

*Remember... And Give Thanks – November 25, 2009 – Thanksgiving Eve Service
Benefit for Habitat for Humanity
Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Matthew 25: 31-46*

At some point in our lives, most of us have heard the expression, “He – or she – has gone above her ‘raisin.’” Perhaps we have said that about someone we know. Or maybe, and I hope not, it was said about us.

There are variations, of course, on that phrase... “He’s forgotten where he came from”... “She’s begun to put on airs”... “He’s gotten too big for his britches”... and then there is this question that really requires no answer, “Who does he... **who does she** think she is?”

All of these observations and questions reflect a concern, yes... a growing impatience at times, certainly... and a genuinely felt pain that someone we once knew has become someone we don’t know, someone who we don’t recognize any longer.

And the very phrase that someone we once knew has forgotten where they have come from is an urgent reminder that **all of us** need to remember what it was like in our respective pasts... **as it truly was**... without the rose-colored glasses - the good and the bad of it all - and then we need to acknowledge how that past has shaped us – for the good - **and for the bad**...

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This need to remember...this call to remember... is central to our faith.

In the passage that we heard this evening from the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses, speaking to the people of Israel, calls on his people to set aside **the first fruits** - that is to say, the very best of the crops that they have grown and the cows and cattle that they have raised - and to give their best to God.

We are to give our best to God. And why? **Because we remember what it once was like for us:** how we once suffered; how we once felt alone and desolate in our suffering; how we were once friendless and without help or recourse; and how through the grace of God we were rescued - and how somehow we made it through.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” This is the beginning of the story that each family from the emerging people of Israel is called to recount as they give their very best to God.

“We began as homeless strangers.” This is what the beginning of this story means. No one knew us, and we had nothing - simple as that.

The story begins with the story of Abraham finding his way in a strange land. And then quickly the story moves to the story of Isaac and Jacob and how the people grew more in number and became stronger and made some money and made some headway **and made a life for themselves**... They had become more comfortable - still strangers, still at times the outsiders, but at last and at least comfortable.

And then this story shifts suddenly, abruptly, as the people’s relative comfort is rudely and violently interrupted. “The Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, imposing hard labor on us” the story is told.

The people have been made slaves. They are mistreated. They are deprived of their freedom and stripped of all dignity. They work hard - **they are worked hard** - and they receive nothing in return. They are more strangers than ever before. They are at their most vulnerable and desolate. **It was the lowest time in their lives.**

But the story doesn't end there.

"The Lord heard our voice" the people report. God saw our affliction, knew how hard we were being worked, saw how badly we were being treated, saw how low we had sunk; and then God, out of love and mercy and compassion – brought us out of that place, out of that bad chapter in our lives –

And God brought us here... brought us here... to this beautiful place. The people of Israel called that place "a land flowing with milk and honey." The psalm writer called that place, in Psalm 66, "a spacious place."

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Call it what you like. Call it the hills and farms and homes of Madison and Orange and Culpeper counties. Call it food on the table - and perhaps a feast tomorrow on that table. Call it fuel in the furnace, gas in the tank, crops in the fields, cows that need milking, a job to go to, an automobile to drive to that job, a comfortable bed to sleep in, bills that are paid – mostly... Cable or dish or satellite - at the ready. TV and computer games at the click of our remotes. Clothes on our backs... Maybe even a vacation being planned...

And an absence of anxiety... a renewed confidence that things, at least for awhile will be alright.

The people of Israel remembered where they had been, where they came from, what they had been through, and how they had gone from there to here. They remembered - and they gave thanks - and they expressed their thanks in a free will offering to God.

And they didn't give a little and they didn't give the very least. They didn't give just the leftovers or what they knew they would never use. They didn't clean out their garage or the back of their closets. They didn't just throw down some loose change from the bottom of their filled pockets. **They gave their best. They remembered...** the good **and** the bad. They gave thanks to God; and they gave their best. And they gave their all.

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Let's go back to where we began when we made the observation that he or she – or we – have forgotten where we have come from. Let's go back to this question, "Who does he – or she – we think we are?"

I don't care... it really doesn't matter... what each of our respective life histories looks like. **What is not decisive is the mix – the ratio – of the good and bad in our lives.** What matters is not whether your life has been one unending and devastating crisis after another... or one moment of hurt and pain that has lasted forever... or mostly smooth sailing and a few bumps along the way.

What matters is that each of us and all of us have a history, that each of us and all of us have had our share our troubles and challenges and crises in our lives, that each of us and all of us have been wounded in some way...For you simply can't get through life without a few bumps and bruises.

What all of us share tonight is that we all have a history and that some of that history hurts.

What all of us **also** share is that we are here tonight; and that we are safe and sound and that we are together for one purpose. **We are here to worship God.** We are here to remember -the good times and the bad - the wounds and how through the grace of God those wounds were healed.

We are to remember... and give thanks. And in our thankfulness, in our gratitude for all that God has done for us, as we wonder and are amazed by how God's grace has brought us to this place, we are moved, we are led, we are called to give the first fruits of our lives to God and for God's glory.

We are here to help. We are here to share.

We are here because we may remember a time when we were without heat or without hope. We are here because there may have been a time when the ringing of the telephone frightened us, knowing full well there was an unforgiving bill collector on the line. We are here because we have known – once or twice or too any times what it feels like to be the stranger, the outsider, the newcomer. We are here because we have known worry; because we have struggled through an illness, either our own or a family member.

We are here because we have been blessed; and because we know that we can never truly count our blessings. We are here because we know that we have but two choices as we remember and deal with our life histories... **we can either become bitter... or we can become better.**

Let's become better. Let us become as Christ was for others and is for us. Let us become wounded healers.

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The passage that we have heard this evening from Matthew's Gospel is sometimes called "the judgment of the nations;" and sometimes not as grandly it is called "the story of the sheep and goats." I prefer the second description. In this passage, Jesus forecasts his return and Jesus makes it plain that his return indeed will be a time of judgment.

The Son of Man – that is to say – Jesus the Beloved – will come with the angels of heaven; and Jesus will divide us into two categories, in much the same way, Jesus tells us, as a shepherd will separate the sheep from the goats - in much the same way as we may separate things that are useful from those things that are useless...the givers in this world from the takers.

To one group, Jesus invites them to join him in God's heavenly Kingdom. To the other, Jesus consigns them to the eternal fire, **that is to say, he sends that group to hell.**

Jesus says to the first group: you fed me, you clothed me; you welcomed me when I was stranger to you. You visited me when I was sick and you comforted me when I was in prison. You encouraged me when I was in despair; and you lifted me up when I was convinced that I could not go on any longer.

The people replied, “Jesus, we don’t remember doing any of those things for you.”

Jesus then says to them, Just as you did any of those things to just one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me... **you did it for me.**

And to the others, Jesus simply says, you did nothing for others and as a consequence you have done nothing for me.

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Before Jesus gave his life for us, he called together his closest followers. Jesus broke the bread that he was to share with them, saying, “This is my body that is broken for you. Whenever you come together and do this, whenever you share the bread, do it in remembrance of me.”

And He did likewise with the cup of wine, saying that it was his blood that was being shed for our salvation, and asking us again to remember him... to remember the sharing... to remember the sacrifice... to remember his death...to remember – and retell – all that Jesus has taught us... and to remember this victory over death and sin and despair.

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Jesus wants us to remember. Jesus wants us to remember when we first were hurt and how we were healed. Jesus wants us to remember the sources of our worries and when we knew the peace of Jesus the Christ. Jesus wants us to remember the hard times, the difficult chapters in our lives, and how we got through and who helped us through, and how God placed people in our lives to get us through.

Jesus wants us to remember every special Thanksgiving dinner that we have ever known – the **wonderful smell of roast turkey, the tang of the cranberries, the stuffing and sweet potatoes and the pies....and also those times when we did not have enough.**

Remember... Jesus wants us to remember... to remember where we came from... to remember how we got here... to remember and give thanks for all the ways that God has been present in our lives... to remember and to give and share with others so that we may bear true and faithful testimony to God’s enduring love... and so that our Lord Jesus will remember us when He comes again. **Amen.**