

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

July 1, 2007

2 Kings 2:1-2:6-14; Luke 9:51-62

Painful Memories

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On this first day of July Sunday I find myself caught up in the moment. I relish the 4th of July time as the most colorful period of summer. Flags are waving. Bright red strawberries abound. Yellow corn is becoming visible and blueberries are not far off. White sails are catching the wind on the lake. Throughout this week night skies will be filled with the multi colored hues from firework displays. Brown hot dogs covered with yellow mustard are everywhere and the Lake Monsters are playing on the green field. Norman Rockwell eat your heart out.

This is the time when those fond memories of childhood just seem to well up, don't they? Family picnics, vacations, amusement parks are all there in my memory bank just bursting to come out. Then again, there are some memories I am not all that fond of. When I was young, I wanted to be athletic but I was a lump of uncoordinated sludge. In the softball games where I stood as far out in left field as was humanly possible, I prayed that the ball wouldn't come my way. Usually it didn't because while I stood out there in mindless terror the pitcher was lucky to get the ball within 10 feet of the batter. Our team's role model was Charlie Brown. The best thing about the game was going out for ice cream after being routed yet one more time. Home again following my valiant effort to appear coordinated I would grab a book and head for the shady back

porch. So, I guess my fondest memories include sitting there and reading the afternoon away with Cherry Ames or Nancy Drew.

Memories are both blessings and challenges, aren't they? Something we see or sense causes recall of some memory that brings a smile; another sensory moment brings that of a painful or difficult experience. Those unbidden memories of long ago events open up a dam of emotions that continue to delight or to hurt in the present moment. In those moments we re-discover how deeply and permanently we are shaped by both good and challenging life experiences. Thus I wonder, would I have been more self-confident as a young adult if as a child I had been able to catch that stupid ball? Probably. On the other hand, would I have been who I am today if I hadn't spent all those summer hours happily reading stories of an intrepid girl detective or an idealistic and valiant young nurse?

Those recalled memories can influence our relationships, our decisions, our sense of self and in some cases our national sense of self. We certainly find comfort in memories. A happy memory can ease a time of anxiety or confusion or aid in the healing of grief. But we can also experience unexpected pain or anger from an unbidden memory. The sad reality we confront in our national life is reflected for many of us in the lingering fears that well up in the presence of an individual who appears to be Middle Eastern. How unfair that is to those we meet and how persistent the fear that invades our consciousness.

As I reflected on the first section of this morning's gospel I began to understand the struggle that we all face to confront and to overcome such divisive memories. The

background for the rejection of Jesus and his disciples by the Samaritans is a painful episode that occurred about 450 years before Christ. When the Jews of the Kingdom of Israel were exiled by Assyria, it was the wealthy and powerful that were taken away. The insignificant people of the land remained and intermarried with foreign settlers who adopted the worship of God. They became known as Samaritans or keepers of the Law. These people of the land faithfully kept the law through the years of exile when they were on their own. They modeled their way of worship on the manner and custom of the Kingdom of Israel. When in their turn, the Persians conquered the area, Cyrus the Great released another group of wealthy, educated exiles who had been taken from the kingdom of Judah and, sent them back to rebuild Jerusalem. The Samaritan people of the land, thinking of the returnees as family, eagerly sought to welcome them home and assist in their rebuilding efforts. Rather than accept the help of the Samaritans, the Judeans insulted and rebuffed them. Refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the Samaritan form of worship, the Judeans called them gentiles and pagans and ridiculed their faithfulness. From that time the Samaritans considered the Judeans to be enemies and the temple in Jerusalem a place of false worship. The long memory of that denial of kinship resulted in the Samaritan rebuff to Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem and the angry response from James and John asking to burn that Samaritan village off the face of the earth. It is ironic that modern science has proved through DNA testing the legitimacy of the kinship claimed by the Samaritans so very long ago. Today there are only 600 Samaritans left in two villages. In one village they are Israeli citizens and in the other, Palestinian citizens. They dwell between the two feuding parties and for their own protection side with

neither. Around their towns churns violent animosity in that land filled with ancient painful and divisive memories.

We know that what we individual humans do to one another has lasting effects. We do not always realize that the memory of our actions, both given and received also has lasting effects that influence our attitude to one another. To paraphrase Shakespeare, the evil that we do or is done to us is easily recalled while the good is oft interred in the dark recesses of our minds. An individual, for instance, who has the demeanor and the saintly qualities of a Mother Teresa has an uncharacteristic lapse and says something unkind to me. I find it so difficult to let go of that unkindness that I place it so securely in my memory that I will never forget nor will I ever again relate to the whole good, kind person. I cannot let go of my hurt. I will not let go of my hurt. Sadly, the same applies to that person in reverse. Despite an apology, he can never again relate to me without feeling embarrassment or guilt. With my sense of wounded pride, I have forced that upon him. It is true that we may be able to forgive but we make it extremely difficult for ourselves to forget. And those memories trip us up time and time again. How much do we lose when we can't let go? How many friendships are lost? How many marriages are broken? How much pain is nurtured and fed? And how childish it all is.

“When I was a child,” Paul says in First Corinthians, “I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult, I have finished with all childish ways. Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known.”

Perhaps we need to take a lesson from Jesus' response to James and John. Jesus did not try to reason with them or ignore them. He rebuked them as a parent would rebuke a child. Perhaps we need to rebuke ourselves. It is time for us to put aside childish ways. We may not be able to control unbidden harmful memories but we can deny their power over us. Let us listen to Paul's advice. Our memories are a mirror reflecting the past. We cannot live in the past. We need to live fully in the present moment. We need to see clearly in the present moment. We need to trust the goodness that is within each of us and to respond to the goodness in the other. As were James and John we are called to see beyond the knee jerk reaction, the moment of anger, the memory of hurt. We are called to understand reality beyond pain and hurt and fear. It is hard to reach that deeply into our souls and yet it is what we must do as people of faith.

The Communion Table is an enacted memory and a model to emulate. Jesus was gathered with his closest companions in table fellowship. Knowing as he did how he would be hurt and disappointed by their actions, still, he blessed the bread and the cup inviting his disciples to share both with him and with one another – inviting them to remember and to pass on that memory. Today we gather around the table – and we remember. We share the bread and the cup and in the sharing, we become the memory – we become the reality – we become the body of Christ to one another and to our world. As Christ to one another there is no room in our minds or hearts to remember pain. There is room only for love. Amen.

