

## Memorial Day Sunday 2011

*In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance...*

As the long running off Broadway musical *The Fantastics* opens, the set is dark except for the spotlight on the narrator and principal actor of the show as, dressed in black and wearing a broad black cattleman's hat, he sings *Try to Remember*. On this Memorial Day weekend there is much that we, too, should try to remember.

Contrary to many people's idea, Memorial Day is not a religious holiday. It had its origins in a presidential decree to set aside the last Monday in May as a day of remembrance and mourning for those who lost their lives in our Civil War. At first the holiday was marked by speeches celebrating the sacrifices and the losses of the war heroes and castigating the iniquity and barbarity of the opponents, in both the North and the South. In some ways, those first celebrations' venting of bitterness and anger only prolonged the divisive effects of that terrible conflict. But that mellowed over the years, so much so that in many places the day was thought of as Decoration Day and families gathered to decorate the graves, not just of soldiers lost in battle, but of all their loved ones. In that spirit we will do well to make this weekend a time of remembrance of the inheritance we have received. I would like to prompt some memories for us.

This morning as we think about the inheritance we have received there are myriad ways that we can direct our thoughts. There are two litanies of such remembrance in the biblical literature often cited on such an occasion. One is in the Book of Hebrews where the writer lists some heroes and heroines of the faith story as a way of evoking courageous faith in the first century believers. The other is in the Wisdom of Sirach in what we call

the Apocrypha from the Greek Old Testament where that writer calls forth a litany of faithful ones beginning, *Let us now praise famous men and our fathers in their generations....*” Rather than repeat those lists, perhaps we can begin our own honor roll of the faithful from whom we too have received so great an inheritance.

As much as we all long for peace in this world, for a time when our young men and women do not have to fly to Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan to struggle and sometimes pay such awful sacrifices, it is well to remember that our present place and welfare were and are bought with a price. On Friday we learned that ten US soldiers died when a bomb exploded in a field in Afghanistan. Whether the battlefield is Bunker Hill or Gettysburg, Omaha Beach or Iwo Jima, Saigon or Baghdad, we need to remember the struggles that gave us our inheritance. And even though sometimes the battle may have been misguided or the call to war of doubtful merit, the soldier who dies in battle is no less heroic for that. Thus as we reflect on the men and women who have served and died for this country let us not only be grateful but also pledge ourselves to Lincoln’s injunction that we seek to insure that they have not died in vain. Let’s pause for a moment in remembrance of the inheritance of bravery and loyalty by which we now stand...

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*Try to remember...* About ten days ago we had to journey to Iowa for the memorial service and burial service for our sister-in-law Petie, whom we have upheld in prayer through her long bout with cancer. The graveside service was in Gowrie, at a typical small town Iowa cemetery. It is on the outskirts of town, on a small hill, with the only yew trees to be seen for miles. As we stood there to say goodbye on a magically soft spring day, with

fluffy clouds drifting by that one felt could almost be touched, I realized anew that there are special memories associated with the inheritance we receive from those we love. Let me begin our reflection by taking you just a few miles northwest of that Iowa cemetery to Cedar cemetery, a tiny little graveyard out in the county by itself where my family and townsfolk lie at rest.

Cedar cemetery lies just across the road from the Hicks farm. Mrs. Hicks was our junior high Sunday school teacher. In my book she is a saint. I will never know how she tolerated the antics and energy of junior highs year after year, how she modeled acceptance, taught us about the faith, and stayed sane. The highlight of our junior high years was the end of the year picnic at their farm. When I think of the inheritance we have received I am always drawn back to those faithful teachers for that little church, and never more grateful for any than for Mrs. Hicks.

Take a moment and think back about those who have enriched your inheritance by sharing the faith with you along the way: a Sunday school teacher, a pastor, a youth counselor, a choir leader- and be thankful.



We are a diverse enough group that that effort to remember takes us far afield, to childhoods here and *up north* and to other states, to many places and families and churches. Perhaps we should focus on this place for a few minutes and be grateful for the inheritance that this church has bequeathed to many of us. We don't need to rehearse the whole church history, or name all of the pastors who have been shepherds here. Perhaps I can prompt your memory of them with one from another place. When we were in seminary in Washington I was working as an intern in the community program of an inner city Methodist church but had Sundays free.

And while we visited many churches to learn about worship and preaching, we were drawn back time and again to Chevy Chase Presbyterian. Dr. Paul Ludwig wasn't the kind of preacher who made you feel warm and cuddly, he wasn't funny, he wasn't a booming orator. But he always preached a sermon that left you feeling the challenge to live well and love better. So his messages were more of a model for me than anyone else's in those years. It is good for us to pause and think of the cloud of witnesses that gathers about us as we seek to carry on Christ's ministry at First Baptist. Some walked a distance to get here, or they came by horse and buggy and tied them outside. They worked through bad times and good times, through times of division and times of flourishing. They saw building programs come and then new ones. too. They hauled and hammered and installed the beautiful organ. They sang in choirs and rang bells and ate potlucks. All about us is that great congregation. We almost literally stand on their shoulders. If I single out any I am sure I will miss someone I shouldn't so let's all take a moment of silence and express our gratitude to God for the pastors and the faithful lay people who have lit the pathway for us at First Baptist Church of Waukesha.

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*Try to remember...* Now let's spread the wings of memory a bit. As we did the Hymn Sing this morning we were choosing favorite hymns to share. One of the richest inheritances we share is that legacy of poetry and song. Notice that I am not even stressing this morning the inheritance that perhaps I cherish most, the New Testament. But let's be aware of how the inheritance of hymns goes with us on our way. For example, I have probably shared with some of you the almost eerie joy I feel when, as we sing a hymn together, I will remember my Father singing the bass line of a hymn so vividly that it is as though he is there by my side and I have to stop singing

and choke back a sob. That sounds sad but it is a joy that memory brings to those moments in a way nothing else can. The same thing happened to Sandy on Palm Sunday as Glenn played *The Palms* which her father often played in her church on Palm Sunday.

Or, again, some of you know that I am not a fan of bagpipe music because they can be played so badly. But once when Sandy and I were in Edinburgh, Scotland, and were able to get tickets for the bagpipe festival they call the Tattoo, we attended it on a warm August night and enjoyed the rousing music of the marching bands and fife corps from all over the British Commonwealth. They closed the program with the playing of *Amazing Grace* by a lone piper high on the castle wall above us. I have never heard anything so hauntingly beautiful and I cannot hear *Amazing Grace* now without that memory flooding back to me. Take a moment to remember how some hymns are special to you and how great an inheritance we have in the music and poetry of our faith.

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*Try to remember....* On this Sunday, which focuses on remembrance it is also good for us to remember the central memory we carry together. Whether it is Jim or Tina or Eric who lead us in communion, they almost always share with us the words about the supper from Paul's letter to Corinth. *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."* There are times in our busy lives, even as a church, that we fail to remember who we are and what we

are about. Moreover, sometimes people think that all we have to remember about Jesus is that he died for us. As important as that is, it clearly is not what Paul says. For remembering Jesus means remembering at least his story from baptism to Easter. The faith community crumbles and shames him when it forgets his message of the dawning kingdom and the overarching love of God. There have been so many examples of people claiming the name of Christ in one breath and spewing hatred and anger and bigotry on the other. Our heritage is the heritage of the one who loved the unlovely, of one who turned the other cheek, of one who called us to live as though God already reigns. He challenged the rich and the mighty, the phony righteous and the petty legalists, the self-satisfied and the ultra pious. When we remember our heritage as Christians we should try to remember the one who calls us to love our neighbors, **all** our neighbors, and to love God and walk humbly with him.

Try to remember, yes try to remember. And if we remember, then follow...follow...follow. Amen.