

Joshua 4:1-9

Don't Forget to Remember

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I hope you are enjoying this Memorial Day weekend. Many of us look forward to Memorial Day because we think of this weekend as the official start to summer. School is out, swimming pools are open, and we seem to have a little more time for fun. We plan camping trips, family reunions, and backyard parties. These ways of celebrating Memorial Day, while familiar to most of us, are very different from the ways I remember my grandparents celebrating the day. You probably know that Memorial Day used to be called Decoration Day. The day was set aside to decorate the graves of men and women who died while serving our country in the armed forces. My brother and I often spent Memorial Day weekend with our grandparents and accompanied them on the trek to various cemeteries around western Illinois.

As we placed the flowers on each grave, my grandparents would tell my brother and me about each person, how they were related to us, where they lived, and what they considered the most important parts of each person's life. I loved hearing the stories of my relatives' lives. As in every family, there were some real characters in ours. There were stories of soldiers missing in action, of extraordinary circumstances, of mothers worrying, and wives delivering babies without their overseas husbands. I am so grateful my grandparents paused long enough to remember and share those stories of our family with us. I learned a deep respect for the sacrifices that were and are made by men and women in the armed forces and their families. Our nation would be very different without their service.

It wasn't until much later in life that I became aware of the stories of war and conflict beyond the family stories my grandparents shared with

my brother and me. At the time, it didn't occur to me that there was anything else. You and I know there is though. We know there are children who are caught in the midst of warring adults. I have heard stories from soldiers who have come home and who painfully relive horrific events every day. I know a young man who was in the Air Force and worked in a room where drone strikes were carried out. When he came home, he talked about his job and how it changed how he feels about the ways our country engages in the world. This young man will never be the same. He is 29 years old and imagines, every single day, that he will have to answer to God for his part in war.

I haven't made a secret about the way I feel about war and my heart's desire for peaceful conflict resolution in the world, in our country, and even in our homes. I want to be clear, though, that my desire for peace is not a criticism of the men and women who have lost their lives serving this country. This weekend is a time for me, for all of us, to remember that the freedoms we enjoy did not come without a cost. And we have to remember that cost was paid by the men and women in our armed forces, but also by the thousands of innocent men, women, and children who got caught in the middle, who had nothing to do with the conflict. Friends, the cost of war is too high. We cannot allow the idea of war to be tossed around as a viable option. War is hell.

As Christians, let us continue to pray for, look forward to and work toward the day when everyone will be safe, everyone will have enough, and everyone will be free to become who God created them to be *and* to know, without a doubt, they are beloved by God.

So, thank you to the families who remember their loved ones this day. Know that you are not alone and we, too, remember their sacrifices and yours. We will not forget. We will continue to tell their stories and the stories of all who have died in the midst of conflict and war.

Remembering is an important part of our lives and an important part of our faith tradition. We talked during Lent about the importance, within the Jewish tradition, of the people remembering God's saving activity through their rescue from the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt. Many times in the Hebrew Bible, writers urge, "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out of there..." (Deuteronomy 5:15) Yes, remember...remember what God had done in your life.

I want to talk today about the importance of really remembering and the importance that telling stories has in remembering. The book of Joshua picks up the story of the Israelite tribes at the very end of their wilderness wandering, after the death of Moses. It paints a memorable picture of their triumphant sweep into Canaan under Joshua's leadership.

In chapter 4, the Israelites had just finished crossing the Jordan River on dry land. The story tells us the people were able to cross as the priests, who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant, stepped into the water. The water simply stopped flowing. After the people crossed, and before the priests stepped onto the bank, Joshua instructed 12 men, one from each of the 12 tribes of Israel, to take a stone from the middle of the river where the priests stood, and take them to their camp in Gilgal. The reason is simple. Like with anything in a child's world, the Israelite children will have questions when they see the stones, and when they do, the adults will be ready to tell the story of how, because of God's providence in drying up the river bed, the people were able to cross the river.

This story has always resonated with me. I think this is true because storytelling was a big part of my childhood, especially as I related to my grandparents. They were such wonderful story tellers. And usually, the

starting point for a story was one of my questions. My grandparents collected things. Grandma collected miniature pianos and glass hens on nests. I could ask her about any one of the items in her collection and be assured there was a story attached to it. Grandpa collected antique telephones and model trains. The same was true for him. He knew where every piece came from and he remembered the story of the day he acquired each piece.

I don't recall ever really caring about the pieces in either of their collection...other than grandpa had some really, really cool train pieces, especially on the Christmas train. What was important to me, the reason I asked about the collections was; I wanted to hear the stories. I loved listening to the tales of people I knew and wished I had known. I loved hearing them talk about their childhood, the early years of their marriage, my dad as a child, and all of the other characters that had been in and out of their lives. I loved that my grandma didn't sugarcoat any of the stories. She told it like it was! She told me the whole story, not just the parts that made our relatives look good. I didn't realize it then, but I think those stories were the beginning of my learning to understand life based on perspective. I can remember my grandma saying, "That's not how your grandpa and I would do it, but everyone has their own wisdom."

The Joshua story about the 12-stones was important because it presented the opportunity for God's people to tell the story of how they understood God and God's activity in their lives. It was about God providing a way across the river and giving land to the people. Remember, the receipt of land, in that time and place, was like throwing a drowning person a life jacket. To own a plot of land was to be able to feed one's family. To be landless was to be at the mercy of others. The landless were always one step from poverty, enslavement and starvation. Once again, God kept God's promises...God saved the people.

And, I'm sure that, as adults told the story of the stones to the children, they shared the story of why the Israelites ended up wandering around in the wilderness in the first place. They talked to them about the importance of doing things God's way and not their own way. This stone memorial wasn't the starting point for a story about how the Israelites always got things right, but instead a more "fair and balanced" story about how, in spite of their getting it all wrong, God still kept God's promises and continued to love and care for them.

So, these ideas of remembering and real storytelling were the things swirling around in mind this week, when my attention was drawn to the story out of New Orleans about the dismantling of four Confederate monuments. The monuments included a monument to Confederate president Jefferson Davis, statues of Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard, and a monument to the postwar Battle of Liberty Place, during which the all-white Crescent City White League staged an insurgency against the mixed-race Municipal Police in an attempt to topple the city's government.

People in favor of keeping the monuments intact feel that in removing them, we, in a sense, try to cover up history. The monument's removal was met with opposition by the Monumental Task Committee, a nonprofit which likened their removal to "erasing a very specific and undeniable part of New Orleans' history." Other groups, like the Sons of Confederate Veterans, said their removal demonstrates that "the war on Southern heritage is raging." New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu disagreed and said so, "These monuments," he said, "have stood not as historic or educational markers of our legacy of slavery and segregation, but in celebration of it. I believe we must remember all of our history, but we need not revere it. To literally put the Confederacy on a pedestal in some of our most prominent public places is not only an inaccurate reflection of our past, it is an affront to our present, and a

bad prescription for our future. We should not be afraid to confront and reconcile our past.” I applaud the leadership of New Orleans in their efforts to help the city understand its history, the good and the bad, and to learn from it, creating a safe place for all children to grow up.

The Mayor’s speech reminded me of President Obama’s recollection of a piece of history...a stone, used for a slave auction block, engraved with a marker commemorating the moment Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay stood and spoke from it. On the occasion when Obama spoke about this piece of history, he invited consideration that there was a whole lot more to that stone’s history than Jackson and Clay standing on it. It told the stories of men and women and children, slaves, who were bought and sold from that stone. The stone was worn down from thousands of bare feet standing on it. His point...let us not allow the story of this stone to be about two white men making speeches.

In our country, we have struggled with our stories. We have argued over the things we should teach our children about our nation’s history. I believe, it is our obligation to teach our children the whole story of our history, especially when it comes to war and conflict. Teaching them about the true horror of war might save millions of lives someday. Maybe if they realize the costs of war go far beyond what we have historically talked about, when they are in charge, they will employ different solutions to the challenges our world faces. But our children, and all of us, have to know the whole story. And I am sure I don’t have to tell you this, but the whole story won’t be found on Fox News, CNN, or the 10 pm news. Those stories are told by the men and women and children who have lived it. We have to listen to them.

Our lives are full of opportunities to listen, to remember, and to tell stories. As Christians, the story we need to be telling is a continuation of that story from the 12 stones in Gilgal. It’s the part of the story that

tells about God's interaction with us. If we tell the story right, I believe everyone will want to be a part of it and I believe the world will be a very different place.

Our part of the story isn't about the 12 stones of Gilgal, so what are we using to tell our children, our friends, and our neighbors about God and God's activity in our lives?

A tour about the church might give us some food for thought. Last Sunday this sign greeted us as we came in for worship. Would this sign remind us to tell the story of the value we believe God places on young people, their experiences, and what they have to teach us about faith? Would this green chalice remind us to tell other people that God's way does not conflict with science and that we believe our role as stewards of creation is an important one?

Would these wall hangings remind us to tell the stories of the relationships many in this congregation have formed with our brothers and sisters in Nicaragua? What would we tell them we have learned about God through relationships with people who are different from us?

What part of God's story would these quilts help us tell? So many squares, representing this community of faith and love. Or what about this picture of our Worship and Wonder room? Would it tell the story of teaching children to think for themselves, constructing a faith that makes sense to them, that makes room for questions? Indeed, I was reminded this week that stories of God and God's activity in and through us are everywhere!

What do you have sitting around your house or office that is a monument to God's activity in your life? A picture? A flag? A letter? A special gift? Let it remind you to tell God's story.

Tell the whole story...to a child, a friend, somebody. Tell them about your questions and doubts, about your mistakes, about your fears. We have to tell the story so that other people can begin to recognize and tell their part of God's story, so that the world may know our stories are connected.

Let us never forget to tell our stories. Amen.