

Remember When

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Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church

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Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20

"I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old."

Movement 1 – Complacency

The status quo can kill you. The mundane, the monotony, the repetition can drain your spirit, sap your strength, and slowly suck out any bit of hope and life you might have. The status quo can kill you.

Perhaps not literally, perhaps not in a quick death kind of way, but keeping to the same old, same old will slowly sap all you have. In the beginning of the movie *American Beauty* the main character says that in a year he is going to die, but then he says that in a real way his life is already over. He lives in a routine that occurs over and over again, working in his cubical, performing a job that does not go anywhere, and not finding any joy in his life. His only joy is found in James Bond marathons, and that is a numb joy. The status quo, the same thing again and again and again can become draining and suck you dry.

It is accepting that your life is in a routine and will never change or adapt. It is accepting that change is never going to happen and that things will always be the same, and not looking for any ways to change, improve or make better one's life. Many churches fall into a place of status quo. They fall into the place of complacency, accepting that the way things are run, the way worship occurs; the way the church is living (or dying) is acceptable and would never consider changing. I would contend that those churches are dying in their similarity, in their complacency, and in their routine of the status quo. The days are only gray even when the sun shines the greatest. The status quo can kill you.

Maybe you find yourself disagreeing. Maybe you like routine, you like to know what is going to happen and what to expect. You may come to me and say, "I have found something comfortable. I have found something predictable, why would I want to change? Why would I want I want to rock the boat in my own life and bring an unneeded stress into my daily existence?" Because change is a part of life, and to live means to change. Our body is changing, our environment is changing.

Maybe you find yourself saying, "Well Pastor, I like to know what I am going to expect, I like to know what is going to happen in worship. I think the status quo is good in the church so people can have at least one hour in their life when they can feel safe, and secure and peaceful." But I answer to you, when we stay the same as a church, then we become a museum, one of the few places where you can expect to see the same thing again and again. The church is not a museum; it is not a place where we exhibit our faith in a display case in the same sterile and comfortable way we are used to. Yet even a museum changes around the exhibits or bring in something new from time to time. When the church falls into the status quo it becomes a museum and then quickly moves to becoming a mausoleum. Thomas Edison said, "We shall have not better conditions in the future if we are satisfied with all those which we have at present." If we do not change the church atrophies, and will wither away.

The status quo can kill you. Imagine with me the Israelites in Babylon. They were forcefully taken from their land; they were marched to a foreign country and made to live among foreign people as second-class citizens. Because they had rejected the Lord, because they desecrated their temples, they neglected the poor, and did not strive to let justice and mercy

prevail in the lands, God allowed them to be conquered and taken to a foreign land as slaves. Imagine that after a while, in this foreign land, the Israelites began to fall into a routine. Imagine that they began to expect the day in and day out of their lives and began to accept the status quo and the state of things. I can imagine that their memory and their imagination of their identity as a people chosen by God would begin to fade into the distance with the mindless monotony. I imagine that with each day, with the same routine they would begin to numb their mind of the horrors of their past and begin to die as children of Israel. The status quo would kill them.

Sometimes it may feel as if we are living in exile. Sometimes it feels as if we are trapped, living through the mundane monotony without any hope or any life. Sometimes, even in the brightest day, it may seem that there is a gray cloud over us all the time.

There is a commercial on television that I think captures the point. We see a number of people in the woods with blank stares on their faces kicking trees with a sense of monotony. They seem lost and stuck in the status quo, until the man with a red wig on his head decides that he deserves a “hot, juicy burger” and he decides to stop kicking the trees. The status quo, kicking the trees would lead to nothing; it would not be living.

The status quo, the complacency, the blind acceptance that life is just as it is and needs not change in the slightest will lead to a living death. The status quo can kill you.

Movement 2 – Dissatisfaction

We can get upset about things. We can look at our life and say with the Wendy’s commercial, “this isn’t right.” We can try to change, try to do better. We can get upset about things.

It is that moment when you look at your life and decide that the job which is taking up 20 hours of your day every day is not worth the hassle. It is looking at your life and deciding that the relationship you’re in that drains your energy, your self-esteem and your sense of pride is not worth it. It is looking at your life and deciding that it is no longer acceptable to live with the pain in your knees, with the shortness of breath. We can get upset about things; we can decide that we are not going to accept the mundane, the gray skies or the angst in our lives. We can decide that we are no longer going to live with the limp, the cloudy days, or the lifeless job. We can get upset.

Think of the psalmist from the scripture read today. We cannot be sure where or when this was written, but speculate with me (a possible speculation supported by a number of scholars; Dahood, etc...). Speculate with me that the psalmist is living in Babylon with the other Israelites in exile. Imagine that he also finds himself stuck in the mundane, monotony and debasing status quo. He wakes up, serves the Babylonians, and goes to bed. He is stuck with his fellow countrymen and women until one day he says, “this isn’t right.” He looks at the way his life is preceding, he looks at the way he is living and gets upset. Maybe that is the moment, which is the point when he pens this psalm. Maybe it is at the moment when he realizes that the status quo is killing him that he, cries aloud to God. He names this day as a day of trouble, he realizes that the gray clouds of complacency are only covering the dark sky of the night. He falls on his knees; he weeps bitterly in his own realization and stretches out his hand to the Lord, no longer accepting the comfort of the routine or the mundane. This isn’t right. This isn’t the land where God called them to dwell. This is not how God called the Israelites to live. The clouds have spread and he can see the true and real darkness in his life and in the lives of the Israelites.

Rodger Williams got upset with the Massachusetts Bay colony. He saw the ways in which religious freedoms were not honored, he saw the ways in which the Native Americans

were treated and he said, “This is not right.” Others told him to not make a fuss. Others told him to not upset the status quo, but Williams would not accept a way of life that he saw as draining and not according to the way of the Lord. Williams got upset.

Think of the founding individuals of this country. They were told that the method of taxation, the method of representation was normal for a British colony, and that they should accept the status quo. When individuals like Jefferson and Madison were working on the Constitution they were told that having a state supported church was normal and was the status quo. Yet Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton and others said that this was not right. Taxation without representation was not right. For the state to support one religious group over another was not right. They got upset and would not accept the status quo.

Church life expert George Bullard talks about different stages of the life of the church. One of the stages Bullard describes is the “mature” stage; the stage when the congregation is full, when program is going well and there is a full feeling of copasetic complacency. It is when people are most happy with the status quo, and it is when Bullard claims that the church begins to die. It is only when someone says, “this isn’t right,” it is only when someone begins to challenge and to feel a sense of dissatisfaction that the church can continue to live and thrive. It is only when we brush away the clouds and say, as a church we are still not loving each other in the same way that Christ has loved us. We are not living out the gospel from day to day. We are not doing enough to share the love of Christ with the world. Our worship is still missing something, it is still missing that presence of Christ. There are things that are not yet right about the church.

Look around and we can find many things to get upset about. In our country there are many things that can lead us to say: this isn’t right. Schools with too many students, people living on one meal a day, people who are held down because of who they are, the growing murder rate in Philadelphia can all lead us to say: this isn’t right.

We can look at our own life as say, this pain I live with isn’t right. This loneliness, this despair isn’t right. This wondering if I am redeemed and if I am good enough in the eyes of the Lord isn’t right. I hurt, I fear, I suffer and isn’t right.

We need to get upset about things. It is complacency that led to the genocide of Rwanda. It is a fear of upsetting the boat that watched the Holocaust lead to the death of millions of Jews. It is a desire to keep to the status quo that made churches complicit in crimes of race. We need to get upset about things. We need to complain, we need to sit uneasy and look for something better. We need to push away the gray clouds, and look at the darkness in our lives; embrace the darkness in our lives. We need to fall on our knees and stretch out our arms to our Lord, crying aloud for help, refusing to be comforted. We need to get upset.

Movement 3 – Memory of Despair

Now don’t get too over-zealous in your discontent, and keep your tempers tempered. Because we can head in the wrong direction, we can head in a direction of despair, and find ourselves quickening the downward spiral we were already engaged in during our slow moving status quo. When you clear the clouds and look into the darkness your minds can return to the times when we thought things were better. We can create in our minds an oasis of memories that give us the illusion of a time when things were better. Stephanie Coontz, the author of *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* says “when you have anxieties about the present you express them by hearkening back to a safer past” (taken from *Newsweek* article “The Myth of Boyhood”, July 9, 2007). This is what often can happen. We can look at the

darkness that surrounds our life, we can look at the hurt and say, I remember when things were better. We can find ourselves saying, I remember the better days, the good days. I remember the days of the 1950s when people were moral, church-going, God-fearing individuals. We can remember the 1890s when everyone read their Bible and seemed to know it well. We can remember the days of our childhood when we had long summers with little activity. We can remember the days of first starting a job when we were full of energy and excitement. We can remember the days being young and in love. We can remember all of those days as we stare at our darkness and say that it was better then. We can get upset and find ourselves yearning and wanting the good old days of the past.

But our memory is selective, especially in the moments of distress. The former president of United Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, Dr. Ed Zeiders once said that when people remember the good days of the church, they are selective in their memory, remembering only what they want to remember in the way they want to remember it. Coontz argues in her book that our memory of the 1950s is also selective and often misguided. She argues that the 1950s were days of a high rate of domestic abuse, one in four homes were in a state of poverty, there was a high dependence on the government, and rampant drug use and on and on. She doesn't say that things were worse than they are today, but she argues that they weren't better as many would like to romanticize.

Yet our memory paints rosy pictures of our past, luring our lamentations, calling our sighs to the "remember when things were better. When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they complained and fell into this selective memory. They had just left the bonds of slavery. They had been complaining to the Lord, asking for help, crying for comfort, and God heard and responded, leading them to liberation. Yet while in the wilderness, looking for food, they began to mumber and complain saying how much better it was back in Egypt. They began to remember Egypt in a romanticized way, forgetting the hardships and the trails. It is a safety mechanization. It is a way to cope with our unsettled country, church and life. It is a way to retreat, and move back into the seductive comfort of the status quo.

A young woman falls for a man who is abusive, unemployed, mean, demanding and unkempt. Everyone asks her why, tries to understand why, and cannot see what she sees. She is looking at him selectively, only seeing what she wants to see. In the same way we look to our memories selectively, seeing only what we want to see to find some hope out of the struggles and the despair and to find some comfort in our troubles. We remember how things were with rose-colored glasses.

Movement 4 – Memory of Hope

Yet we should not abandon the past. We need not turn from remembering our story. We can remember and use our story to give us hope. We only need to remember not how things were, but what happened. We need to remember actions of prophets, actions of the radicals, and most importantly, the actions of God.

Do you hear the psalmist doing this as he remembers? He says he will call to mind, he will remember, but not a rosy colored view of what he wishes was, but what God has done. He remembers, and muses on God's works and deeds. He remembers the way of the Lord, the way which led the people out of the narrow place, the difficult place of Egypt. He remembers the way of the Lord which led the people through the waters, into the wilderness and then into the Promised Land. He remembers what God has done, the mighty deeds of the Lord, the liberation of the Lord. This is a memory we can claim as well. This is a hope we can claim as well.

Theologians such as Moltmann, Volf and Metz all talk about memory as a powerful tool, a powerful part of our faith which can give us strength, focus and direction. When we are looking at the darkness, when we are embracing our distress and our pain, remember the past victories. Remember how you weren't sure VBS was going to come together, and with the grace of the Lord the love of Christ was shared. Remember how your parents, or grand parents, or great-grand-parents, or even before came to this country with little to nothing, and worked, and believed and planted roots. Remember what people have done.

When you are unsettled, when you are dissatisfied, when you feel that things are not right, remember how someone like Rosa Parks stood up and sat down and began to change our country. Remember how young Thomas Jefferson found the strength and the wisdom to pen the Declaration of Independence. Remember the faith they had, the strength they had, and the guidance God offered in their actions. Remember the actions of others, and remember the actions of the Lord.

It may feel now like you are all alone, like you have no hope, like the clouds of complacency are the only hope you can endure, but the power of God can make the light shine in the darkness. You may say that you cannot remember any time when Christ specifically moved you in your life. But our memory goes beyond just ourselves. Our memory is the memory of the Christian story. The story of the parting seas is our story and our memory. The story of the liberating God is our story and our memory. Most importantly, remember Christ. Remember the event of the cross and the resurrection. Remember the love and the grace that Christ offered, the way that Christ taught and claim that memory. Remember the forgiveness that we have through the cross. Remember Christ, what he did and how he has affected our life.

We need not remember how things were, but what was done. We can remember the actions of Christ, the actions of the Holy Spirit, and the actions of God. We have a powerful memory.

Movement 5 – Dangerous Memory of the Present

We can live into that memory today. We can take that memory and make it present in our lives, in the here and now. We can use that memory for hope, we can use that memory for courage, and we can use that memory for direction. We can live into that memory today.

When we remember our independence, we can again reclaim the same kind of political moxy that our founding fathers (and mothers) had. We can scrutinize the system, study the process and demand that things be different and better. Yet more than just demanding, we can get involved, discuss, disagree and exchange ideas as occurred. We can take the memory of 1776 and live into that memory today. We can remember the passion that our founding members had in this church and live that passion today to be a Baptist church that proclaims the gospel, that calls people to a regenerate baptism of immersion and to walk with Christ. We can live our memory.

The storyteller, and activist Utah Phillips tells stories of the workers movement, of the lives lost and sacrificed for the sake of decent wages, working conditions and freedom. He tells the stories not so the people will be remembered, but so that the passion of the movement will live on. He told one story of an instance when he was speaking to his son's graduating class. He went up to the podium, and promised his son that he would be good and not too controversial. Yet as he stood at the podium and saw the corporate dressed in their suits who were going to follow him something snapped. Phillips does not say exactly why his snapped, but I think the stories he told of Mother Jones, the stories he told of the Norwegian lumberjacks, the stories he

told of the workers in Lowell, Mass came to life in his mind and he embraced his memory of workers who refused to be pushed down and held down the money-hungry establishment. He stood at the podium and said to the students something along the lines, “the people after me will tell you that you are the nation’s greatest natural resource. Have you seen what they have done to the nation’s natural resources?” He remembered and he lived his memory.

We need to be careful, because this memory can be a dangerous memory. It can be a memory that challenges us and pushes us to places where we might not be comfortable. Imagine the psalmist remembering the actions of God, and then saying to the other Israelites around him, the ones sloughing through the sludge of despair and monotony that their life is not acceptable, that things should not stay as they are, that things should change. Imagine him calling others to remember, and being labeled as dangerous, as a troublemaker rocking the boat. Yet the memory of the Lord will not leave you complacent with the status quo, but will compel you to change.

Live the memory of Christ. Embrace the memory of Christ just as the psalmist is embracing the memory of God’s liberating actions, but be careful because it is a dangerous memory. Bruce Morrill says remembering Christ, keeping alive the memory of Christ is a “dangerous memory of freedom in the social systems of our technological civilization that will unlock the message of Christianity from the modern manacles of privatized religion and institutional power structures” (Morrill, *Anamnesis As Dangerous Memory*). Remembering Christ, and living that memory may very well lead us to demand a change, and movement, and a new thing to emerge in our lives, in our church, and in our society. Remembering Christ will give us the courage to find the light in the darkness. Remembering Christ will give us the hope to know that even as we struggle, even as we face hardships, even as we face our difficulties we know that a brighter day is coming through the action, the grace and the glory of the Lord.

I heard a comedian the other night say that he always gives money to baggers just in case it is Jesus in disguise. When we live our memory of Christ, when we embrace our memory of Christ, we cannot walk past a beggar without being moved, not because it may be Jesus in disguise, but because it is not of the Kingdom of God as Jesus taught to have someone living in such a destitute situation.

When we are struggling with our own life, we can live the memory of Christ and remember that even our sin is not enough to turn Jesus away from us, for we are forgiven and we are redeemed. We can live this dangerous memory that calls us to be better, that calls the church to be better, and that calls the world to be better. We can live that memory into today.

Movement 6 – Memory in Worship

We start to live that memory in worship. It is here in worship that we remember the story of God, the story of Christ, and the story of a people who have been striving to walk in the way of the Lord. It is here where we remember that sacred memory that the psalmist is evoking. We start to live our religious memory in worship.

Bruce Morrill says that liturgy is the praxis of remembrance, that worship is the way to practice our memory of the story of Christ. We hear the scriptures and respond to the scriptures. We celebrate the liberation of the people in Egypt in a real way. We celebrate the presence of Christ. We repent our action in Christ’s crucifixion, and we find joy in Christ’s resurrection and redemption. We live our memory in worship.

This is what communion is. We gather here at the table with our true life, our real life. We gather at the table, brushing away all of the gray clouds in our life, and come to the table with our burdens, our wounds, and our hurts. We come to the table as human as we are, and then

we remember. We remember how Christ lived with us, taught us, and sat, and sits with us at this table. We remember how Christ sat with us, broke bread with us, and offered us his love, his friendship and his grace. We remember how Christ poured out the cup with us, and invited us to be a part of a new covenant, a new thing in the world. We remember how Christ invited us, embraced us, and loved us as we are, and we practice that memory in worship. This is part of the power of communion. This is part of the strength of communion, of worship, that we practice our memory.

Do not be complacent with the status quo. Refuse to be comforted with pleasantries, but cry out to the Lord. Seek the Lord in the night of your life, and remember the way, the mighty works, and the great deeds of the Lord. Remember the power of the liberation, remember the strength of the incarnation, and remember the promise of the resurrection. Remember and live in worship, in your church, in your life.

AMEN