

## **REMEMBER?**

Sermon preached by Rev. Edee Chase Fenimore

May 24, 2009

Scripture: Genesis 9: 12-17, Acts 11: 1-18

This is a strange Sunday. I know it says at the top of the bulletin, “The Seventh Sunday of Easter”, but it seems as though Easter with its lilies and brass instruments and alleluias is in the distant past. It also says that this is Presbyterian Heritage Sunday but I often have trouble describing what a Presbyterian is let alone what our heritage is about. Also this is the first Sunday after Ascension, the traditional celebration of Christ rising to be with God. But the ascension is even more difficult to talk about than the resurrection. So this Sunday, like it or not, is more defined by what the secular world is celebrating than by what the church and all its liturgists have to say. This is Memorial Day weekend; the unofficial start of summer. Most colleges have already ended the school year and any teacher of elementary, middle or high school can tell you that though there are two or three weeks remaining in the school year, real teaching and learning has slowed discernibly and maybe even stopped entirely. We see evidence of the start of summer here at First Church. Folks are spending weekends away. Sunday School is over. We have had few days where shorts and tee shirts were the garb of choice. And these are all signs that summer is beginning, in our minds, if not on the calendar, or consistently with the weather.

But originally, Memorial Day had nothing to do with summer vacations. Originally it was called decoration day and it was intended as a time to decorate the graves of and remember the Union Soldiers who had fought in the Civil War. It was expanded after World War I to include American casualties of any war or military action.

So as I was preparing for this sermon, I got caught up in trying to tie together these things; Memorial Day, Presbyterian Heritage Sunday and the Seventh Sunday of Easter or Sunday after the Ascension. And what came to me was the word “remember”. All these things are about remembering. We remember those who gave their lives, in the current conflicts or conflicts of the past. We remember those people who shaped the Presbyterian Church, the denomination of which this church is a part. And as people who bear the name of Christian we remember the centrality and significance of the claim that somehow, though our language fails in trying to describe it, somehow, Jesus of Nazareth called the Christ, lived, was killed, rose from the dead, ascended to God and is among us still.

As I searched, I found that in the Bible, there are well over two thousand uses of the word remember in one or another of its forms. The two passages that I

chose for this morning's lessons caught my interest and attention for very different reasons.

Our second lesson, the one from the book of Acts, is a strange tale about a vision that Peter had. Let me set the scene. It is early in the establishment of what would become the Christian Church. It was during the time when a rag-a-tag group of Jewish men and women sought to follow the teachings and life of Jesus of Nazareth. They were trying to put into practice the lessons that they had heard from Jesus. But they were human. They had conflicts and disagreements about what all this meant and how they should behave. And one of the most violent disagreements was about whether or not non Jews, Gentiles, the ones called the uncircumcised in our lesson, . . . whether or not they could be followers of Jesus. Does this sound familiar? We human beings often get into the most peculiar situations by declaring who is or is not included in the circle of God's people. Anyhow, a group of followers came to Peter and questioned him about why he had eaten and associated with Gentiles. And Peter, a man after my own heart, answers them not with a carefully worded doctrinal statement but with a story. He tells them that he had a vision. And what a vision it was. He saw a large sheet being lowered from heaven. In that sheet were four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles and birds of the air. Now if we were to hear this as the original hearers we would already be saying, "O.K. this is trouble right here. All kinds of creatures are mixed together, some of which are unclean, unacceptable for eating. And when Peter says that a voice told him, "Get up Peter, kill and eat", you can almost hear the crowd gasp. Then Peter tells them that he responded to the voice saying, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane has ever entered my mouth." The crowd breathes again for Peter, the leader of this new group of followers, has declared that he obeys the rules, follows the most minute details of the law. Peter goes on to say that in the vision the voice of God came again to him and said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." In fact this dialogue between Peter and God is repeated three times.

We, who read of Peter's description of this vision, do not know if the followers of Jesus got it right away. We do not know if they understood that the rules we human beings make up, rules that attempt to restrict, limit or contain God's love must always give way to that extravagant unconditional embrace of the One who gives us life. Did they understand that the message of the vision was that God's love is much broader than we can imagine?

But perhaps more important than the original hearer's responses, we need to ask ourselves how we hear the description of this strange vision. We could say to ourselves, "This has nothing to do with us. We enlightened Christians of 2009 do not have rules about the food that we eat, or about circumcision, or anything like that." But upon reflection, we might realize that we have different rules that we think should be followed, rules that we think make one a follower of Jesus. Our own denomination continues to argue about rules for who can be ordained as

a deacon, elder, or minister of word and sacrament. And sadly people on both sides of the question sometimes are so sure that their position is right that they think of those on the opposite side as completely wrong and perhaps not really following God's way. So the message in this strange story is not for the original hearers alone. It is for us as well.

Though we don't know about the reaction of the original hearers we surely know that Peter understood the impact of the vision. For when this strange vision ended, some men arrived and led by God's spirit, Peter and the men went to the house of a Gentile man who had been told by an angel to send for Peter. The angel told this man that he and all his household would be saved. And that is exactly what happened. Now it is interesting to note that Peter does not take credit for this salvation event. He could have taken credit and enhanced his reputation among the followers of the way of Jesus. But Peter, with great candor says that just as he began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon this group of people that many argued could not be a part of the faith community that followed Jesus. Peter says that is was just like it was for all of them, that is, all who were part of the original group. It seems to dawn on Peter that for God, the distinctions that we humans make are completely unimportant. God's love embraces all. All are drawn into the circle.

Then Peter says the words that almost sound like a V-8 commercial... you know the one... clunk I could've had a V-8. Peter says, "I remembered the word of the Lord, how God said that John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Peter made the connection between the teachings of Jesus, the current situation and what action should be taken. He remembered that God sends the Holy Spirit and he put that together with the vision. Peter understood that God's Holy Spirit is for all people. And that's the lesson for Peter and all followers then and now. Remember this: God's love is bigger, broader, more inclusive than any restrictions that we human beings might devise.

So that's one of those over 2000 passages that use the word remember. I will not revert to my former profession and assign to you the task of researching the others. But any time you hear a reading that uses that word, see if you can find what it is we are called to remember.

In closing let's spend a minute or two with the passage from Genesis that was our first lesson. It is the familiar story of the great flood, what we often call Noah and the ark. This story shares many images and ideas with myths told in cultures around the world. But there is one concept that is unique to this version of the great flood story. Hear again a most significant sentence. God says to Noah, and not incidentally to all living creatures forever, "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." In this version of the story God, the creator, is pictured as making a promise, a covenant, to love the people, and not destroy this beloved creation. The rainbow is a kind of colorful string

around the finger of God, reminding God of the great love God has for all creation.

God will be faithful. God will remember. With God's help may it be the same for us.

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