much preaching (for a couple hours), about the need for members of the congregation to support, pray for, and encourage whomever would be chosen, the current bishop (whose health was failing) went into a back room and brought out three songbooks, each with a slip of paper in it, one different than the others [shorter, I believe]. And he shuffled those books and shuffled them and then gave each of the candidates one of the songbooks. Then he asked the first candidate to open his book and declared: "We need look no further. The Lord has chosen our Brother Wenger." He had the book with the unique slip. The bishop clearly believed the

Lord had made the choice among the fairly equal candidates. On the way out, however, I heard some folks mutter: “it should have been our nephew.” No matter what method we use, someone will object. But leadership must be re-membered and vacancies filled, in order for the work of the Lord to carry on.

Indeed, we must gather co-workers as well as leaders ... we must gather people of all sorts to re-member the Body of Christ whenever anyone drops out.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I invite us to think of re-membering in an even larger sense – as we remember people who have been special in our lives, who have given themselves for our sake, who have helped us get in touch with God’s purposes for our living. What qualities or characteristics of the spirit of their living can be carried on in your own living ... re-membered to be alive again through you. As I try to say at most every funeral service – there is a legacy to be carried on, and if we will embody the best example others gave to us, then generations to come will be blessed by what we “re-member.”

When I sing my grandchildren to sleep, I re-member my Grandma Lewis and the calming peace that came as she sang to me as a child. Once in a while she seemed to forget the words and just hummed. Or maybe it was on purpose that her voice would drop now and again to lull us to sleep. The spirit of her singing inspired trust and hope, and we just knew we were precious in her sight and in God’s sight. I want my grandchildren to know that, too.

What legacy will *you* carry on – how will you re-member in your own life the good example of those you remember this Memorial Day weekend?

And how will we re-member in our congregational life the faithful witness of people who gathered in this meetinghouse over the years? This is not a call to repeat their living, but that we piece back together in our own living the qualities of faithful living, gracious encouragement, and humble service that helped them to follow Jesus.

Our scripture calls us to more than re-membering those who have gone before us. It calls us to the hard work of re-membering the Body of Christ after deceit and betrayal have torn the body asunder. It calls us to two ways of re-membering:

(1) to reclaim those who can be reclaimed – like the Eleven who needed to be grouped back together after fleeing in fear when Jesus was taken to be crucified. We also are to call people back out of sin and fear, out of brokenness and alienation. This is the task that the poet Meridel le Seuer refers to as “re-membering the dis-membered,” including those who have been ostracized because of drug addictions, homelessness, despair, or broken relationships. The prophet Ezekiel reminds us that God has the power to put dry, dead bones back together to give new life to hopeless people – and that God does this through people like Ezekiel, you and me, telling us to prophesy to those dead bones that they should hear the Word of the Lord: God wants you to fit you back into a living body again! (See Ezekiel 37.)

(2) to replace those who cannot be reclaimed – like Judas – and to add many more by calling new people to become co-workers with us in Christ’s service. Together we piece together the perspectives God gives to us so that we can re-member the Good News of the saving grace of Jesus Christ to make a faithful witness in our time.

When I was working towards my D.Min. degree at Bethany Seminary, I was quite taken by an analogy given by the philosopher R.M. Hare in an article we studied. The analogy was about how we have to work together to re-member things fully. His analogy is about trying to remember how to dance a Scottish reel, and he says the best way is for people to simply start dancing the reel, and gradually piece together each person’s understanding as to how it is supposed to go, discerning whether it feels right as you go along, until the whole dance is pieced back together as it should be. I used that analogy in my thesis as a way of describing how we must collaborate, how we need each other to piece together the teachings of Jesus, to help all of us follow Jesus faithfully, re-membering Jesus as we help each other embody his Way of Life and thereby continue the work of Jesus in our life together.

In the hollers and hills of the Shenandoah Valley, we sang a song that talks about being re-membered in a much more simple, down-home way. It expresses the heart-felt yearning that all the members of our families – indeed that all of God’s family from every culture and every generation – might yet be re-membered into the circle of God’s salvation, learning to walk in the Way of the Lord so as to be ready to share eternal Life together forever. As we sing it together, ponder how we will re-member the faithful witness of those who have gone before us.

Hymn: “Will the Circle Be Unbroken”