

The Rector's Column for October 2010

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Dear Friends,

Remembering. Think for a moment about the role that remembering plays in our lives. I am a hoarder, so I keep all sorts of things which remind me of places I've been, of events that I have wanted to hold onto, and of people I have known. My walls are filled with pictures, I have set my computer to run a random slide show of stored photos when the keyboard is idle, I make notecards from images of St. Elizabeth's and places I have seen. I have kept the [now quite dried out] white rose I wore at Laura's wedding a little over a year ago in Louisiana, and it stands in a small jar next to a crystal candle holder Susan and I bought on a trip to Vermont. Susan took a dim view of my shipping home this summer a small box of stones from the seaside at Nairn where we walked everyday, but when they arrived they took me back to our time together there. Where they will be displayed is still something of an open conversation, but that's a topic for some later letter on negotiation in marriage...

But all of these images and objects blur the distinction between "then" and "now", between "here" and "there"; they help the past to be still part of the present, enriching it, reminding me of much for which I should be grateful, and making the past not lost, but present in a different way.

Pumpkins, trees, and bow ties And then there are the ritual objects—not just from Church but from daily life. It would still be Halloween without pumpkins, candles, and costumes, but with those familiar elements the season is richer, and the memories of childhood trick-or-treating are more vivid. The span from transforming oneself into a favorite character and ringing doorbells in the neighborhood to being one of the senior residents of a street opening the door and giving out some of the same miniature chocolate bars I once collected—that distance is long by the calendars, but amazingly brief in retrospect and memory.

And so it is with Christmas. Christmas would be still be the Feast of the Incarnation without a tree, lights, cards, decorations, and parties, but in their presence somehow each of all of the earlier Christmases, by the mystery of memory, is evoked and present, so that we enter into not a single day and season, but all of those in which we have celebrated before.

And there are certain practices or customs we observe which have their roots in our personal, or maybe national, history. I learned to tie a bow tie for Susan's and my wedding ten years ago. Somehow getting married in a fake tie seemed an unpromising beginning to a marriage. I started wearing bow ties after we were married as a way to remember that day, and each time I tie a bow tie, I revisit that festive, happy, and holy day. The ring I put on once and leave it on; the bow tie I retie many times in the course of a week. And, because I think about these things, that combination reminds me of our sacraments—the baptism we experience once, and Communion to which we return over and over—the one establishing our identity, the other a regular reminder, and celebration, of that new identity which is ours.

These mementos, these customs and traditions, remind us that the relationship between the past and the present is much more complicated, and lively, than we might otherwise think.

Stone, oak, and glass And Church is a place where we pay special attention to looking at time in that more complicated, and even more mystical, way. When we step into a building, we enter a space in which the old and the new coexist side by side. We have a comparatively new Parish House, but many of its elements—the corridors, the large arched windows, the use of stone and oak throughout—derive from the architecture of monasteries and churches many centuries older than our building. Our stained glass windows are given as memorials, and when I am in the Chapel, the Sacristy, or looking up at the Dove Window over the Parish Hall door, I not only see the windows before me, but also, in my mind’s eye, those in whose memory they were given, and, in the case of the Chapel, the donor who has entered his larger life and is reunited with his wife in whose memory he made the gift.

Each of the Prayer Books in the sanctuary bears the names of those acolytes who were seniors in high school the year in which the book was presented to the parish. They are scattered throughout the world, but each Sunday I imagine them as part of the company of “angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven” who gather around the altar. I see them held in the small hands of some of our youngest acolytes and look forward to the time when they will be the seniors, and then themselves off at college, starting families, and, I hope, raising up children who will in their turn take their place around some other altar in some other parish.

Take this in remembrance...And at the altar itself, our principal work is to remember. We tell a story—on the night in which he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord took bread, and, when he had given thanks, he broke it. We remember not only the Last Supper, but the events that followed—the crucifixion, the burial, the sense of desolating loss, and then the resurrection and what was first incomprehension which evolved into joy and then to a sense that everything was now different. When we receive the bread, the one who gives it often says, “take this **in remembrance** that Christ died for thee.” Our belief, and perhaps Jesus’ intention in “instituting” this custom of breaking bread and sharing wine, is that if we mentally make the journey from now to then by an intentional act of memory, we will join that original band of followers, and all that they took in by being right there with Jesus will be available to us as well. We will not be simply hearing an old story, but leaving “now” for “then” so that the “then” becomes, for a while, our very intense “now”.

To facilitate the journey, we come to a place specially designed for that purpose and that purpose only. The room in which we worship is intended to be something of the gateway to that larger sense of time and space which is outside of ordinary, secular life and is a place where we can enter into the holy life of God, where the congregation is those whom we see, and those who rejoice with God—the congregation of all the saints, seen and unseen but equally present.

And with that congregation, and with the God who is at the center of it all, we enter into Communion. As we take the bread and the wine, the body and blood, separated on the cross and producing death, are reunited in us for the purpose of engendering new life. A new future for each of us has its roots in remembering those chronologically distant, but spiritually immediately present, events. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, and we keep the feast—and call it a feast—because the purpose of that sacrifice was to open to us a life in which the past, the present, and the future are all present, and the living and the dead are all alive together in the communion and fellowship of the saints. Whatever was lost, whatever was broken, whatever was separated in that sacrifice is restored, repaired, and reunited when we remember, receive, and enter into that new life with thanksgiving and joy.

A final word. On September 12 we had a Chapel congregation of 100—mostly children between about 3 and 7 years old, accompanied by their teachers and a few parents. I want especially to thank and commend all those parents who brought those—and our older—children to St. Elizabeth’s as we began our new year. Getting organized and to church on Sunday morning requires commitment and, as the year progresses, discipline. The encouragement I want to give you, though, is that by your coming yourselves, and by bringing your children to share the Sunday experience with you, you introduce them to that practice of remembering and receiving, and start them on the path to developing the ability to become people who can move between “then” and “now”, between “there” and “here”, and whose community will include not only those whom we see now, but those whose life is with God. This ability does not come in an instant, it cannot be conveyed in a single brilliant class or sermon, it cannot be crammed into any single year of classwork and curriculum.

It is never too late to begin to acquire this ability to live this larger, richer life. Adults may begin themselves, but I hope parents, godparents, and grandparents will be as intentional in giving this gift to the children in their care as we are about teaching them to read and love books, to sing and delight in music, and to create and become budding artists.

We have been blessed in so many ways—by our parish congregation and all its beautiful buildings, appointments, and memorials; by the rich liturgical and theological tradition of the Episcopal Church; and, most of all, by a God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who invites us into a fullness of life larger and more glorious than anything we can sense on our own alone. We best honor these blessings when we receive them with remembrance, thanksgiving, and joy.

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